

**Strategic leaders driving innovation through digital transformation: An exploratory study in the South African trade, catering, and accommodation sector**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (Corporate Strategy).

24 November 2025

## **ABSTRACT**

The accelerating pace of digital transformation has reshaped business models and innovation pathways in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. Businesses are grappling with strategic responses, often acknowledging the paradox and complexity associated with innovating while adapting to rapid technological change, which has become essential for ongoing survival. It is within this dynamic context that the mechanisms which strategic leaders employ to explore innovation through digital transformation remain underexplored. Therefore, this study investigates how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation within South Africa's Trade, Catering and Accommodation (TCA) sector industries that are inherently customer-centric and have been significantly affected by post-pandemic disruption and continued digital acceleration.

Adopting a qualitative, exploratory research design, this researcher interviewed seventeen leaders involved in digital transformation initiatives across trade, accommodation, and catering industries. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases, and the data were thematically analysed, using a conceptual leap approach to move back and forth from raw insights to broader explanation.

The findings confirm that strategic leaders enact their roles through a combination of vision setting, people alignment, and disciplined execution, supported by integrated competencies including digital literacy, learning agility, empathy, and relational influence. Moreover, the findings show that digital transformation and innovation are bidirectionally linked, with each enabling and reshaping the other through leadership action. While barriers such as legacy systems, cultural inertia, and change fatigue persist, leaders convert these into enablers through human-centred practices, iterative learning, and sense-making.

Worth noting is that this study extends existing theory by positioning strategic leadership as an integrative mechanism that aligns technology, people, and culture to produce value-driven innovation. It also adds to the existing body of knowledge by showing how leaders in emerging customer-service industries humanise digital transformation through relational influence, empathy, and disciplined execution, which remains an area for future research. The final conceptual framework reflects both the literature and the empirical insights, offering a contextually grounded view of how leadership shapes digital-driven innovation.

**KEY WORDS**

Strategic Leadership, Strategic Leader, Innovation, Digital Transformation

## DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Corporate Strategy at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

24124682

23 November 2025

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Name & Surname

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Signature

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

AI: Artificial Intelligence

ATLAS.ti: computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

CFO: Chief Financial Officer

CIO: Chief Information Officer

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

DT: Digital Transformation

IT: Information Technology

MMM: Mixed-Media Modelling

PMO: Project Management Office

ROI: Return on Investment

TCA: Trade, Catering, and Accommodation

VUCA: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces the study by outlining the context in which strategic leaders enable innovation through digital transformation within South Africa's trade, catering and accommodation sector. It explains the motivations for the study, defines the research problem and guiding questions, and sets out the aims and objectives that informed the exploration. The chapter also highlights the significance of the study for both theory and business and concludes by providing an overview of the structure of the research.

### **1.1 Background to the research problem**

In today's fast-evolving global economy, business leaders recognise innovation as one of their top three priorities, yet fewer than 10% of individuals express satisfaction with how their businesses perform in terms of innovation (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Innovation in the business context is described as introducing new or original approaches while responding to emerging contextual issues (Boyles, 2022a). These approaches do not necessarily stem from engineering inventions or one-off discoveries (Desjardins, 2020), thus suggesting that the foundation of innovation is grounded in a culture of creativity (Kent, 2024).

Recent studies show businesses with strong innovation cultures implement digital transformation technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data, and cloud computing at scale (Jong et al., 2023). In contrast, businesses that fail to adapt and embrace innovation through digital transformation face increasing risks to their relevance, profitability, and operational efficiency (Astapciuks, 2023).

Within dynamic customer-centric service industries such as retail, where shifting consumer expectations continually redefine customer value proposition (CVP), continuous innovation has become a necessary condition for relevance and competitiveness amongst uncertainty and disruptions (Deloitte, 2025). This could not be more critical in today's world, where businesses' innovation-driven response strategies are in the spotlight.

McKinsey and Company (2024) describe digital transformation as a fundamental driver of innovation, consequently creating the need for businesses to incorporate digital technologies into their core operations to stay relevant and competitive. Digital transformation requires a strategic rethink of value creation and business operations,

thus shaping its success through organisational culture and the willingness to embrace change (HBR Editors, 2025).

Digital Leadership (2024) and Carrière-Swallow and Haksar (2021) add that in the trade sector, digital transformation extends far beyond technological upgrades; it demands a fundamental reconfiguration of strategy, culture, and operational models. Similarly, in retail related industries, digital transformation is not only significant but fundamental to sustaining competitiveness and relevance in a rapidly evolving environment (MIT Sloan Management Review Connections, 2024).

In the African context, promoting innovation to drive digital transformation extends beyond economic performance; it is a critical driver for growth, inclusivity, sustainable development, job creation and poverty alleviation (African Union, 2020; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2024). Africa's digital market is projected to reach USD 16.5 billion by 2030 and create about 230 million digital jobs, making innovation through digital transformation a strategic imperative, thus highlighting the need for strong policy, infrastructure, and local talent to capture economic and social benefits (BusinessTech, 2025).

In South Africa, these imperatives are particularly significant as the country positions itself to lead in AI adoption (BusinessTech, 2025). South African is regarded as the gateway to Africa and is currently projected to remain the continent's largest economy until 2030; despite the country's socio-economic landscape remaining marked by persistent poverty, unemployment and structural inequality (Naki, 2025; International Monetary Fund, 2025).

In addition, South Africa's increasing population of over 63 million is a pressure point that makes innovation and digital transformation not just desirable, but imperative for building a more inclusive and resilient future for the nation (World Bank, 2025).

Despite its relatively young population, South Africa's economy continues to struggle to generate sufficient employment opportunities (Statistics South Africa, 2024a; Statistics South Africa, 2025). Over the past decade, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has averaged growth of approximately 0.7%, reflecting persistent economic stagnation and constraints linked to a weak business environment (World Bank, 2024b).

This context makes the development and support of key and vibrant industries such as the Trade, Catering and Accommodation (TCA) sector critically important, as these industries create jobs and drive economic growth. The TCA sector encompasses customer-centric industries that play a significant role in the South African economy, particularly in youth employment (Statistics South Africa, 2025). As part of the broader service sectors, the largest contributors to GDP, the TCA industry reflects its importance to national economic outcomes (Statistics South Africa, 2024b).

Despite this contribution, output levels remain below pre-coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) benchmarks (DNA Economics & Codera Analytics, 2023). The long-term impacts of the pandemic, rapid digital disruptions, broader macroeconomic pressures, and interconnected global risks continue to pose serious challenges (World Economic Forum, 2024). During Covid-19, business leaders expressed the urgent need for digital transformation driven by customer-centric strategies with the pandemic providing the opportunity to fast-track digital footprints as a means to remain competitive post-Covid-19 (Deloitte, 2020).

Organisations often fail not as results of the pace of adoption, however due to of their inability to respond strategically to disruption (Emerson, 2025). Recent statistics reveal a rise in compulsory liquidations, raising concerns about business sustainability (Statistics South Africa, 2024c). The TCA industry, one of the country's largest employers, contracted by 0.3%, subtracting 0.1 points from GDP (Statistics South Africa, 2024b). This underlines the need for the sector to remain dynamic and adopt innovative approaches to sustain its contribution to growth and employment.

The South African National Planning Commission (2011) identifies innovation and digital transformation as essential for economic development and growth. While the country is positioned as a regional digital hub, both risks and opportunities exist. South Africa's digital economy is estimated to contribute approximately 20% of GDP by the end of 2025 (International Trade Administration, 2024).

Despite rising investment in digital transformation, many businesses struggle with inadequate digital infrastructure, leadership inertia, and skills shortages (International Trade Administration, 2024). In this context, technology is crucial but leadership remains vital for successful digital adoption and sustained innovation (Smith et al., 2022; Wörle, 2021).

In earlier work, Kane et al. (2015) emphasised that leadership capability is critical for driving digital transformation strategies, while Emerson (2025) underscores the need for leaders to make decisions that enable organisations to navigate uncertain futures. Among different types of leaders, strategic leaders stand out as those who are not constrained by day-to-day operations, rather, focus on shaping strategies that enable organisations to respond to evolving contexts (Andrews, 2022).

Therefore, strategic leadership is key to drive innovation in business through digital transformation across customer-centric industries (Lamarre et al., 2023). How these strategic leaders do it remains key to business operations (Boyles, 2022b).

For the purposes of this research, the TCA industry is considered a customer-centric industry. This makes the sector particularly relevant for exploring how strategic leaders are driving innovation through digital transformation.

## 1.2 Research problem

Exploring the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation within the customer-centric sector requires an understanding of the broader theoretical business context.

The current business environment is shaped by grand global challenges and ongoing digital disruption, prompting calls to “put strategy back in the leadership picture” (Vera et al., 2022). This is particularly salient in customer-centric industry, which were heavily affected by Covid-19 and must now respond to changing consumer expectations and digital resolutions (Grewal et al., 2021; Kumar & Venkatesan, 2021).

“The enterprise that does not innovate ages and declines. And in a period of rapid change such as the present, the decline will be fast.” (Drucker, as cited in Kiss et al., 2022, p. 1). Businesses innovating through digital transformation have become essential and valuable in responding to disruptions; although scholars note that the effectiveness of such innovation varies across industries and contexts (Kumar & Venkatesan, 2021; Fischer-Preßler et al., 2024). Importantly, as technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data, and cloud computing advance rapidly, digitalisation is becoming a key driver of customer value creation (Zhuo & Chen, 2023). It is therefore imperative for customer centric industries must take note of this fact.

However, innovation through digital transformation represents one of the most significant challenges facing firms today, not only as new digital technologies alter competitive dynamics but also because they introduce new uncertainties (Marion & Fixson, 2021). In trade, these technologies have reshaped the market, shifting sales towards younger, digitally based firms (Verhoef et al., 2021; Schiavone et al., 2021). In emerging economies such as South Africa, innovation is further challenged by persistent social and economic disruption (Anand et al., 2021).

Given this urgency, the role of strategic leaders in enabling innovation through digital transformation in particular such as TCA remains relevant and underexplored (Singh et al., 2023; Johns, 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Ciarli et al., 2021; Georgakakis et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022 & Kumar et al., 2021). Earlier, Peter Drucker once said that all issues businesses are facing are opportunities hidden and waiting for innovation and strategic intent to drive and enable benefits (Vohra & Mukul, 2009).

While prior research has examined the domain of strategic leadership, scholars argue that its concept remains contested and fragmented. Singh et al. (2023), Cortes and Herrmann (2021), Kurzahls et al. (2020), Ciarli et al. (2021), Georgakakis et al. (2022), and Samimi et al. (2022) note that the construct continues to evolve and calling for more nuanced investigations into how strategic leaders operationalise this evolving concept in shaping organisational direction and performance, particularly under contexts of change.

Scholars see strategic leaders as key to shaping strategic decision-making and aligning resources in turbulent environments (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). Yet, how they enable innovation, particularly in the context of digital transformation, requires deeper inquiry (Singh et al., 2023).

The need to encourage further research into digital transformation and innovation management also stems from the incredibly high practical relevance of this topic (Appio et al. 2021). Recent studies conceptualise digital leadership capability as a driver of innovation performance, mediated through platform digitisation (Benitez et al., 2022). However, this extends the contestation: If digital leadership integrates strategic skills, market knowledge, and technical expertise, what then is the distinctive role of strategic leaders in enabling innovation through digital transformation? Existing research has not sufficiently explained how strategic leaders influence innovation in digitally disrupted

environments, or whether digital leadership should be understood as an extension of strategic leadership or as a separate construct.

Innovation itself is recognised as a crucial lever for competitiveness and sustainability, and digital transformation is now considered a major enabler of innovation (Kurzahls et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021). Several scholars contend that digital uptake is considered innovation that is accelerating digital transformation in businesses (Compagnucci et al., 2025).

However, integrating innovation into digital transformation strategies remains a significant challenge for many organisations (Shonubi, 2025). Scholars argue that strategic leaders must be equipped to guide this integration, yet little is known about how this occurs, particular customer-centric sector such as TCA, where customer experience and performance outcomes are tightly interlinked (Singh et al., 2023, Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Ciarli et al., 2021; Georgakakis et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022).

There is a growing call for research that unpacks the relationship between strategic leadership, digital transformation, and innovation in real-world settings, especially in sectors that have been and continue to be structurally altered by global disruptions such as the Covid-19 pandemic and digital disruption (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Singh et al., 2023).

Although strategic leadership is recognised as pivotal for innovation and digital transformation, research provides limited integrated evidence on the specific competencies that enable leaders to perform this role effectively across contexts, leaving a critical gap in understanding how these competencies develop and interact to drive organisational outcomes (Singh et al., 2023; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Ciarli et al., 2021)

Given this academic and practical gap, this study explores the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation within a customer-centric industry. By concentrating on a customer-facing context, this study addresses settings where value is co-created with customers since digital technologies fundamentally reshape customer experiences and data-driven services. These conditions heighten the need for strategic leaders who can sense changes, mobilise resources, and foster innovation. Therefore,

this study provides a more contextualised understanding of how strategic leadership shapes innovation outcomes during digital transformation initiatives.

### 1.3 Research questions

Building on the recommendation of Singh et al. (2023), for deeper exploration of strategic leadership's role in digital transformation and innovation, this study establishes the central question as follows:

**How do strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation?**

The research central question is further supported by the following sub-questions:

**Sub-question 1: What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?** (Singh et al., 2023, Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Ciarli et al., 2021; Georgakakis et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022)

**Sub-question 2: What strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation?** (Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022).

**Sub-question 3: How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?** (Singh et al., 2023; AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2022)

### 1.4 Research purpose and aims

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic leader's role in driving innovation through digital transformation. As a result, the first aim is to explore strategic leaders' role in driving innovation through digital transformation. Secondly, this study will examine competencies necessary for innovation through digital transformation. Thirdly, the research aim is to examine how strategic leaders fostering innovation is impacted by digital transformation, further exploring the bidirectional interaction between innovation imperatives and digital transformation offerings.

It is against this backdrop that this research aims to contribute meaningfully to strategic leadership domain by contributing context-specific understanding in the setting of South Africa and recommendations that established and emerging strategic leaders can apply

in practice. The study will finally synthesise the findings into a conceptual framework that connects the constructs of the research question.

### 1.5 Research scope

The scope of the research is theoretically and physically defined to ground the focus and relevance of this study. The theoretical scope will explore strategic leadership; particularly how strategic leaders navigate the interplay between innovation imperatives and digital transformation.

The physical scope is defined by medium to large businesses operating in South Africa's TCA industry. This customer-centric industry encompasses retail, hospitality, and fast-food services. Therefore, it is economically significant and digitally dynamic, thus offering a rich context for examining strategic leadership in action as discussed in paragraph 1.1. South Africa provides a compelling setting due to its position as an emerging African market seeking to expand innovation and its digital economy, where leadership remains key to organisational progress (International Trade Administration, 2024; Shonubi, 2025). Furthermore, earlier research found that African countries remain underrepresented in management studies despite their significant economic potential (Barnard et al., 2017).

This study is conducted in the post Covid-19 period, a time of accelerated adoption of digital technologies and intensifying digital disruption (Amoah et al., 2021). While the research scope is limited to one industry and excludes Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) as well as non-leadership roles, it can help to generate insights that are both practically valuable and theoretically relevant to strategic leaders in similar fast-evolving industries, while also offering inspiration to emerging leaders and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) seeking to grow.

### 1.6 Research contribution

#### 1.6.1 Business relevance

The customer-centric industry continues to experience disruption triggered by Covid-19 and industrial transformation, requiring innovation through digital transformation in a strategic manner (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2023). Duarte (2022) argues that Africa has a rare opportunity to rethink its development path in the post-COVID period by placing innovation and digital transformation at the core of its growth agenda. The difficulty,

however, is that innovation is often spoken about enthusiastically but seldom converted into a focused, actionable strategy.

This shift is evidenced by a prior study, showing that at the end of 2021, 61.8% of South African businesses were responding to the call for innovation through digital means despite systemic challenges such as skills shortages which have resulted in diminished full effectiveness of these efforts (Human Sciences Research Council, 2023).

While innovation is often highlighted as a driver of transformative growth, not every business benefits equally, partly due to a lack of clarity about what innovation entails (Kent, 2024). This underscores the importance of leaders making choices that are grounded in evidence, contextual analysis and organisational capacity rather than being influenced by hype or external pressure.

Digital transformation has become an organisational capability that must be continuously developed and strengthened, rather than treated as a one-off project with a fixed endpoint. This stresses the importance of leaders who can implement transformation effectively while also seeing the broader strategic picture (HBR Editors, 2025).

Every organisation's approach to digital transformation differs, which requires leaders to tailor strategies to context (Storgaard et al, 2023). Even with strong leadership, digital transformation efforts can fail if leaders lack the strategic vision and skills needed to navigate change effectively (Forbes, 2024). (McKinsey & Company, 2025) cautions that as technological innovation accelerates, strategic leaders must understand the strategic impact on their businesses and balance emerging opportunities with a long-term vision.

On the other hand, the World Economic Forum (2025) observes that successful AI transformation requires senior leaders to rethink organisational structures, updating governance and building public trust. These lessons apply to corporate settings where strategic leaders must similarly modernise legacy systems, form multi-stakeholder collaborations, and balance rapid innovation with responsible risk management.

Odilov (2024) highlights that while many organisations claim to prioritise innovation, hidden cultural and structural barriers often undermine these efforts. Recognising and addressing such invisible hurdles is essential for fostering a truly innovative environment (Anthony, 2025).

Further, Coldwell (2022) argues that failure is not simply an obstacle, however an integral and productive part of innovation. When organisations treat failure as a chance to learn and refine their practices, rather than as evidence of poor performance, they are better positioned to adapt and improve. This shift in perspective helps build resilience and encourages a culture where experimentation is possible and supported.

Thus, this study is relevant to businesses as they navigate a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world where innovation enabled by digital transformation is no longer optional but a necessity. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of understanding the role of strategic leaders in enabling this navigation. With digital transformation becoming integral to business survival and growth, knowledge about the role of strategic leaders is paramount. By exploring how strategic leaders enable innovation through digital transformation, this study provides practical insights that can inform leadership development in real-world business settings.

#### 1.6.2 Theoretical relevance

Amid the rapid rise of global competition and pressures for technological progression, businesses are rethinking their models, with digital transformation (DT) emerging as a strategic response for sustainable competitiveness and survival (Verhoef et al., 2021). This shift underscores the need for a strategic focus at the highest levels of leadership to address both opportunities and challenges that emanate from DT (Vera et al., 2022). Although DT is widely recognised as a key driver of business performance, the phenomenon is complex, continuously evolving, and lacks a universally accepted definition (Gong & Ribiere, 2025).

Browder et al, (2023) adds by arguing that DT now functions as a deeper organisational capability, one that supports resilience by enabling firms to adapt and absorb shocks and maintain continuity under conditions of disruption. Markus and Rowe (2023) further notes that this definitional ambiguity complicates efforts to understand and apply DT in practical contexts. This fragmentation is not a negative issue per se however needs to be steered in order to move forward existing research on the topic (Appio et al., 2021).

Although DT has been explored from multiple perspectives, recent scholarship emphasises the need to move beyond a technology-centric lens to consider human, structural, and relational dimensions that enable organisations to navigate uncertainty (Gong & Ribiere, 2025). Earlier studies highlight the human factor, particularly the critical role of employees in DT success (Vidal et al., 2022; Markus & Rowe (2023). This raises

important questions about how leaders can effectively guide and support employees during innovation and digital transformation processes.

In customer-centric industries such as TCA, firms have increasingly adopted innovation to meet evolving consumer demands and adapt to dynamic digital environments. Yet, scholars still lack full understanding of how businesses should adapt to the demands of this new environment such as DT (Browder et al., 2023). Appoio et al. (2021) highlights the value of examining how DT and innovation unfold under conditions of complexity and uncertainty including these amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although strategic leadership groups are essential for driving radical organisational change, their specific role is often not clearly visible (Jarrett & Vince, 2023). For decades, scholars have debated the impact of leadership on organisational outcomes (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). Recent research shows that leaders are responsible for establishing a long-term strategic vision, managing uncertainty, and aligning DT with corporate objectives (Samimi et al., 2022). However, the degree to which leadership transforms digital technologies into meaningful innovation remains insufficiently examined (Singh et al., 2023).

As Kiss et al. (2022) note, the recognised role of senior leaders in driving innovation has led upper-echelon researchers to focus on how strategic leaders' characteristics influence innovation-related choices and outcomes.

Innovation is central to catching up and sustaining growth in emerging economics like South Africa, thus necessitating the need study this phenomenon from various vantage points, and not only in research and development labs (Anand et al., 2021). Innovation and DT are closely intertwined, with each capable of driving the other (Ciarli et al., 2021).

Yet, theoretical development on why innovation initiatives fail remains limited (Freisinger & McCarthy, 2024). This raises important questions about which competencies and roles are most essential for strategic leaders to drive innovation effectively in DT contexts. Previous studies have often focused either on digital adoption or on innovation processes, rather than the intersection where leadership shapes both simultaneously (Ciarli et al., 2021; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).

Existing leadership models remain fragmented, prompting calls for an integrated approach linking strategic leadership, innovation, and DT (Singh et al., 2023). Earlier

studies emphasise the need to better understand how DT both shapes and is shaped by organisational actors (Hinings et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Ciarli et al. (2021) highlight the importance of identifying new levels of analysis and developing multi-disciplinary concepts to capture how innovation practices are transformed by digitalisation, with implications for work, jobs, and skills.

By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to ongoing theoretical development of strategic leadership in the context of DT and innovation. Specifically, it responds to calls for a deeper examination of human and leadership dimensions of DT, adding conceptual clarity to the roles and competencies strategic leaders require to enable innovation in digitally transforming organisations.

### 1.7 Research outline

This research report is structured to guide the reader from the theoretical foundations of the study through to its conclusion. It commences with an introduction chapter that outlines the background of the research problem and details both the business and theoretical relevance.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review based on current, high-quality journals. The analysis focuses on key constructs, and each section concludes with a synthesis and summary of insights.

Chapter 3 presents the research questions and sub-questions, underpinned by literature. Chapter 4 justifies the various components of the research methodology and design while Chapters 5 and 6 relays this study's findings and the critical discussions, respectively. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the study, presents recommendations, and articulates the conceptual framework.

### 1.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the background and context of this study by framing the complexities that underpin the research problem both in business and theoretical domain. The research questions, purpose and aims were defined, together with the scope and expected contributions to both business practice and academic theory. Therefore, this chapter grounded this study within the evolving phenomenon of strategic leadership, innovation, and digital transformation in the TCA sector - a sector made up

of customer-centric industries. The study exposition was presented to guide the reader through the structure of this report.

The next chapter builds on this foundation by critically engaging with relevant literature from top scholars in the field, thereby establishing the theoretical and conceptual basis for the research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Pursuant to the background outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter examines relevant literature on strategic leadership, innovation, and digital transformation which form key constructs underpinning the opportunity identified by Singh et al. (2023). In exploring the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation within the customer-centric industry of TCA, this chapter builds a comprehensive foundation for this study through reviewing existing literature that foregrounds this study.

As a starting point, the journal sourcing criteria for literature review are described. The review draws on literature anchored in the opportunity highlighted by Singh et al. (2023). Relevant works were identified through systematic searches of academic databases including EBSCOhost and Google Scholar. Keywords, including logical connectors together with combinations such as “strategic leadership,” “digital transformation,” “innovation,” “leadership in digital contexts,” “digital-enabled innovation,” “strategic leader,” “digital technologies,” and “digital transformation in trade” were applied during empirical studies searches on the academic databases.

The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2025, with priority given to studies on strategic leadership in customer-centric sectors such as TCA. Seminal works predating this period were also included to provide theoretical grounding as such studies cannot be ignored due to their influential nature. Again, journals indexed in the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Academic Journal Guide (AJG), updated in 2024, were prioritised to ensure academic rigour and relevance in business and management research. This approach ensured balanced coverage of seminal theories, contemporary research, and applied perspectives, thus enabling a comprehensive understanding of this study. The reviewed literature is therefore organised around three constructs, namely; strategic leadership, digital transformation, and innovation.

The first construct, strategic leadership, is examined by clarifying concepts often conflated in the broader domain. The discussion considers the role of a strategic leader in the context of innovation and digital transformation, followed by an exploration of the competencies that enable innovation through digital transformation.

The second construct, digital transformation, is explored by unpacking its conceptual and context, core features, and the ways it exists with both strategic leadership and innovation. The third construct, innovation, is considered by examining its context, ecosystem, enablers, and the reasons why innovation initiatives may fail.

Drawing on scholars' insights, this chapter describes a bidirectional relationship between innovation and digital transformation, effectively highlighting how these processes continually influence each other and are shaped by the actions of strategic leaders.

The chapter concludes with a synthesis of insights from the literature, which provides the foundation for the conceptual framework that follows. **Figure 1** below provides the outline structure of the literature review with the link to the central research question.

**Figure 1: Literature review outline structure**

| 2.1 Literature introduction                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Central question:<br>How do strategic leaders (2.2) drive innovation (2.4) through digital transformation (2.3)?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 2.2 Strategic leadership                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 2.3 Digital transformation                                                                                                                                                                   |  | 2.4 Innovation                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 2.2.1 Definitions<br>2.2.1.1 Definition of strategic leadership<br>2.2.1.2 Definition of a strategic leader<br>2.2.2 Role of strategic leader driving innovation through digital transformation<br>2.2.3 Competencies of strategic leaders driving innovation through DT<br>2.2.4 Strategic leadership as a linking mechanism<br>2.2.5 Conclusion | 2.3.1 Definitions and perspectives of digital transformation<br>2.3.2 Characteristics of digital transformation<br>2.3.3 Barriers and enablers of digital transformation<br>2.3.4 Conclusion |  | 2.4.1 Definitions and perspectives of innovation<br>2.4.2 Barriers and enablers of innovation<br>2.4.3 Bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation<br>2.4.4 Conclusion |
| 2.5 Literature conclusion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 2.6 Literature review conceptual framework                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

**Source: Author's own**

## 2.2 Strategic leadership

Despite the vastness, complexity and evolving discipline of the strategic leadership domain, scholars have yet to reach consensus on key definitions (Samimi et al., 2022). As a result, most notable fundamental concepts that underpin the domain, namely; strategic leadership and strategic leader, are often used interchangeably or misunderstood.

### 2.2.1 Definitions

The discussion below examines these concepts in detail and situates them within the relevant scholarly discourse and context of innovation and DT.

#### 2.2.1.1 Definition of strategic leadership

The conceptual fragmentation within the strategic-leadership domain reflects a deeper and evolving theoretical debate (Singh, 2023). In an early contribution, Porter (1996) portrayed strategic leadership as the ability to envision an organisation's future under conditions of uncertainty.

Strategic leadership is now widely recognised as shaping business outcomes through disruption and building competitive advantage, which is essential for customer-centric businesses (Samimi et al., 2022). It is important to note scholars argue that leadership of any kind should not be judged based on outcome, urging instead, attention to processes and contextual factors that influence those outcomes (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). The idea ties into Upper Echelons Theory by Hambrick and Mason in 1984, which suggests that a business's direction and results are shaped by the values, experiences, and thinking of its top leaders. Essentially, the way executives see the world and make decisions becomes the driving force behind the business's strategy.

It also links to the Dynamic Capabilities framework by Teece (2007), which highlights how great leaders spot opportunities, act on them, and adapt the company's resources to stay ahead in fast-changing, often unpredictable markets.

Samimi et al. (2022) define strategic leadership as “the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organisation (CEOs, TMT members, directors, general managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm”. Singh et al. (2023) agree, extending this definition to leadership that operates at the highest level of

the business, encompassing “general managers (GMs) and leaders of strategic business units (SBUs)”.

Over the years, leadership itself has evolved into multiple styles, but strategic leadership is distinguished by its focus on guiding and directing the entire organisation (Vera et al., 2022). Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish strategic leadership from ordinary or supervisory leadership by emphasising that strategic leadership involves leadership of organisations, whereas supervisory leadership concerns leadership in organisations.

Georgakakis et al. (2022) add that strategic leadership can be understood as a cooperative process involving the chief executive and the top management team, rather than being vested in a single individual. The common idea these scholars share is the central idea of a collective leading the whole organisation towards long-term goals.

Samimi et al. (2022) identify the core functions of strategic leadership as setting strategic direction, engaging stakeholders, managing people, guiding operations and information flows, and addressing ethical and competing demands. These are integrative, organisation-wide activities that shape a firm’s long-term direction and performance.

For customer-facing businesses competing in digital and disruptive markets, these shared functions of strategic leadership assume heightened importance. Direction setting and decision making remain key because they determine whether a business can translate innovation opportunities into concrete digital transformation (Benitez et al., 2022).

Yet, influence and alignment are not merely coordinating tasks; they shape how competing priorities are reconciled so that strategic choices create enduring competitive advantage (Al-Surmi et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022). Boundary spanning, often treated as a networking skill, becomes a mechanism for building trust and stimulating cross-domain innovation by integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives (Collien, 2021). Value and risk management likewise go beyond routine control, enabling leaders to weigh the trade-offs between value creation and risk exposure in volatile technological environments (Sjödin et al., 2020).

Information integration supports evidence-based decision making and organisational learning, but recent findings caution that structural factors such as team composition do

not, on their own, ensure performance, highlighting the primacy of leadership processes in delivering these outcomes (Sieweke et al., 2025).

In summary, strategic leadership is an organisational level construct that combines functions performed by individuals to steer long term performance of the business. While scholars agree on its central function in building competitive advantage (Al-Surmi et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023; Kurzhals et al., 2020); recent evidence shows that team composition alone is not enough; the quality of leadership processes and their fit with organisational context ultimately determine impact.

This understanding sets the stage for the next section, which focuses on the strategic leader, the individual whose behaviours and capabilities have direct impact to business outcomes.

#### 2.2.1.2 Definition of a strategic leader

Drawing on Samimi et al.'s (2022) conclusion that strategic leadership is enacted by individuals who perform strategic functions, the concept of the strategic leader, and the competencies and behaviours that define it, focus on the people occupying these critical roles. These individuals include board members, chief executives, senior directors, top management team members, and strategically placed senior managers, all of whom hold ultimate decision-making authority and responsibility for resources, long-term organisational vision, strategy, and organisational performance (Samimi et al., 2022; Jarrett & Vince, 2023; Wang et al., 2023, Singh et al., 2023).

Although not all of these leaders report directly to governance bodies, the Upper Echelons perspective emphasises that strategic leadership is not limited to the actions of chief executives, other top managers also require specific competencies to perform their functions effectively (Samimi et al., 2022). Fernandes et al. (2022) and Singh et al. (2023) add that leaders collectively work to shape the strategic direction of the organisation.

However, title alone does not make a strategic leader. Earlier researchers caution that not everyone occupying a strategic position demonstrates the qualities required for true strategic leadership (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). This perspective underscores that a strategic leader is grounded in distinct competencies, foresight, and the ability to integrate innovation and change, not merely in formal authority.

Within the business environment, strategic leaders are a reflection of business operations and seen as origin of competitive advantage, posit earlier researchers (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). These leaders not merely act as overseers of technology projects, but as architects of organisational change and stewards of customer trust, responsible for uniting data, people, and processes to achieve sustainable, innovation-driven growth (Pauwels & Aksehirli, 2025). Consequently, their role shapes operational practices and ultimately the performance and competitive advantage of the business (Singh et al., 2023).

In summary, literature portrays the strategic leader as the main player within the broader strategic-leadership domain, whose role shapes how businesses stay competitive and adapt to the ever-changing business landscape. For the purposes of this study, attention is centred on strategic leaders at different levels of business with common features of strategic and consequences intent as found by literature, highlighting the competencies and roles needed to enable innovation and guide digital transformation.

Accordingly, the next section of the research examines the roles through which strategic leaders enable innovation through digital transformation.

### **2.2.2 Role of strategic leader driving innovation through DT**

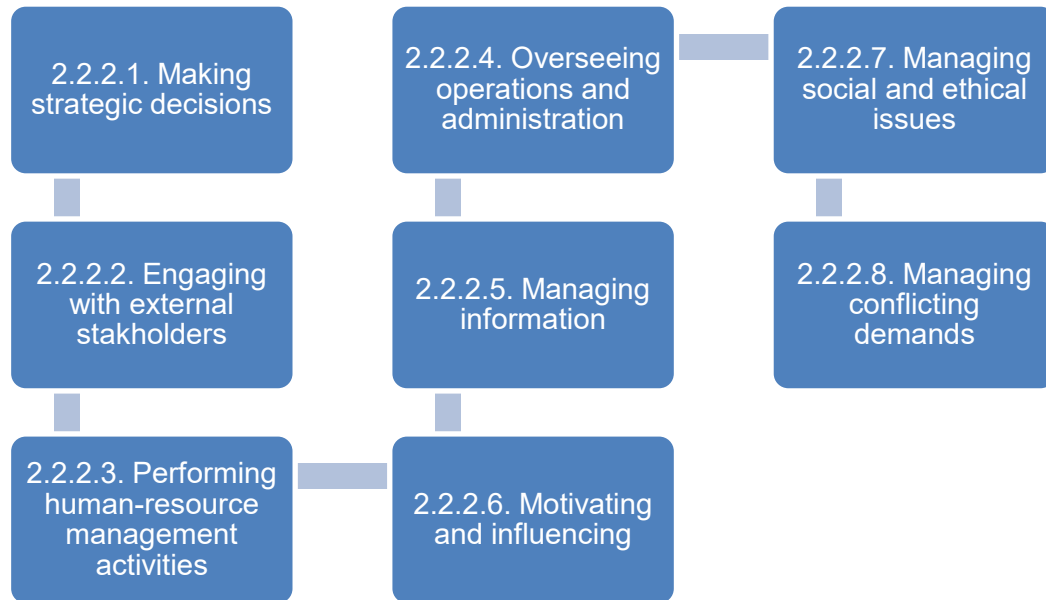
Strategic leaders' roles have grown increasingly dynamic and complex over the past four decades (Van Doorn et al., 2022). In general, business leaders' roles have evolved from concentrating on supervision roles to increasingly adopting a strategic leadership style that prioritises long-term decision making and organisational guidance (Fernandes et al., 2022).

Strategic leaders are central to identifying and driving innovation opportunities and to shaping how organisational members engage with and contribute to these activities, while also playing an essential role in preparing organisations for episodic disruptions by fostering adaptive capacities and resilience (Cortés & Herrmann, 2021).

Samimi et al. (2022) provide one of the most comprehensive conceptualisations of what comprises a strategic leader's actual role. From their integrative review, eight interrelated functions emerge that describes the essential role of strategic leaders in shaping long

term business outcome depicted below in **Figure 2**. These functions are explored through scholars' insights, with nuances and additional perspectives included.

**Figure 2: Eight interrelated functions of strategic leaders**



**(Adapted from Samimi et al, 2022)**

#### 2.2.2.1 Making strategic decisions

Advanced digital transformation relies on strategic leaders aligning their actions with the business mission and integrating digital and business strategy, shaping long-term direction through decisive resource allocation and market positioning (Porfírio et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022).

Under uncertainty, strategic leaders act as sense-makers, using personal experiences to frame problems, assign meaning, and guide choices (Schaedler et al., 2022). In line with Upper Echelons theory, organisational outcomes reflect leaders' cognitive bases and values, which shape their motivations and decision processes (Vera et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022). Studies on technological innovation caution that decision quality depends less on formal authority than on the ability to sense and seize opportunities in turbulent contexts (Kurzahls et al., 2020), and leaders may sometimes delay action to avoid unwanted outcomes (Samimi et al., 2022). The literature thus highlights a paradox: strategic discretion enables bold action, but without mechanisms for self-regulation and governance, it can misalign strategy and performance.

#### 2.2.2.2 Engaging with external stakeholders

Effective leaders create strategic value by building trust and reputation with regulators, partners, and customers (Samimi et al., 2022). Trust and reputation reinforce each other:

trust builds reputation, and a positive reputation strengthens stakeholders' trust (Chaudhary et al., 2021). The review also notes that breaches of trust or reputational damage can have disproportionate consequences for businesses. Collien (2021), Cortes and Herrmann (2021) further stress that boundary-spanning influence is a precondition for innovation, highlighting the need to manage power dynamics across organisational borders.

Strategic leaders are regarded as key drivers of change because their authority enables them to implement transformation, allocate resources, and connect the organisation with its external environment (Jarrett & Vince, 2023). These facts suggest that stakeholder engagement is as much about negotiating competing interests as it is about relationship building. Collectively, these factors create the conditions for effective stakeholder engagement led by a strategic leader and for building relationships that generate mutual value.

#### 2.2.2.3 Performing human-resource management activities

Samimi et al. (2022) place talent acquisition and leadership development at the centre of this responsibility. Fernandes et al. (2022) extend this view by emphasising that human resources are key mechanisms through which strategic leaders foster an innovative climate, not merely administrative routines.

Strategic leaders they perform this role by making key decisions themselves and by setting up structures and cultures that support innovation, say Cortes and Herrmann (2021). This perspective raises important questions about how leaders balance sustained investment in talent with short-term cost-pressure tension that is critical because ongoing innovation and effective digital transformation depend on a workforce whose skills and commitment can adapt to continuous change.

#### 2.2.2.4 Motivating and influencing

Strategic leaders inspire commitment and shape organisational culture (Samimi et al., 2022). Cortes and Herrmann (2021) argue that vision and character strengthen innovation outcomes, as strategic leaders frame and sell ideas and create conditions that energise others to generate, refine, and implement innovations. On the other hand, Vera et al. (2022) highlight the importance of leader's character for ethical influence. During times of uncertainty, strategic leaders play an especially critical role because their ability to interpret ambiguous situations and rally coordinated action strongly shapes the organisation's future direction and outcomes (Schaedler et al., 2022).

#### 2.2.2.5 Managing information

Strategic leaders engage in continuous environmental scanning and knowledge integration to support long-term decisions (Samimi et al., 2022). Jorzik et al. (2024) say that AI and big-data analytics are transforming how leaders collect and interpret information, demanding new analytical and technological competencies. Yet, Kurzhals et al. (2020) caution that when information systems and data governance are weak, leaders' own cognitive filters and sense-making become even more critical because poor information quality can obscure strategic signals and delay timely action.

This role therefore extends beyond gathering data: strategic leaders must ensure the reliability of information flows and convert vast and diverse inputs into actionable insight without overwhelming decision processes, thereby linking information quality directly to organisational agility and innovation.

#### 2.2.2.6 Overseeing operations and administration

Strategic leaders design structures and controls to align daily operations with strategic intent (Samimi et al., 2022). Fernandes et al. (2022) document the transition from traditional supervisory management to resource-orchestrating leadership, while Kurzhals et al. (2020) show that technological turbulence requires ongoing reconfiguration of organisational routines and resource allocations. Therefore, strategic leader oversight in this context is a continuous process of adaptation rather than a static control mechanism, ensuring that operational activities remain responsive to shifting strategic and technological demands.

#### 2.2.2.7 Managing social and ethical issues

Strategic leaders cannot remain neutral on ethics because they inevitably shape the ethical climate of the business, creating a duty to lead on ethical behaviour, founds earlier researcher (Thomas et al., 2004). Modern strategic leadership therefore extends well beyond compliance. Singh et al. (2023) and Kurzhals et al. (2020) emphasise that embedding sustainability and responsibility into strategy has become a key source of legitimacy and competitive advantage. Therefore, the strategic leader's role is to champion ethical conduct and integrate social and environmental responsibility into core strategy, ensuring that innovation and digital transformation advance both organisational performance and societal well-being.

#### 2.2.2.8 Managing conflicting demands

Lastly, Strategic leaders continually navigate tensions such as innovation versus efficiency, global versus local priorities, and short-term results versus long-term growth.

Giustiniano et al. (2020) describe this as paradox work, where success depends on holding opposing imperatives in productive tension. Similarly, Sjödin et al. (2020) frame value creation and value capture as a dynamic balancing act. These perspectives recast conflict management as an ongoing strategic capability rather than a discrete problem to be solved, underscoring the need for leaders who can sustain organisational agility and coherence amid persistent contradictions. Porfirio et al. (2021) show that more democratic styles of leadership, characterised by participation, openness, and shared decision-making, favour the development of digital transformation processes.

Over and above established roles, recent scholarship argues that radical innovation inevitably involves failures that differ from avoidable errors and require distinct governance (Gomes et al., 2024). Strategic leaders therefore design and adopt rules, norms, and decision processes to ensure failures are recognised as opportunities for organisational learning rather than simply punishing employees involved in failed business endeavours.

In summary, strategic leadership is an integrative, adaptive system of practices in which influence is the unifying thread. At this point, the research moves beyond simple description to explain how strategic leaders connect their individual capabilities with organisation-wide outcomes, thereby shaping business performance in complex, technology-driven environments. The next step is to examine the competencies strategic leaders require to perform these roles effectively in the context of innovation and digital transformation within customer-centric industries.

### **2.2.3 Competencies of strategic leaders driving innovation through DT**

In the absence of an agreed set of strategic-leadership competencies (Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022), this section outlines the key competencies that enable strategic leaders to drive innovation and digital transformation, drawing on an extensive body of recent scholarship. These competencies correspond with critical areas of inquiry, including:

- Technological and data requirements for transformation;
- Cognitive and decision-making capabilities needed to frame and guide strategy;
- Ability to mobilise people and external partners;
- Capacity to uphold ethical and legitimate practices;
- Development of talent and organisational learning; and
- Resilience required to withstand shocks.

Strategic leaders are central to shaping and enabling digital transformation as they bring together vision, adaptability, and technological understanding in ways that support organisational innovation. Benitez et al. (2022) argue that effective digital leadership capability rests on four interdependent competencies: digital skills, market awareness, business management, and strategic leadership. Together, these capabilities enable leaders to connect technology with strategic intent; they encourage collaboration across organisational boundaries, and finally, these capabilities enhance innovation performance by building strong platform-digitisation capacity.

Georgakakis et al. (2022) find that strategic leadership is a shared function that demands greater effort and a more diverse skill set than any single leader can provide. Strategic competencies include sense-making under uncertainty and the ability to transform ambiguity into actionable strategies while making strategic decisions (Schaedler et al., 2022).

Leaders who exhibit risk-taking tendencies, data-driven decision capability, transformational leadership qualities, and digital proficiency are essential for fostering innovation and technological advancement (Kurzahls et al., 2020). Strategic leaders must be able to turn large and complex data sets into timely and actionable strategic insight while avoiding information overload.

The ability to build trust with stakeholders, span boundaries, and engage stakeholders, including negotiating competing interests and orchestrating place-based development (Collien, 2021; Jarrett & Vince, 2023), brings out the influence competencies and the ability to be relatable and motivational across all levels of the business (Samimi et al., 2022; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). Understanding and recognising employee approval and sentiments as key elements of governance (Wang et al., 2023) ensures that strategic choices gain commitment throughout the organisation rather than remaining only on paper.

Ethical competencies, including integrity and governance of failure, move ethics from a compliance issue to a core strategic function, ensuring that experimentation and radical innovation occur within principled and socially legitimate boundaries (Thomas et al., 2004; Singh et al., 2023; Gomes et al., 2024).

The ability to attract, develop, and retain people who can innovate and adapt constitutes key human-capital competencies, coupled with fostering individuals and the organisation at large for ongoing reskilling and adaptation (Ciarli et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022). At the same time, Kurzahls et al. (2020) caution that certain CEO traits, such as narcissism, overconfidence, or an aggressive risk posture, can result in poorly balanced innovation agendas. Innovation related to digital transformation also calls for developing new skills as evolving digital technologies reshape how knowledge is structured and applied in productive and innovative contexts (Ciarli et al., 2021).

Samimi et al. (2022) identify critical skills and traits of strategic leaders as encompassing dispositions, managerial cognition, charisma, knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as power and motivation. These skills and traits of strategic leaders relate to Upper theory. Ultimately, providing directive guidance and competitive simplification in emergencies and building resilience through digital transformation enhance organisational recovery and long-term adaptability (Jarrett & Vince, 2023). Resilience competencies also mobilise networks and institutional support to sustain operations under extreme disruption and strengthening adaptive capacity (Kurzahls et al., 2020; Schaedler et al., 2021).

In summary, interrelated competency clusters such as digital and analytical, strategic and cognitive, relational and influence, ethical and sustainability, human capital and learning, as well as crisis and resilience integrate detailed capabilities identified across this literature review by providing a structured lens for analysing how strategic leaders perform their roles in driving innovation through digital transformation.

#### **2.2.4 Strategic leadership as a linking mechanism**

Strategic leadership has increasingly been recognised as a mechanism that connects digital transformation to innovation (Singh, 2022; Samimi et al., 2020). Positioning strategic leadership in this way allows the study to examine not only what leaders do, but how their actions enable innovation through digital transformation. As conceptualised earlier (Section 2.1), strategic leadership shapes organisational direction, orchestrates resources, and establishes the behavioural and structural conditions through which digital initiatives translate into innovative outcomes. This structural orientation makes strategic leadership well suited to link digital transformation initiatives with innovation and inversely link innovation with digital transformation initiatives.

The literature consistently shows that the value of digital transformation is realised only when leadership is present to guide, align, and integrate digital efforts (Samimi et al., 2022; Porfírio et al., 2021; Kiss et al., 2022). Petzolt and Seckler (2025) emphasise that transformation requires more than formal project plans; transformation appeals to leaders to identify and empower informal actors who drive innovation from within. Their work draws on the promotor model, which describes four informal innovation roles power, expert, process, and relationship promoters whose influence helps organisations overcome barriers and progress through transformation. Kiss et al. (2022) highlight that proactive strategic leadership creates the behavioural and structural conditions necessary for different types of innovation. This reinforces the role of leadership as an organisational mechanism rather than a technical contributor.

Several leadership functions illustrate how this linking mechanism operates in practice. Boundary spanning enables leaders to bridge organisational silos and coordinate across internal units and external digital ecosystems; an essential requirement in digital-transformation contexts (AINumi et al., 2023; Porfírio et al., 2021). Strategic alignment is another mechanism.

Porfírio et al. (2021) show that digital transformation advances only when managers align digital and corporate strategy, while Samimi et al. (2022) describe strategic decision-making as the process through which leaders convert ambiguity into direction. Supporting this, AINumi et al. (2020) emphasise that digital transformation is complex and requires vision, alignment, and targeted organisational restructuring.

Relational and ethical leadership functions also contribute to this integrating role. Bracht et al. (2022) show that trust and leader-employee relationships shape creativity and thus essential component of innovation. Porfírio et al. (2021) add that leadership characteristics influence how digital strategy integrates with IT/IS infrastructure, while AINumi (2023) highlights the need for continuous data management and organisational learning as part of a digital transformation process.

Digital transformation also introduces new organisational tensions, including the agility versus strategic discipline tension, which leaders must actively manage (AINumi, 2022; Porfírio et al., 2021). Sense-making becomes central in this context: leaders interpret technological shifts, translate them into organisational meaning, and determine the implications for business models, processes, and capabilities (AINumi, 2023; Bracht et al., 2022).

Strategic leaders act as a critical linking force by shaping cultural norms that encourage experimentation and digital mindsets, signalling that digital transformation is an organisation-wide strategic priority rather than a narrow operational initiative (Cao et al., 2025).

### **2.2.5 Conclusion**

Strategic leadership is an organisation-wide capability expressed through the actions of identifiable strategic leaders. Scholars agree on precise definitions, thus converging on the view that strategic leaders value leadership with strategic intent, shaping long-term organisational direction and performance by connecting vision, decision, and influence (Samimi et al., 2022; Jarrett & Vince, 2023; Wang et al., 2023, Singh et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2022).

Strategic leadership is differentiated from supervisory management by operating at organisational level, whereas leaders set direction, interpret uncertainty, and integrate strategy with dynamic capabilities to maintain competitive advantage. They fulfil numerous interrelated roles ranging from making strategic decisions and engaging stakeholders to managing information, ethics, and paradoxes that collectively form an adaptive system of practices, with influence serving as the unifying thread connecting individual judgment to organisation-wide outcomes. Ultimately, the effective execution of these roles relies on interdependent clusters of competencies. Across these contributions, the literature consistently portrays strategic leadership as the set of functions that connects digital transformation inputs with innovation outputs.

This synthesis provides the conceptual bridge to the next section on digital transformation, where the interaction between strategic leadership and digital transformation is examined in detail.

## **2.3 Digital transformation**

The phenomenon of digital transformation continues to be widely discussed in scholarship, yet it still lacks complete conceptual clarity. Much of the debate centres on distinguishing digital transformation from traditional IT-enabled change. Earlier forms of digital adoption focused on improving efficiency or automating existing tasks, while recent work shows that digital transformation involves a deeper strategic shift one that reshapes organisational processes, structures, roles, and value creation (Markus &

Rowe, 2023; Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2023). Scholars emphasise that technology remains an important enabler, but it is not the essence of transformation; rather, it is the redefinition of organisational logic and the integration of digital capabilities across the business (Verhoef et al., 2021; Benitez et al., 2022).

With this context, the discussion that follows outlines the key components of digital transformation through the lens of how strategic leaders drive innovation. Definitions and perspectives are introduced, the main characteristics of the phenomenon are discussed, its barriers and enablers are examined, and finally, the bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation is presented. The researcher draws conclusion that will inform and ground the study.

### **2.3.1 Definitions and perspectives of digital transformation**

DT lacks full conceptual clarity (Markus & Rowe, 2023; Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2023; Appio et al., 2021). However, recent scholars have drawn a clear distinction between traditional IT-enabled organisational change, which typically focuses on deploying information technology to improve efficiency or automate tasks, and digital transformation, which redefines organisational strategy, processes, and stakeholder interactions so that digital technologies reshape organisational logic rather than merely enhance existing processes (Fischer-Preßler et al., 2024; Wessel et al., 2021).

Many scholars support this view, recognising IT as a key enabler but stressing that it is not the essence of DT (Verhoef et al., 2021; AlNuaimi et al., 2022). Benitez et al. (2022) note that “digital transformation requires re-evaluating the firm’s processes, services, and roles from a technology-enabled perspective” (p. 1), a shift that also demands a deeper understanding of customer needs and the innovation opportunities that emerge from them.

This distinction is evident in customer-service industries, where DT is understood as fundamentally improving and personalising customer experience, not just digitising existing touchpoints (Compagnucci et al., 2025).

DT is broadly defined as a fundamental shift in how businesses integrate digital technologies to develop innovative business models, ultimately enhancing value creation and capture for the organisation (Verhoef et al., 2021). This perspective distances DT from a simple adoption view and emphasises the strategic integration of digital technologies. Markus and Rowe (2023) posit a definition of DT as the strategic

integration of digital technologies to fundamentally refine an organisation's structures, functions, and employee dynamics, ultimately enhancing its identity, value proposition, and overall competitiveness. Piccoli et al. (2024) argue for a strong IT related definition and note most literature blurs DT with IT-enabled change and insist DT is a true metamorphosis from an IT-enabled to a fully digital organisation.

Appio et al. (2021), Hanelt et al. (2020) and Petzolt and Seckler (2025) emphasise that digital transformation is a multifaceted, ecosystem-level phenomenon that spans the entire organisation and its processes, closely linking technology-enabled change with how innovation is shaped and delivered. Building on this, Wessel et al. (2021) show that DT disrupts organisations by redefining how value is created, reshaping structures, and altering established roles.

Petzolt and Seckler (2025) extend this view by arguing that digital transformation unfolds across multiple organisational levels and requires coordinated shifts in structures, strategy, and behaviour to realise its full impact. Ultimately, this is “a journey rather than a project” (Porfirio et al., 2021, p. 611).

An important extension of this definition highlights the human dimension; employees and other users are not passive recipients of technology but key actors in its adoption and utilisation, shaping how digital tools are embedded and how transformation unfolds in practice (Dąbrowska et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2025).

It is necessary to distinguish digital transformation from the related but different concepts of digitisation and digitalisation, which are often misused and for which scholarly consensus is still evolving (Gradillas & Thomas, 2023). The discussion on digitisation and digitalisation below offers a nuanced scholarly differentiation of these key terms.

#### 2.3.1.1 Digitisation

Digitisation is typically described as the technical conversion of analogue information into digital form, such as scanning records or converting audio to digital files (Gong & Ribiere, 2021). Gradillas and Thomas (2023) define digitisation as “the creation of digital artifacts through technical processes of conversion, representation, and enhancement” (p. 113). Ritter and Pedersen (2020) extend this view by framing digitisation as an enabling capability comprising data, permission, and analytics, underscoring that mere data conversion is insufficient unless legal, contractual, and analytical conditions allow its

effective use. Importantly, this stage focuses on data format change without altering organisational logic (Verhoef et al., 2021).

### 2.3.1.2 Digitalisation

Digitalisation, by contrast, is generally portrayed as the application of digitised data and technologies to enhance or automate processes and services (Verhoef et al., 2021). Gradillas and Thomas (2023) describe it as “the transformation of the socioeconomic environment through processes of digital artifact adoption, application, and utilisation” (p. 113). This view emphasises that digitalisation is about more than simply using technology: it is the process of adopting and applying digital tools in ways that change how organisations and people work and interact, creating new opportunities that reshape industries, transform business models, and bring about broader socioeconomic change (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021; Gradillas & Thomas, 2023).

DT, unlike traditional mechanical or analogue tools, are reprogrammable and enable data integration, allowing information from different sources to be combined and reused for continual innovation across organisational boundaries (Ciarli et al., 2021). They include cloud computing and data analytics for real-time processing “such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, internet-of things (IoT), and robotics (Verhoef et al., 2021, p. 890); Sjödin et al., 2020; Bresciani et al., 2021; De Paula et al., 2023)

In contrast to scholars who want to fix a single, strict definition of digital transformation, Markus and Rowe (2023) caution that the field is still too young and diverse for hard boundaries. They argue that insisting on one official meaning could discard valuable earlier research, hide what is genuinely new, or encourage careless use of buzzwords. Instead of locking in a definition, they call for greater clarity and justification of whatever definitions researchers choose, so that debates remain open and conceptually rigorous.

In summary, the transformation of digitalisation is digital transformation. Although digital transformation often includes digitalisation, not every digitalisation effort qualifies as a full transformation. Digitisation refers to converting information into digital formats, while digitalisation integrates digital technologies to transform business models.

For the purposes of this study, digital transformation refers to the strategic adoption and integration of digital technologies to fundamentally refine organisational processes and structures, including operational dynamics, thereby enhancing identity, value proposition, and overall competitiveness (Gong & Ribiere, 2025).

### **2.3.2 Characteristics of digital transformation**

Given the lack of a single agreed-upon definition of digital transformation (DT) by scholars, several interrelated characteristics emerge consistently in literature. DT extends across the entire organisation and unfolds as a continuing process of renewal rather than a one-off project (Porfírio et al., 2021; Vial, 2023). It encourages reconfigurable structures and data-driven operations, allowing rapid adaptation and agile redefinition of markets and activities (Hanelt et al., 2021).

Value creation increasingly depends on collaboration and platform participation that cut across firm and industry boundaries (Hanelt et al., 2021). Organisations advance DT by developing genuinely new resources, processes, and capabilities while integrating them with legacy systems to maintain strategic coherence (Vial, 2023).

Success relies on cultivating digital and dynamic capabilities, including analytics, platform competencies, and organisational agility, rather than focusing on technology adoption alone (Hanelt et al., 2021). DT also unfolds differently across industries and technologies, with adoption often incremental and shaped by sectoral and firm-level factors.

In sector characterised by complex products and services, DT increases integration and system complexity, creating the need for new forms of coordination and governance. Effective DT further depends on leadership that aligns digital initiatives with corporate purpose and drives organisational commitment (Porfírio et al., 2021). Finally, continuous data generation, governance, and reuse are integral, enabling learning loops and evidence-based decision making (Verhoef et al., 2021).

### **2.3.3 Barriers and enablers of digital transformation**

Vial (2023) identifies innovation and integration as two central mechanisms through which organisations initiate and advance DT. Innovation entails applying resources, processes, and capabilities that are new to the organisation, while integration focuses on aligning these novel elements with existing resources, processes, and capabilities (Hanelt et al., 2021). Successful DT therefore requires more than technology investment; intangible assets such as competencies and expertise are essential to navigate uncertainty and sustain competitive advantage (Gong & Ribiere, 2025).

Recent scholarship sometimes uses the term digital transformational leadership (DTL) to describe the capabilities required to lead technology-driven change (AlNuaimi et al.,

2022; Gyamerah et al., 2025). However, closer scrutiny shows that these authors are not proposing a new leadership paradigm, rather, are clarifying how established strategic-leadership roles must evolve in digitally intensive environments.

Strategic leaders play a pivotal role in digital transformation by embodying the organisation's mission and communicating it authentically across all levels. By aligning their actions with the firm's core purpose and inspiring collective commitment, they create the conditions for coordinated change. Such leadership, as Porfírio et al. (2021) argue, is essential for mobilising resources and overcoming structural or managerial obstacles that often hinder digital transformation.

This literature review consistently shows that successful DT depends on a combination of leadership, organisational, and technological enablers, not on technology adoption alone. Strategic and digital leadership capabilities are foundational because leaders blend business and IT expertise, communicate a transformative vision, and mobilise diverse teams to drive cultural change, including sustaining long-term commitment (Benitez et al., 2022; Porfírio et al., 2021). This success requires top-down commitment, digital knowledge, and business understanding, combined with innovative contributions from a wide range of stakeholders, which underscores the human factor in transformation (Gong & Ribiere, 2021).

Design thinking and supportive behavioural strategies complement leadership by fostering experimentation, reducing cognitive bias, and embedding creativity across strategy, culture, and competencies (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). At the technological core, platform digitisation capability, the integration of IT infrastructure, processes, and data, standardises and automates workflows while freeing organisational attention for opportunity sensing and innovation (Benitez et al., 2022).

Closely related is organisational agility, the ability to rapidly sense environmental changes and reconfigure resources to capture emerging opportunities, which mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and measurable DT outcomes (AlNuaimi et al., 2022).

Additional enablers operate at the resource and structural level. Firms need digital assets and big-data analytics capabilities to store, process, and use data effectively; digital agility to continually reconfigure these assets; and digital networking capability to connect users and partners in evolving ecosystems (Ciarli et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Organisational structures must also adapt, for example, by creating autonomous digital business units, adopting agile organisational forms, and transforming the IT function from a back-office utility into a proactive orchestrator of value (Porfírio et al., 2021).

Critically, DT differs from traditional IT-enabled change by redefining the value proposition itself, rather than merely supporting existing offerings (Vial, 2023). Strategic alignment and an inspiring long-term vision ensure that these initiatives reinforce corporate identity and purpose, providing coherence across multiple transformation efforts (Hanelt et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, there are challenges as Porfírio et al. (2021) identify potential resistance to digital transformation, which may arise from misalignment with digital strategies or lack of leadership vision and competencies. Moreover, structural complexities, rigid hierarchies, and bureaucratic decision-making processes can hinder strategic leaders' ability to drive innovation and digital change (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).

#### **2.3.4 Conclusion**

In summary, digital transformation hinges not on technology alone but on a dynamic interplay of leadership, organisational agility, and strategic enablers. Strategic leaders must evolve established roles to blend business and IT expertise, articulate a compelling vision, and foster cultural commitment to overcome resistance and structural inertia. Supported by design thinking, platform digitisation, big-data analytics, and adaptive structures, these leaders orchestrate innovation and integration to redefine value propositions and sustain competitive advantage in uncertain environments.

It is also important that Digital transformation must be distinguished from digitisation and digitalisation. Digital transformation entails the strategic integration of digital technologies to redefine business models and organisational identity, a view adopted for this study. Meanwhile, DT exhibits distinct characteristics:

- It cuts across all functions;
- Unfolds as a continuous process;
- Relies on reconfigurable structures and dynamic capabilities;
- Increasingly depends on cross-industry collaboration and data governance; and
- Successful transformation depends on a convergence of enabling factors.

Overall, digital transformation emerges as a holistic, boundary-spanning phenomenon in which technology, strategy, people, and governance interact to generate self-reinforcing cycles of innovation and value creation. This integrated perspective provides the foundation for analysing how strategic leaders enable and direct innovation in the digital era.

## 2.4 Innovation

The phenomenon of innovation remains central to scholarly work because of its influence on organisational growth and competitiveness. Although the field has advanced considerably, the phenomenon itself still carries a long and fragmented history. Earlier work tended to equate innovation with new products or processes, but contemporary scholarship recognises it as a broader process that combines novelty with meaningful application, often involving multiple actors across organisational and national boundaries (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020; Varadarajan, 2024). This shift reflects the increasing complexity of innovation in practice and the growing need to account for contextual factors, ecosystem relationships, and the behavioural and technological conditions that shape how new ideas are developed and implemented.

With this context of evolving perspectives, the discussion that follows sets out the main definitions and perspectives on innovation, examines its drivers and constraints, and establishes the conceptual basis for understanding how strategic leaders foster innovation in digitally driven and customer-centred environments. Acknowledging that the process of innovation increasingly unfolds in digital environments, the interaction between digital transformation and innovation is reviewed as part of the innovation construct, reflecting how digital capabilities shape and are shaped by innovation practices. The researcher draws conclusion that will inform and ground the study.

### 2.4.1 Definitions and perspectives of innovation

The phenomenon of innovation has gained significant attention from scholars because of its critical role in driving competitiveness and organisational growth (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). Earlier researchers found the process of innovation neither straightforward nor free of failures. Since then, the concept has evolved from being understood mainly as a new product, process, or practice introduced by an individual firm or inventor ((Dahlander & Gann, 2010).

Today, innovation is commonly described as the result of a process that combines two key elements. The elements refer to the introduction of something novel and its successful or valuable application, driven by multiple and interdependent actors across organisational and national boundaries (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020). What counts as “new” varies with context; it may be new globally, within a particular country, or simply new to a single organisation (Marion & Fixson, 2021).

Despite this conceptual progress, innovation continues to have a long, fragmented history. Earlier and recent scholars still express different views on its fundamental concepts, and these differences have faced criticism for being ambiguous and have slowed theoretical advancements (Oh et al., 2016; Varadarajan, 2024). Popular perspectives include innovation ecosystems and the distinction between open and closed innovation.

Granstrand and Holgersson (2020) view innovation ecosystems as a broad process involving the creation, development, and implementation of new ideas, products, processes, or business models that generate value. Cortes and Herrmann (2021) explore this further by specifying four interlinked stages of this process and name these stages as:

- Idea generation, which is where new concepts emerge;
- Idea elaboration, which is where ideas are refined and aligned with organisational goals;
- Idea championing, which is where leaders secure resources and internal support; and
- Idea implementation, which is where innovations are executed and embedded into business functions.

In a similar yet distinct vein, De Paula et al. (2023) describe innovation as a multifaceted concept that goes beyond developing new products to fostering new behaviours and cognitive models that support digital transformation. Mariani et al. (2023) highlight a range of innovation types, noting that digital transformation itself can be considered one form of innovation.

Varadarajan (2024) advances another inclusive definition of innovation as the implementation of a novel idea into an outcome that creates stakeholder value, and proposes a rich typology spanning novelty, domain, impact, and approach. This call for definitional clarity is supported by earlier researchers, Dahlander and Gann (2010),

whose historical review shows that innovation has always encompassed multiple forms of products, processes, service, and degrees of novelty ranging from incremental to radical. Echoing the same sentiments are Melnychuk and Schultz (2025) who demonstrate that the effectiveness of different innovation types depends on organisational capabilities such as financial slack, university collaboration, and network position, which both enable and complicate knowledge integration.

Maier and Baccarella (2025) extend this view by examining customer empowerment in new product development, revealing how psychological and behavioural factors shape the success of product, service, and marketing innovations. Cooper (2024) adds a technological frontier, illustrating how artificial intelligence accelerates product development while also creating new categories of innovation and new adoption barriers.

Together, these studies confirm Varadarajan's (2024) essential threefold; novel idea, outcome, and value creation, while also showing that contextual drivers, organisational capacities, and emerging technologies must be incorporated if innovation categories are to remain conceptually robust and practically useful.

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- Idea generation, which is where new concepts emerge;
- Idea elaboration, which is where ideas are refined and aligned with organisational goals;
- Idea championing, which is where leaders secure resources and internal support; and
- Idea implementation, which is where innovations are executed and embedded into business functions.

For the purposes of this study, innovation is defined as the implementation of a new, original or not seen before idea into an outcome that creates value for stakeholders. This view recognises innovation as both a process and a result, allowing it to include products, services, processes, or new ways of working. It accommodates the full spectrum of innovation from incremental improvements to radical, socially oriented, or digitally enabled transformations. Adopting this unified lens of novel idea, outcome, and value creation provides conceptual clarity and enables consistent analysis of diverse innovation types such as digital, organisational, social within the research context. This

definition provides a clear and consistent basis for analysing how strategic leaders foster innovation through digital transformation in customer-centric industries.

#### 2.4.2 Barriers and enablers of innovation

Bracht et al. (2022) argue that to foster innovation effectively, leaders must create environments that nurture creativity, promote collaboration, and support continuous learning. Pre-Covid-19 scholars found that effective innovation depends on using the right routines for the risk context, but there was still limited clarity on how to match routines to conditions. This has evolved since then and now reflects the changes that customer experiences and willingness to pay has moved to the centre of innovation (Cooper 2024; Maier & Baccarella, 2025) in the wake of Covid-19 and ongoing digital disruption.

Cooper (2024) further posits DT as a transformative enabler, improving understanding of customer needs and strengthening willingness to pay insights that strategic leaders must use to design or refine strategies. This aligns with the broader view that innovation is linked from strategy practices, and therefore from strategic leadership itself. De Paula et al. (2023) add that successful innovation in digital contexts often requires integrating advanced technologies such as AI, the Internet of Things, blockchain, and machine learning into organisational processes.

Strategic leaders are both drivers and enablers of innovation (Porfírio et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). Porfírio et al. (2021) emphasise the human dimension of this role, noting that strategic leaders must actively interpret context, exercise judgment, and inspire collective action as they align digital and corporate strategies. Building on this understanding, further scholars confirm that innovation succeeds when digital strategies are aligned with overall business strategy, emphasising that this alignment both drives and is reinforced by digital transformation, underscoring the central role of strategic leaders (Ciarli et al., 2021).

Even when organisations struggle with inertia and resistance to change, many strategic leaders still launch digital transformation when technological disruptions arise, such as the entry of born-digital competitors that challenge incumbent firms in previously low-tech sectors (Browder et al., 2023)

Melnychuk and Schultz (2025) highlight research and development (R&D) as a key driver of radical innovation, especially in high-tech sectors, pointing to the need for strong

funding and organisational capabilities to support interdisciplinary work, while also noting the complexity that must be actively managed. Within customer-centric businesses, firms with strong digital capabilities and skills are better positioned to drive innovation (Zhu et al., 2006). Key for strategic leaders is to guide the business in building an effective innovation system rather than simply spending more on R&D (Zhuo & Chen, 2023).

Suchek et al. (2021) add a systems perspective, arguing that innovation is driven by interconnectivity across value chains and ecosystems, highlighting that understanding stakeholder pressures and having the ability to reconfigure resources are key to sustaining innovation. These pressures come from external macro factors in both global and regional contexts. National policies, enabling regulations, and R&D incentives, together with society's openness to experimentation and change, significantly affect innovation (Qiu et al., 2020).

Porfírio et al. (2021) and Suchek et al. (2021) conclude by highlighting the human factors in innovation. Employee competencies especially digital literacy and innovative thinking are critical, and businesses that manage change effectively perform better. The capacity to learn and adapt supports ongoing innovation and long-term competitiveness.

Petzolt and Seckler (2025) observe that resistance to change and uncertainty as well as limited awareness among key organisational actors are persistent obstacles during digital transformation. They note that these barriers are rarely rooted in technology itself; rather, they arise from capability gaps, administrative constraints, and the complex inter- and intra-organisational dynamics that ultimately slow the pace of innovation.

Innovation is not a straightforward journey. Barriers to innovation and technology adoption arise from multiple, interrelated sources. Conceptual confusion and definitional inconsistency remain persistent obstacles for both research and practice (Varadarajan, 2024). This lack of clarity makes it harder for organisations to assess outcomes and share lessons, adding to the complexity of validating innovation results (Melnychuk & Schultz, 2025).

Baxter et al. (2023) describe the innovation phenomenon as something that can often be avoided yet is essential to the innovation process, because experimentation and occasional setbacks are part of how organisations learn. Avoiding opportunities for innovation particularly when digital transformation calls for change, can therefore be seen as a failure in its own right.

Even when firms innovate, resistance to change, organisational inertia, and bureaucratic decision-making frequently delay or derail new initiatives (Kurzahls et al., 2020; Browder et al., 2023). Earlier researchers found that resource constraints add another layer of difficulty, while security risks and the high cost of technology can further slow progress (Zhu et al., 2006).

Underlying these challenges is the way digital technologies and skills co-evolve. Ciarli et al. (2021) show that digital tools both replace and complement existing tasks, recombine in unforeseen applications, and generate new business models. Yet, this rapid change can render existing skills obsolete, creating shortages in emerging competencies and structural divides that constrain adoption. This is seen as barriers to innovation with a customer centric industry that is the biggest employer in South Africa.

Governance arrangements can also restrict progress. Cortes and Herrmann (2021) note that strict regulations and rules, slow decision-making, or volatile external conditions can limit the discretion of strategic leaders and reduce their ability to champion innovative initiatives.

In the business context, successful innovation depends as much on relational quality and governance as on technology. Köhler et al. (2022) show that open innovation, dynamic capabilities such as sensing and reconfiguring opportunities, and strong inter-firm relationships built on trust and shared goals create fertile ground for joint value creation. However, poorly aligned or poorly governed collaborations can reverse these advantages. Goal conflicts, unequal benefit sharing, fears of opportunism, and long payback periods all discourage knowledge exchange and investment, demonstrating how potential enablers can quickly become barriers.

Stornelli et al. (2021) show that challenges typically stem from technology limitations, personnel-related issues, capability gaps, and corporate structural constraints. These include problems such as immature or hard-to-integrate technologies, skills shortages and employee resistance, weak absorptive capacity or project management, and rigid organisational forms that make reconfiguration difficult. Understanding how these categories interact helps explain why even well-resourced firms struggle to convert digital investments into sustained transformation.

Taken together, these findings underscore that innovation barriers and failure is not limited to single missteps. It often stems from conceptual ambiguities, capability gaps, resource and infrastructure weaknesses, governance rigidities, and misaligned collaborations, all of which strategic leaders must anticipate and manage if innovation is to deliver lasting value in a digital era.

#### **2.4.3 Bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation**

Scholars have long recognised the two-way influence between DT and innovation, yet the conceptual ambiguity of both phenomena means that robust theoretical and empirical studies are still lacking (Appio et al., 2021). Scholars make clear that digital technologies do not, on their own, produce innovation; it is the combination of strategic leadership, ecosystem partnerships, and well-developed organisational capabilities that enables digitalisation to translate into sustainable innovation outcomes (Bresciani et al., 2021).

Ciarli et al. (2021) highlight the co-evolution of digital technologies, innovation routines, and skills, where each element shapes and is shaped by the others. A year later, Wu et al. (2022) similarly demonstrated that digitalisation capabilities do not just support but are refined by open-innovation practices. Supporting Appio et al. (2021) are Wen et al. (2021) who found that the rationale for this relationship lies in resource integration between digital capabilities and open innovation, which involves identifying and acquiring digital resources, matching them with other resources, and using them effectively.

Strategic leadership and governance play a central enabling role. Leaders influence how DT and innovation reinforce each other by setting direction, aligning resources, and embedding innovation-friendly structures and cultures (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).

This literature review consistently shows that digital transformation and innovation reinforce one another as dual engines of competitive advantage. Digital transformation provides new technologies, data, and organisational capabilities that enable innovation, while innovation generates fresh demands and opportunities that drive further digital investment and restructuring. Yet scholars note that strong theoretical frameworks and long-term empirical studies remain limited, highlighting the need for deeper investigation into how these reciprocal dynamics unfold across industries and over time (Appio et al., 2021).

Innovation practices such as new business models, co-creation with customers, and experimentation create fresh requirements for digital infrastructure, which, in turn, enable the extension and redesign of digital capabilities (Ciarli et al., 2021).

Gradillas and Thomas (2023) provide an important refinement to the commonly cited view of a bidirectional relationship between DT and innovation, where each is assumed to drive and deepen the other in a reinforcing cycle. The bidirectional model rightly emphasises continuous feedback; innovations in products, services, and business models stimulate further digital investments and organisational redesign, which, in turn, enable additional innovation. Yet this account often blurs the foundational stages of the process. Building on this insight, the next section develops a conceptual framework that integrates strategic leadership with the DT-innovation dynamic. This framework shows how strategic leaders mobilise competencies and roles to activate the feedback loop between transformation and innovation, while accounting for the enabling and constraining conditions identified in the preceding discussion.

#### **2.4.4 Conclusion**

This literature review confirms that innovation is both a process and an outcome that combines novelty with value creation, but its conceptualisation remains fragmented. At the same time, innovation is shaped by powerful drivers and enablers. Innovation reaches far beyond new products to include services, processes, and new ways of working, unfolding across ecosystems and collaborative networks that cut across firms and national boundaries. Its success rests on strategic leadership, human capabilities, and advanced digital technologies, all of which enable continual renewal and adaptation. Yet, innovation remains fragile and contested. Conceptual ambiguity, resource and skill gaps, organisational inertia, and governance rigidities frequently slow or derail progress, while experimentation and failure are unavoidable parts of learning.

#### **2.5 Literature Conclusion**

This literature underscores the essential role of strategic leaders in enabling innovation through digital transformation, ensuring that businesses remain sustainable in both trade and operations. It suggests a reciprocal relationship in which innovation imperatives catalyse digital transformation initiatives. This highlights the potential for bidirectional dynamics, where strategic leaders engage in iterative cycles of transformation and innovation rather than following a one-way path.

This view aligns with Butt et al. (2024), who argue that transformations driven by digital technologies are not merely technological shifts but organisation-wide innovation changes. Together, these insights strengthen the argument that strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation not only by setting a vision but also by actively configuring leadership roles and DT strategies to fit the organisational context (Soto Setzke et al., 2021). These constructs coexist, and this study builds on these insights.

## 2.6 Conceptual framework

This section integrates the preceding literature on strategic leadership, digital transformation (DT), and innovation into a conceptual framework that guides the empirical part of this study. The framework explains how strategic leaders enable innovation through digital transformation in customer-centric industries and translates the theoretical insights into operational research questions.

The framework also connects the constructs and relationships developed in Sections 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4, including the bidirectional DT-innovation dynamic discussed in Section 2.4. It specifies how strategic leaders' roles and competencies influence the initiation, direction, and sustainability of both digital transformation and innovation. Finally, it translates theoretical insights into explorational research questions and provides direction for data collection and analysis.

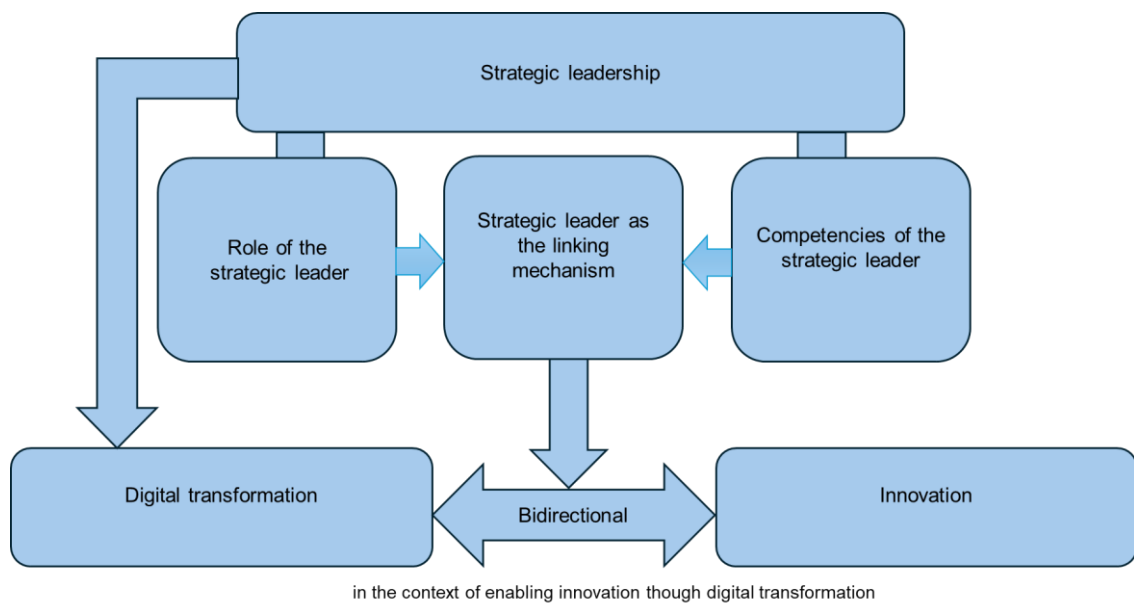
Strategic leadership is defined as an organisation-wide capability enacted through interrelated roles and competency clusters identified earlier. Thus, strategic leaders provide vision and strategic alignment, mobilise talent and partnerships, and govern risks, thereby creating the organisational context in which innovation and digital transformation can occur.

Digital transformation is understood as the strategic adoption and integration of digital technologies that reshape organisational structures, processes, and value creation. Distinct from digitisation and digitalisation, DT requires active leadership to convert technological potential into enduring business advantage.

Innovation is defined as the implementation of a novel idea into an outcome that creates stakeholder value. This definition accommodates the full range of innovation types from incremental improvements to radical, socially oriented, or digitally enabled transformations and treats innovation as both a process and a result.

Building on Gradillas and Thomas (2023), the bidirectional dynamics framework recognises a bidirectional relationship between DT and innovation, where each reinforces the other. Crucially, it incorporates the insight that digitisation provides the technical starting point, but reciprocal effects emerge only when strategic leaders mobilise resources and redesign business models to create new value. Figure 3 below illustrates the discussion above into a conceptual framework.

**Figure 3: Literature review conceptual Framework**



**Source: Author's own**

The above (figure 3) conceptual framework positions strategic leadership as the primary enabling force that activates and sustains the reciprocal relationship between digital transformation and innovation. These conclusions set the foundation for the next chapter, which develops the central research question and specifies how the study will examine the interaction of strategic leadership, digital transformation, and innovation.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research questions that flow from the research problem introduced in Chapter 1. The research problem was further explored through literature review in Chapter 2 by translating identified gaps into a clear line of inquiry. This study addresses the theoretical problem of how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation; a topic that remains conceptually fragmented and under-explored in different contexts (Singh et al; 2023). Digital disruption, shifting customer expectations, and global uncertainties intensify the need to understand how strategic leaders enact roles and develop competencies that enable innovation.

Given that the field of strategic leadership is still evolving and requires new insights rather than statistical testing, the investigation is guided by one central research question supported by three sub-questions. These questions directly extend the themes and conclusions discussed in Chapter 2 and form the foundation for the methodology design in Chapter 4, as well as the empirical analysis in subsequent chapters.

### 3.2 Research question

Therefore, the study is guided by the following central research question:

#### ***How do strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation?***

This overarching question integrates this study's three core constructs of strategic leadership, innovation, and digital transformation. By addressing how leaders translate strategic intent into innovation outcomes, the central research question provides the organising framework for this study. Consequently, this central question is elaborated through three sub-questions:

#### ***Sub-question 1. What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?***

This sub-question examines the specific leadership roles that make innovation possible when organisations adopt digital technologies. It draws on work identifying key strategic-leadership functions (Singh et al; 2023; Samimi et al., 2022; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021) and on research highlighting the need to operationalise these roles under conditions of technological change (Carli et al., 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Georgakakis et al., 2022).

The aim is to uncover how and what strategic leaders actually do when they execute businesses innovation through digital transformation.

***Sub-question 2. What strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation?***

This question focuses on the competency clusters that enable strategic leaders to fulfil the roles identified in sub-question 1. Prior studies emphasise competencies such as strategic foresight, digital acumen, and change management, yet evidence remains fragmented (Singh et al; 2023; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Carli et al., 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020). By identifying and analysing these competencies, sub-question 2 clarifies the competencies that equip strategic leaders to integrate innovation and digital transformation effectively.

***Sub-question 3. How does digital transformation influence the ways in which strategic leaders foster innovation?***

Finally, the third sub-question explores how the digital context reshapes leadership practice itself. DT introduces new technologies, alters market dynamics, and changes consumer expectations; all of which can redefine how leaders promote and manage innovation (Singh et al; 2023; AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020). Therefore, sub-question 3 investigates these influences by asking how digital disruption modifies decision processes, leadership behaviours, and the interaction between innovation and DT.

### 3.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the central research question and its related sub-questions. These questions were informed by the theoretical and empirical gaps identified during literature review in Chapter 2. Collectively, the research questions establish the foundation for the methodological choices discussed in the next chapter; Chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the research methodology and design that will be applied in the study which explores research question. It provides the details and justification for the methodology and designed used.

### **4.2 Choice of methodology**

The literature review in Chapter 2 highlighted that the strategic leadership domain is vast, with its nuances increasingly explored through empirical research. However, both innovation and digital transformation still lack strong conceptual grounding. The exploration of strategic leadership within these two phenomena therefore justifies the methodological approach adopted in this study, which is anchored in exploration.

#### **4.2.1 Research questions**

A research question is fundamental to structuring the research process. Snyder (2019) states that a well-defined research question determines the focus and scope guiding the choice of methodology and analysis. In addition, earlier Alvesson and Sandburg (2013) emphasise that formulating a question is not only a matter of narrowing a topic but also of challenging underlying assumptions to create space for new insights. The central question for this study examines how individual strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation. As Creswell and Creswell (2023) note, exploratory questions are often framed using “how” or “what”. The sub-questions, outlined in Chapter 3, further develop this exploration by examining both “what” and “how,” thereby reinforcing this study’s grounding in an exploratory nature approach.

#### **4.2.2 Research paradigm**

Creswell and Creswell (2023) describe qualitative research as an approach focused on exploring individuals and understanding the meaning they attribute to a particular phenomenon or problem. Qualitative studies are defined as inquiries that seek to explore and interpret the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue. In this study, the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation. These leaders operate within organisations and navigate complex processes of digital change, as discussed in Chapter 2. Hammarberg et al. (2016) posits: "Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning, and perspective, most often from the participant's

standpoint. These data are usually not amenable to counting or measuring." This makes the qualitative approach most appropriate for this study.

Creswell and Creswell (2023) describes philosophical assumptions as the basic beliefs and viewpoints that guide how a researcher approaches a study. These include assumptions about what is real, known as ontology; which recognises that reality is not made up of separate things but of connections and relationships between people, objects, and ideas, say Hultin (2019). Moreover, philosophical assumptions include assumptions about how knowledge is created; and this is known as epistemology, according to Hultin (2019). Together, these beliefs form the foundation of research methodology and shape the overall approach a researcher uses to conduct a study.

Barad (2003) cautions that separating the nature of being from the nature of knowing is misleading as it maintains an artificial divide between the human and non-human, the subject and object, and the material and discursive, thus recognising that knowing and being are deeply interconnected. This perspective aligns with the philosophical grounding of this study, which seeks to understand how strategic leaders and digital technologies co-shape one another in the process of innovation in customer-centric sectors. By adopting this stance, this research acknowledges that leadership practices, technological tools, and contextual factors are not independent elements but are continuously forming and influencing each other through practice and meaning making.

Situating this perspective within the broader philosophical paradigms that inform a suitable research methodological approach, requires understanding the distinctions among positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Thus, these paradigms were considered to determine the most appropriate research approach.

This research adopts an interpretivist paradigm, aligning with this study's research question of exploring how strategic leaders drive digital transformation through innovation. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), the interpretivist approach assumes that reality is socially constructed and emphasises context, meaning, and subjective experiences, unlike positivism, which seeks to establish objective and measurable truths. This study does not aim to test hypotheses or quantify leadership effectiveness; instead, it seeks to understand how leaders navigate digital transformation (Singh et al., 2023). Similarly, the pragmatic paradigm, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to solve real-world challenges (Creswell & Creswell, 2023),

was not selected, as this research focuses on interpreting leadership experiences rather than prescribing specific solutions.

Ontology concerns the nature of reality, and an interpretivist study acknowledges that leadership effectiveness is context-dependent (Schraw, 2013). This aligns with Gimpel et al. (2018), who suggest that digital transformation manifests differently across organisations, depending on their strategic orientation and leadership context. This perspective supports the qualitative approach, where semi-structured interviews allow leaders to share subjective experiences when navigating digital transformation and innovation. By adopting an interpretivist approach, this study ensures that leadership insights are explored within their real-world contexts, providing rich and meaningful findings. To ensure coherence between this study's objectives, research questions, and methodological choices, a consistency matrix was developed as provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Consistency matrix**

| Research questions                                                                                         | Literature review                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Data collection tool                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-question 1: What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation? | Section: 2.2: Strategic Leader<br>2.3.1 Conceptual and Contextual understanding of DT and 2.4.1 Conceptual and contextual understanding of Innovation<br>Singh et al. (2023); Cortes and Herrmann, (2021); Kurzhals et al. (2020); Ciarli et al. (2021); Georgakakis et al. (2022); Samimi et al. (2022)   | Semi-structured Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, 10 and 11 |
| Sub-question 2: What strategic leader competencies are critical for digital transformation?                | Section: 2.2.3 Competencies of strategic leader<br>(Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022).                                                                                                                            | Semi-structured Interview Question 4, 5, and 6         |
| Sub-question 3: How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?        | Section 2.3.2 Enablers and Barriers of digital transformation;<br>2.4.2 Enablers and Barriers of innovation; 2.5 Bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation.<br>(Singh et al., 2023; AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2022) | Semi-Structured interview Question 7, 8 and 9          |

**Source: Author's own**

### **4.2.3 Research design**

Research designs represent specific types of inquiry within broader approaches, providing structured direction for the procedures used in a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study adopted a phenomenological research design as part of its qualitative approach. Phenomenology focuses on exploring and interpreting individuals lived experiences to understand the essence and meaning of a phenomenon as it is perceived by those who experience it (Bachkirova et al., 2020). This design is well suited to exploring how individuals make sense of complex realities, providing a phenomenological framework for understanding how strategic leaders experience and interpret their roles in driving innovation through digital transformation with the customer-centric sectors. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, the approach values context, subjectivity, and the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

### **4.3 Research setting**

Responding to the opportunity identified by Singh et al. (2022), who call for scholars to investigate strategic leadership and digital transformation phenomena across diverse contexts, this study situates its inquiry within the South African business environment. Mariani et al. (2023) argue that more exploratory research is needed to understand how digital innovation unfolds in practice, especially in settings characterised by uncertainty and rapid technological change. Duarte (2022) similarly positions Africa as an ideal environment for such inquiry, noting that the continent's evolving development landscape creates both urgency and opportunity for examining how innovation and digital transformation take shape on the ground.

Therefore, this research is underpinned by the theoretical and practical relevance outlined in Section 1.1, ensuring both academic rigour and contextual significance. The focus is on the trade, catering, and accommodation (TCA) sector; a sector with industries characterised by direct customer engagement and high service dependency. This sector is particularly exposed to the disruptive effects of digital transformation, facing mounting local and global pressures to adapt rapidly to technological change, evolving consumer behaviour, and intensified competition (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2024b).

Within this setting, this study explores how senior strategic leaders interpret and respond to these shifts, navigating uncertainty while driving organisational adaptation and

innovation. By examining leadership practices and decision-making processes under conditions of digital flux, this study aims to deepen understanding of how leaders shape strategic renewal and organisational resilience in emerging-market contexts such as South Africa.

#### 4.4 Level of analysis

This study's aims are to understand how organisations navigate and respond to digital change, as experienced and interpreted by their strategic leaders. The level of analysis is thus, organisational, as the phenomenon of interest innovation through digital transformation occurs within organisational contexts.

#### 4.5 Unit of analysis

The exploration of this study was centred on the experiences of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation within businesses in customer-centric sector. Consequently, the unit of analysis is placed at the strategic leaders. This view aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, that values the subjective meanings and context-specific insights leaders bring during complex organisational transformation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

#### 4.6 Sampling strategy, criteria and size

##### **4.6.1 Sampling strategy**

This study employs purposive sampling, a commonly applied qualitative research method to identify participants with specific expertise relevant to the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling allows the research to select participants with specialised knowledge or experience, ensuring rigorous data collection and meaningful results (Campbell et al., 2020).

##### **4.6.2 Sampling criteria**

The participant selection process consists of two stages which are the level and the unit of analysis. Businesses were chosen from the TCA sector, described as customer-centric industries. This researcher prioritised organisations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) for inclusion in this study, as there is no available dataset for this business category.

The participants in this study are strategic leaders, including senior leaders, top management teams, and decision-makers from different levels of the organisation, with a common strategic intent and involvement in digital transformation. Participants with specific knowledge and experience of the phenomenon were eligible for inclusion in this study, as the focus on their experience aligns with this research's assumptions.

It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic served as a key contextual trigger for this research, as it significantly accelerated digital transformation across customer-centric sectors (Amoah et al., 2021). Although the COVID-19 pandemic was not a direct focus of the study, it provided a relevant background for understanding the growing strategic importance of digital transformation and innovation within customer-centric industries.

This researcher's professional connections and network proved to be useful social capital that he tapped into, to identify the unit of analysis. Prospective participants were contacted via LinkedIn and In-email.

#### **4.6.3 Sample size**

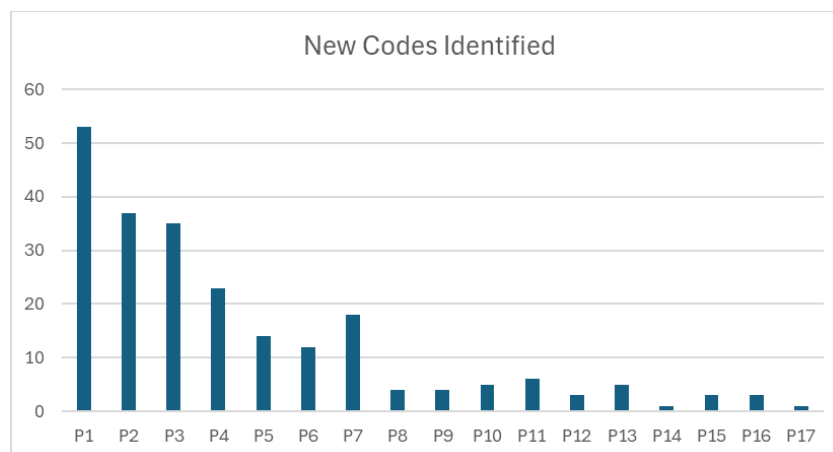
Creswell and Creswell (2023) posit that there is no specific number for determining sample size in qualitative research and suggest that it should be guided by the point at which data saturation occurs. Guest et al. (2006) describe saturation as the stage where no new themes emerge and indicate that this typically occurs between six and twelve interviews. While these authors provide general guidance, the final determination of sample adequacy was informed by ongoing data analysis and coding trends within this study.

This approach aligns with the GIBS research guidelines, which recommend a minimum of 15 participants for qualitative studies, and with Creswell and Creswell (2023) proposing a range of 3 to 10 participants for phenomenological designs. This researcher conducted a total of 17 interviews.

Although participants represented three subsectors within the TCA industry, code saturation was assessed at the level of the overall dataset because the study aimed to understand shared patterns in how strategic leaders enable innovation through digital transformation. An analysis of the Code–Document Table exported from ATLAS.ti demonstrated that most new codes emerged within the first seven interviews (**Figure 4**). Interviews P1 - P7 generated 53, 37, 35, 23, 14, 12, and 18 new codes respectively.

From Interview 8 onward, the number of new codes declined sharply, ranging between 1 and 6 per interview, with Interviews P14 - P17 each contributing only one to three new codes. This pattern indicates that the dataset had reached code saturation, as additional interviews produced minimal new conceptual insights. This aligns with the guidance of Guest et al. (2006), who note that saturation is typically achieved once further data collection yields little incremental information.

**Figure 4 New code identification**



**Source: Authors own**

In reaching out to prospective participants, this researcher began by searching the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) website for organisations operating within the TCA sectors using the indices classifications. After identifying relevant organisations, this researcher proceeded to locate the company profiles of individuals. Following an exhaustive search and recognising the limitations of publicly available information, this researcher adopted a contract-based approach, seeking recommendations through established professional contacts.

As part of participants recruitment process, this researcher utilised a premium LinkedIn account to contact potential participants directly via LinkedIn InMail. Each message included a formal greeting, the researcher's name, the purpose of the contact, details of the study topic and university affiliation. In addition, the message included the requested interview time that would be needed from participants to volunteer data in this study. Importantly, all the prospective participants were assured of confidentiality. Upon acceptance, further communication occurred on the same platform, where the researcher requested the participants' email address to confirm meeting arrangements, either directly or through their personal assistants. The interview invitation and informed

consent form, signed by the researcher, were subsequently emailed to participants prior to interview scheduling.

This researcher maintained a detailed tracking spreadsheet throughout the prospective participants recruitment process. This included the names of potential participants, the industry sub-sector they represented, the date of initial contact, and whether a response was received. The spreadsheet facilitated systematic follow-up and monitoring of participants recruitment progress. When several potential participants declined or became unavailable, this researcher extended the search by using targeted LinkedIn keyword filters such as “Strategic Leader”, “Digital Transformation”, “Innovation”, and “Leadership.”

In total, seventeen (17) participants confirmed availability as listed in **Table 2** below. This group comprised of eleven (11) individuals from the trade industry, three (3) from the accommodation industry, and three (3) from the catering industry. To comply with ethical clearance requirements and minimise any risk of identification, participant names and company affiliations were replaced with confidential codes, with the original details securely stored and accessible only by this researcher, and specific job titles were excluded from the report. These roles included positions such as Head of Product, Executive: Strategy Execution, Managing Director, Head of Digital, General Manager, Chief Information Officer, and Head of Integration with the strategic intent embedded into their duties.

**Table 2: Participants**

| <b>No.</b> | <b>Participants</b> | <b>Industry grouping</b> | <b>Experience in digital transformation</b> |
|------------|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1          | Participant 1T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 2          | Participant 2T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 3          | Participant 3C      | Catering                 | Yes                                         |
| 4          | Participant 4T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 5          | Participant 5T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 6          | Participant 6T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 7          | Participant 7T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 8          | Participant 8A      | Accommodation            | Yes                                         |
| 9          | Participant 9T      | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 10         | Participant 10T     | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 11         | Participant 11C     | Catering                 | Yes                                         |
| 12         | Participant 12T     | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 13         | Participant 13T     | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 14         | Participant 14T     | Trade                    | Yes                                         |
| 15         | Participant 15A     | Accommodation            | Yes                                         |
| 16         | Participant 16A     | Accommodation            | Yes                                         |
| 17         | Participant 17C     | Catering                 | Yes                                         |

**Source: Author's own**

#### 4.7 Research instrument

The research instrument used in this study is a semi-structured interview protocol, designed to explore participants lived experiences of strategic leadership and digital transformation. Mann (2016) states that semi-structured interviews formats are the most frequently used method in qualitative research because they offer a natural and socially appropriate means of gathering information and allow researchers to obtain detailed insights into participants' experiences and perspectives in innovation through digital transformation. Creswell and Creswell (2023) support this view, adding that qualitative interviews conducted face-to-face are best suited for understanding how individuals interpret their experiences.

As Josselson (2013) explains, qualitative interviewing is not a procedural act but a relational process in which knowledge is co-constructed through interpersonal dialogue. This approach allows the researcher to access participants lived experiences, uncover their meaning-making processes, and develop a contextual understanding of phenomena. Interviews were treated as active interactions rather than neutral data collection tools, recognising that meaning is co-constructed between the interviewer and participants (Mann, 2016). Josselson (2013) contends that the researcher plays a part in this co-construction of experience, recognising that the researcher's presence, tone, and behaviour, influence how the interviewee shares and how meaning is formed, while ensuring ethical sensitivity throughout. Therefore, all interviews were recorded to allow the researcher to be present and attentive to the participant.

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow flexibility and probing for depth while maintaining consistency across participants (Mann, 2016). In addition, semi-structured interviews further make provision for unanticipated leads and adapt to participants lived experiences (Kvale 2011). Annexure X provides the interview protocol used for this study. These interview protocols were prepared in alignment with the central research question and sub-questions to ensure consistency across Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4.

To assess the appropriateness of the interview protocol, a pilot was conducted with the researcher's colleagues prior to obtaining ethics approval, and prior to the commencement of data collection. Creswell and Creswell (2023) highlight the

importance of pilot testing as a means of refining data collection procedures and ensuring alignment between the research questions, interview protocols, and participants' understanding. Feedback from the pilot informed minor adjustments to the wording and sequencing of questions, and the interview duration was extended from 60 minutes to between 60 and 90 minutes to allow for greater depth, coherence, and participant understanding.

#### **4.8 Data gathering process**

The data collection process, guided by the central research question and qualitative approach, began with an application for ethical clearance. Data were collected through interviews aligned to the core question of how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation, focusing on individual experiences. Each participant was required to have experience in digital transformation to be eligible for inclusion in this study. A request for participation was sent to potential participants before providing detailed information about the study. This request sought participants' willingness to participate and their availability. The invitation explained this study's purpose and relevance to the participants' professional experiences.

A consent form was shared with participants as part of the invitation and was also discussed verbally at the beginning of each interview. Participants were taken through the consent form (sample **appendix one**) and asked to confirm their acceptance and grant permission to begin recording the interview. All recordings were stored securely on the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive cloud storage, with interviews conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform.

To collect primary data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior leaders from the TCA sectors via Microsoft Teams. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews (**appendix two: Interview Protocol**) provided the flexibility to enhance open-ended discussion with probing questions prompted by participants' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The collected interview data were subsequently transcribed and prepared for analysis, forming the foundation for identifying themes and patterns that address the central research question.

#### **4.9 Data analysis approach**

The data analysis is described as a systematic yet interpretive process that examines qualitative data for patterns, meaning, and insights that respond to the research

questions (Saldana, 2013). The process is viewed as “like peeling back the layers of an onion and putting it back together” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In transforming raw data into structured and meaningful insights that answer the research questions and tell a coherent analytical story, Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a process that is not linear but recursive, where researchers move back and forth between phases, building on previous steps. Klag and Langley (2013) describe this approach as a conceptual leap, bridging what is observed or said to abstract ideas, balancing rigour and imagination to build meaningful theoretical contributions.

Braun and Clarke (2006) posit that thematic analysis can be conducted using either an inductive or a deductive approach. The inductive approach is described as one where themes emerge directly from data without being shaped by pre-existing frameworks or theoretical assumptions, making it a data-driven process. In contrast, a deductive thematic analysis is guided by the researcher’s theoretical or analytical interest, meaning that coding and theme development are influenced by prior concepts or frameworks.

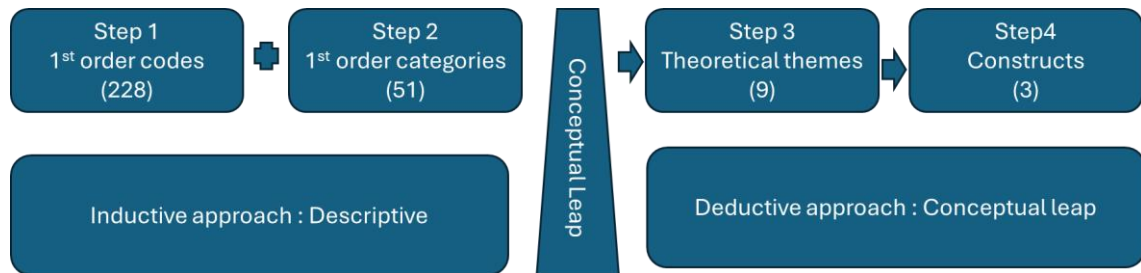
This study used as a hybrid form of thematic analysis, beginning with inductive, data-driven coding before moving to deductive theme development. As the analysis progressed, the researcher made what Klag and Langley (2013) describe as a conceptual leap, shifting from descriptive coding to higher-level interpretation informed by the study’s conceptual framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of thematic analysis:

- Becoming familiar with the data;
- Generating initial codes;
- Searching for and refining themes;
- Defining and naming these themes; and
- Producing the report.

This process moves from immersion in the data to identifying patterns of meaning and developing a coherent narrative that answers the research question. The process begins with data familiarisation, involving the researcher thoroughly reading the transcripts repeatedly to develop a deep understanding of the content. First-level coding uses inductive and descriptive approaches to capture the units of meaning, using short phrases drawn from participants' language to label key ideas, which will be grouped.

Henceforth, the analysis shifts toward interpretation through what the conceptual leap when the researcher moves from surface-level description to higher-level abstraction (Klag & Langley, 2013). Themes will be developed deductively based on the conceptual framework guiding this research. This researcher further refined the themes into theoretical categories corresponding to the research questions. The systematic analysis processes steps of the data analysis are capture in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Steps of data analysis**



**Source: Author's own**

#### 4.9.1 Step 1: First order codes

In preparing the data, the researcher downloaded the interview transcripts from Microsoft Teams and uploaded them into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative research tool used to support the inductive analysis process (**figure 6** illustration the ATLAS.ti tool with the outcome of the analysis). According to Saldaña (2013), a code is a word or short phrase that captures the essence of a portion of data. Each transcript was carefully reviewed, and the researcher began coding by linking key phrases from participants' responses and reducing the data into meaningful units. **Appendix three** provides the code book from ATLAS.ti.

#### 4.9.2 Step 2: First order categories

Following the thematic approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher searched for recurring or significant phrases across the dataset. This was a back-and-forth; iterative process aimed at identifying both common and contrasting patterns. Saldaña (2013) emphasises the importance of recoding and re-categorising data to gain a deeper understanding and progressively build towards theory, which guided this phase of the analysis.

#### 4.9.3 Step 3: Theoretical themes

This researcher proceeded beyond descriptive coding of participants' perceptions towards theoretical interpretation; a process often referred to as the conceptual leap (Klag & Langley, 2012). First-order categories derived from the data were mapped onto

the theoretical framework based on this researcher's interpretation of how the findings related to the theoretical themes. While all categories aligned with existing theoretical constructs, new theme was created for those that did not fit neatly within the framework.

#### 4.9.4 Step 4: Constructs

In the final stage, this researcher mapped the identified themes to the constructs outlined in Chapter 2, ensuring alignment between empirical findings and the theoretical foundation of this study. This process helped to refine the conceptual framework and demonstrate how this study's results extend or reinforce existing theory. This is captured in Table 4.3 below;

Each row in Table 4.3 represents a cluster of related categories derived from the codes mapped to relevant constructs and these categories were synthesised into broader themes.

**Figure 6: Coding outcomes of step 1 and 2 from ATLAS.ti**

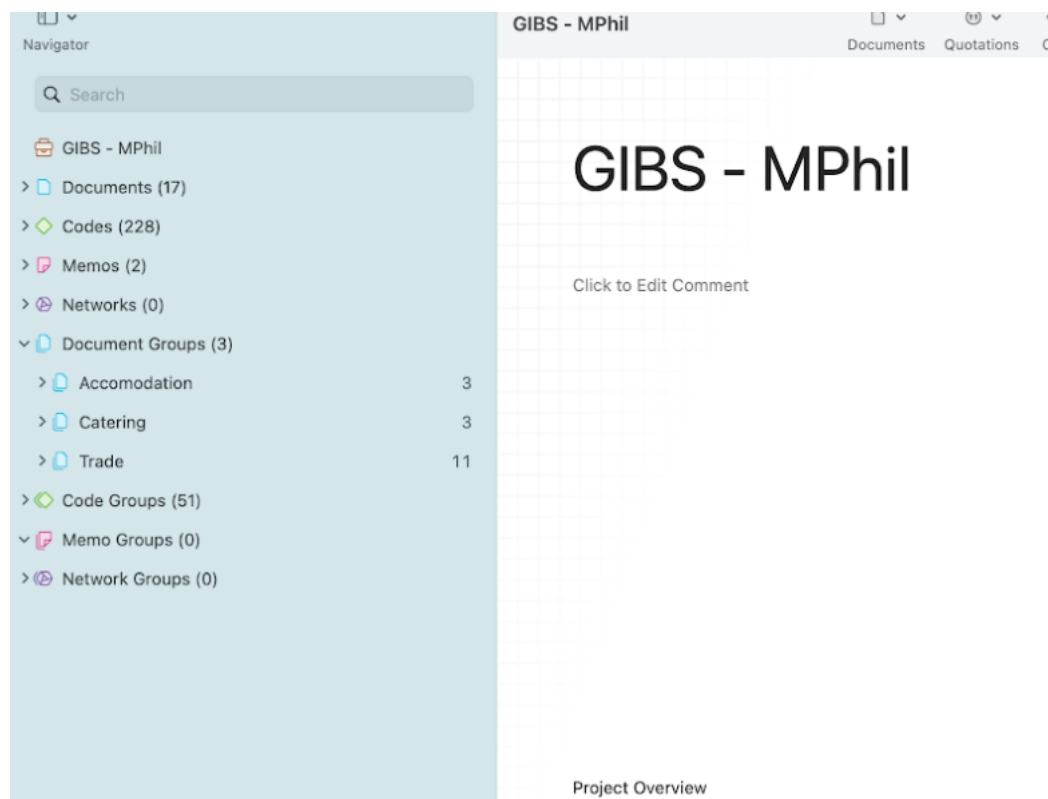


***Table 4.3: Synthesis of categories and themes informing the conceptual framework***

| Constructs and Category                                               | Themes                                                  | Constructs and Category                                           | Themes                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strategic Leadership: Boundary-Spanning & Stakeholder Orchestration   | Strategic leadership as the linking mechanism           | Digital Transformation: Bureaucratic Inertia                      | <u>Barriers</u> and enablers of digital transformation                   |
| Strategic Leadership: Direction & Strategic Coherence                 |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Human and Behavioural Concepts            |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Ethical leading                                 |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Leadership & Strategic Alignment Enablers |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Information Integration                         |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Legacy Systems                            |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Risk balancing                                  |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Organisational and Human Enablers         |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Sense-Making & Decision Under Uncertainty       |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Resource Limitation                       |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Vision and Direction                            | Evolving Roles of Strategic leaders                     | Digital Transformation: Strategic Misalignment                    | How strategic leaders understand innovation                              |
| Strategic Leadership: People and Culture Enabler                      |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Technological Enablers                    |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Execution and Accountability Driver             |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Fear of Redundancy                        |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation     |                                                         | Digital Transformation: Skills                                    |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Adaptive and Resilient Leader                   |                                                         | Innovation: Evolving Views of Innovation                          |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: People Management (Competency)                  | Competencies of strategic leaders                       | Innovation: Contextual Drivers and Pressures                      | <u>Barriers</u> and enablers of innovation                               |
| Strategic Leadership: Relational and influence (Competency)           |                                                         | Innovation: Innovation as a Multi-Stage Process                   |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Crises and Resilience (Competency)              |                                                         | Innovation: Performance and Return of Investment                  |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Digital and Analytical (Competency)             |                                                         | Innovation: Ecosystem                                             |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Human Capital Development (Competency)          |                                                         | Innovation: Leadership Alignment                                  |                                                                          |
| Strategic Leadership: Strategic and Cognitive Capability (Competency) | How strategic leaders understand digital transformation | Innovation: Dynamic and Learning                                  | Bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation |
| Digital Transformation: Context Dependent                             |                                                         | Innovation: Technological and Digital Enablers                    |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Leadership Driven and Vision Dependent        |                                                         | Innovation: Ambiguity                                             |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Organisational and Strategic Change           |                                                         | Innovation: Resource Limitation                                   |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Customer and Experimental                     |                                                         | Innovation: Human and Behavioural                                 |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Purpose, Process and Technology Orientation   | Characteristics of digital transformation               | Bidirectional: Co-evolution                                       |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Cross-Functional Integration                  |                                                         | Bidirectional: Integrative Role                                   |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Continuous and ongoing                        |                                                         | Bidirectional: Return on Investment                               |                                                                          |
| Digital Transformation: Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Orientation    |                                                         |                                                                   |                                                                          |

**Source: Author's own**

#### 4.10 Research quality and rigour

In qualitative research, ensuring quality and rigour involves establishing trustworthiness, transparency, and methodological consistency. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), rigour and quality represent central strengths of qualitative inquiry, as they allow the researcher to demonstrate the accuracy and credibility of the findings through systematic and transparent processes. To uphold these standards, this researcher applied a series of quality assurance techniques, including data triangulation between participant groups, comparative analysis with existing literature, and the use of credible data analysis methods supported by established methodological sources.

Furthermore, recorded interviews and de-identified transcripts were securely stored and uploaded to the GIBS data repository, ensuring transparency and auditability of the data. This study's systematic literature review, purposive sampling, and evidence of data saturation strengthened its validity and reduced researcher bias. As Johnson et al. (2020) emphasise, ensuring research quality and rigour begins with a clearly formulated research question, a coherent conceptual framework, and appropriate data collection and analysis methods that minimise bias and enhance credibility. In line with this, the findings in this study were substantiated through detailed quotations and cross-group comparisons, demonstrating a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous approach to qualitative research.

#### 4.11 Limitations of the research design and methods

Qualitative research is inherently subject to researcher bias, which can shape how data is interpreted (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Because the researcher was a novice with no prior research experience, the potential for interpretive bias and methodological limitations is acknowledged. To minimise this risk, recognised research methodology guidance was followed, and the quality and rigour criteria in Section 4.10 were applied.

Thematic analysis also brings methodological limitations. Theme identification and interpretation rely on the researcher's judgement, which means that an element of subjectivity is unavoidable. A structured, step-by-step analytical process was used to enhance dependability, yet the method remains interpretive by nature.

Purposive sampling, while suitable for qualitative research, also introduces methodological limits. It focuses on selecting participants for their relevance rather than for representativeness. As a result, the findings reflect the perspectives of those selected and are not intended to be generalised beyond the study.

#### 4.12 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the GIBS Research Ethics Committee before any data collection commenced (included in **appendix four**). All participants were informed about the purpose of this study and their participation requirements before the interviews began. Consent forms were distributed and signed, granting permission for audio recording, transcription, data storage, and the use of anonymised quotations in the final report. A copy of the pro forma informed consent form is included in Appendix D.

Consistent with the ethical considerations outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2023), this researcher ensured that this study causes no harm to participants; that participation was entirely voluntary, and that participants could withdraw at any point without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the process. No personal identifiers or organisational names were used in the report; only general descriptors such as industry and confirmation of experience in digital transformation were retained to provide context.

All data were securely stored within identifiers electronic format on the researcher's OneDrive cloud platform. Access to these files was restricted to the researcher, and the data will be retained for a minimum of ten years, as required by the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) research policy.

#### 4.13 Conclusion

This study explores how strategic leaders drive innovation in the context of digital transformation. The methodology outline provided a systematic framework for research questions. Through the selected research methodology and design, this study provided an opportunity for a deep, context-driven exploration of leadership strategies. Moreover, it provides insights for academic research and business practice, with meaningful insights into how strategic leadership influences innovation through digital transformation.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings emerging from semi-structured interviews conducted with strategic leaders across the Trade, Catering, and Accommodation (TCA) sector.

Before presenting the results, steps were taken to ensure that the findings are credible, transparent, and grounded in the data as described in Chapter 4. The themes were derived from consistent patterns identified across seventeen participants representing senior leaders involved in digital transformation innovative initiatives post Covid-19 pandemic within South Africa's TCA sector. Of these, eleven (11) were from trade industry, three (3) from accommodation industry, and three (3) from catering industry. Participants held senior roles such as Head of Product, Executive: Strategy Execution, Managing Director, Head of Digital, General Manager, Chief Information Officer, and Head of Integration. Their industrial diversity confirmed that the insights were not confined to a single organisational context. Direct quotations are used throughout this chapter to illustrate how the themes reflect participants' own words and experiences. Guided by the methodical choices described in Chapter 4, the findings are organised thematically around the three sub-research questions.

### 5.2. Presentation of findings

The data analysis produced nine (9) themes, eight (8) of which correspond with the constructs and themes derived from the conceptual framework. Three (3) of the eight (8) themes however, while the underlying concepts align with existing theory, the titles of these themes differ slightly to reflect the contextual language and emphasis expressed by participants. **Table 4** below illustrates how the themes identified in Chapter 5 conceptually align with those discussed in Chapter 2, while differing in emphasis and phrasing to reflect participants' contextual interpretations.

**Table 4: Alignment of research findings and literature themes**

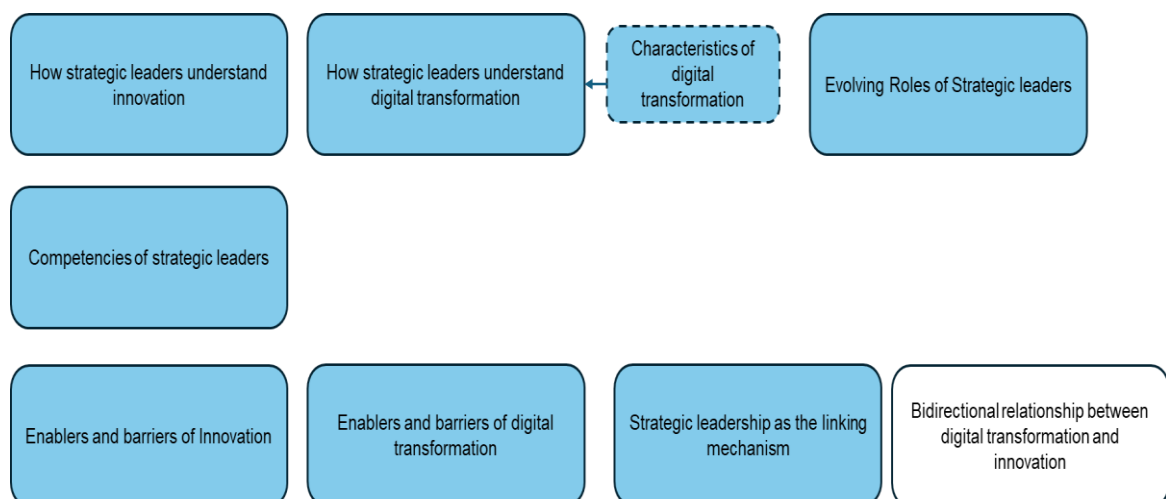
| Literature                                             | Research findings                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Role of strategic leader driving innovation through DT | Evolving roles of strategic leaders                     |
| Definitions and perspectives of DT                     | How strategic leaders understand digital transformation |

|                                            |                                             |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Definitions and perspectives of Innovation | How strategic leaders understand innovation |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|

Further, the theme “Bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation” was analysed through the data. While this theme primarily describes the dynamic environment in which strategic leaders operate, where innovation both drives and is driven by digital transformation and vice versa, on closer look, it provides a necessary background for understanding for strategic leadership in dynamic and involving environment that requires strategic leaders to respond. Therefore, it contextualises rather than extends theory of the Strategic leader’s role. It merely frames the arena within which strategic leadership operations. Consequently, this theme will not be discussed as a stand-alone theme. Rather, it will come through the discussion of other themes such as barriers and enablers of innovation and barriers and enablers of digital transformation.

Lastly, the theme of “Characteristics of Digital Transformation” has been merged with the “Conceptual and Contextual Understanding of Digital Transformation,” because it contributes to a deeper understanding and participants interpreter view of the phenomenon through its defining characteristics that shape and form digital transformation. Thus, the remaining seven (7) themes shown below in **Figure 7** will form the basis of the discussion.

**Figure 7: Themes for discussion**



**Source: Author’s own**

Each overarching theme is supported by several sub-themes that further unpack its underlying dimensions and offer deeper insight into the data. These refinements including the sub-themes have been incorporated into the adapted conceptual framework presented in **Figure 6** to illustrate the refined relationships between constructs that emerged through the analysis.

The findings are organised according to the three research sub-questions that are derived from the central question that asked: “How do strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation?”. The first sub-question on the roles of strategic leaders is addressed through Conceptual and Contextual Understanding of DT (including characterises of DT), Conceptual and Contextual Understanding of Innovation, and The Role of Strategic Leaders. The second sub-question on key competencies is covered by the Competencies theme. The third sub-question on how digital transformation impacts leadership is explained through Strategic Leadership as the Linking Mechanism, Barriers and Enablers of Digital Transformation and Innovation and the Bidirectional Relationship between Digital Transformation and Innovation. Table 5 below provides the linkage between sub-research questions to the themes and constructs.

***Table 5: Sub-Research questions mapping to themes and constructs***

| Research sub-question                                                                                  | Theme                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Construct                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?             | <b>Theme 1:</b> How strategic leaders understand innovation<br><b>Theme 2:</b> How strategic leaders understand of digital transformation (Including theme: characteristics of digital Transformation)<br><b>Theme 3:</b> Evolving roles of strategic leaders                       | Innovation<br><br>Digital transformation<br><br>Strategic leadership |
| What strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation? | <b>Theme 1:</b> Competencies of strategic leaders                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Strategic leadership                                                 |
| How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?                    | <b>Theme 1:</b> Barriers and enablers of Innovation<br><b>Theme 2:</b> Barriers and enablers of digital transformation<br><b>Theme 3:</b> Strategic leadership as the linking mechanism<br><b>Theme 4:</b> Bidirectional relationship between digital transformation and innovation | Digital transformation<br><br>Innovation<br><br>Strategic leadership |

Participants were grouped according to their respective industries within the TCA sector. This grouping facilitated both in-group and across-group analysis, enabling this researcher to identify patterns specific to each industry and those shared across the broader sector. Each group was assigned a distinct colour code for ease of reference during data analysis and presentation, light orange for trade, light blue for accommodation, and light green for catering:

|       |               |          |
|-------|---------------|----------|
| Trade | Accommodation | Catering |
|-------|---------------|----------|

This researcher acknowledges that within qualitative research, the prevalence with which a topic or sub-theme is mentioned by participants does not determine its significance. Rather, each participant's account is regarded as an important insight that contributes to understanding the research phenomenon in relation to the guiding research questions. Accordingly, this researcher does not quantify the number of mentions of a particular sub-theme; instead, notes whether a sub-theme was referenced "multiple times", "sometimes", or "few times" across participants to indicate the relative spread of perspectives without implying comparative importance.

Each theme is presented using a consistent analytical structure to ensure clarity, coherence, and comparability across findings. First, a theme overview introduces and defines the theme, explaining its relevance to the research question and situating it within the broader context of strategic leadership, digital transformation, and innovation. This is followed by supporting evidence drawn directly from participant interviews, where several illustrative quotations are used to highlight key patterns and meanings. An in-group analysis and a cross-group analysis follows. The in-group analysis examined insights within each industry, while the cross-group analysis compared patterns across the three industry segments aimed at providing and highlighting both similarities and differences in perspectives. Finally, each theme concludes with an interpretation of the key insights, linking them to the sub-research question and illustrating how the theme contributes to addressing the central research question, how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation.

### 5.3. Research sub-question 1: Roles do strategic leaders?

The first sub-question, ***"What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?"*** is addressed through the three themes that emerged

from the data analysis; namely, how strategic leaders understand innovation, how strategic leaders understand digital transformation and the evolving role of strategic leaders. Together, these themes describe the environment in which leadership takes place and the key functions strategic leaders perform to connect digital transformation and innovation.

**Table 6** presents each of the themes derived from sub-question 1, along with the sub-theme discussed within each theme. The table also indicates the relative prevalence of mentions.

***Table 6: Topic prevalence by participant group – research sub-question 1***

| Theme                                                      | Sub themes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Accommodation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Catering                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| How strategic leaders understand innovation                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous</li> <li>• Pragmatic</li> <li>• Performance-linked</li> <li>• Ecosystem-based</li> <li>• Cultural enabled by leadership mindset</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>Multi mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous</li> <li>• Pragmatic</li> <li>• Performance-linked</li> <li>• Ecosystem-based</li> <li>• Cultural (enabled by leadership mindset)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous</li> <li>• Pragmatic</li> <li>• Ecosystem-based</li> <li>• Cultural enabled by leadership mindset</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>Few mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pragmatic</li> <li>• Ecosystem-based</li> <li>• Performance-linked</li> <li>• Cultural enabled by leadership mindset</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| How strategic leaders understand of digital transformation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context Dependent</li> <li>• Leadership Driven and Vision Dependent</li> <li>• Organisational and Strategic Change</li> <li>• Customer and Experimental</li> <li>• Purpose, Process, and Technology Orientation</li> <li>• Cross-Functional Integration</li> <li>• Continuous and Ongoing</li> <li>• Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Orientation</li> </ul> | <b>Multi mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context Dependent</li> <li>• Leadership Driven and Vision Dependent</li> <li>• Organisational and Strategic Change</li> <li>• Customer and Experimental</li> <li>• Purpose, Process, and Technology Orientation</li> <li>• Cross-Functional Integration</li> <li>• Continuous and Ongoing</li> <li>• Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Orientation</li> </ul> | <b>Multi mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context Dependent</li> <li>• Leadership Driven and Vision Dependent</li> <li>• Organisational and Strategic Change</li> <li>• Customer and Experimental</li> <li>• Purpose, Process, and Technology Orientation</li> <li>• Cross-Functional Integration</li> <li>• Continuous and Ongoing</li> <li>• Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Orientation</li> </ul> | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context Dependent</li> <li>• Leadership Driven and Vision Dependent</li> <li>• Organisational and Strategic Change</li> <li>• Customer and Experimental</li> <li>• Purpose, Process, and Technology Orientation</li> <li>• Cross-Functional Integration</li> <li>• Continuous and Ongoing</li> <li>• Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Orientation</li> </ul> |
| Evolving roles of strategic leaders                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision and direction</li> <li>• People and Culture Enabler</li> <li>• Execution and Accountability Driver</li> <li>• Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation</li> <li>• Adaptive and Resilient Leader</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                       | <b>Multi mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision and direction</li> <li>• People and Culture Enabler</li> <li>• Execution and Accountability Driver</li> <li>• Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation</li> <li>• Adaptive and Resilient Leader</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                       | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision and Direction</li> <li>• People and Culture Enabler</li> <li>• Execution and Accountability Driver</li> <li>• Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision and direction</li> <li>• People and Culture Enabler</li> <li>• Execution and Accountability Driver</li> <li>• Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation</li> <li>• Adaptive and Resilient Leader</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                       |

|  |  |  |                                 |  |
|--|--|--|---------------------------------|--|
|  |  |  | • Adaptive and Resilient Leader |  |
|--|--|--|---------------------------------|--|

### 5.3.1 Research sub-question 1: Theme 1 – how strategic leaders understand innovation

This theme relates to the first sub-research question “What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?” This sub-question offers a foundational understanding of how participants define and interpret innovation within their organisational contexts. Before identifying what leaders do, it is necessary to establish what “innovation” means to them. The theme therefore provides the conceptual baseline that shapes strategic leader behaviour

#### 5.3.1.1. Evidence of how strategic leaders understand of innovation

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Accommodation | Catering |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| <i>Participant 6T: “Now in terms of innovation, it comes back down to what your definition of innovation is. I am not necessarily the biggest believer in innovation. I am the biggest believer in execution. And the reason why I particularly say that is and I'll give you a use case. You take a look at Company X. Company X is heralded as this great innovation plan. But if you strip it down to what the core principles and the core essence of what Company X did, Company X took what was already existing. What it identified was a customer segment that was neglected in the market and all it effectively did was execute very well given what the customer needs.”</i> |               |          |
| <i>Participant 1T: “...but innovation can also stand alone, such as in product or service design. Innovation is an organisational imperative.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |               |          |
| <i>Participant 2T: “Innovation is about finding new ways to create value...”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |               |          |
| <i>Participant T 9T: “Innovation can be many things. It's any creative thought something novel or even small continuous improvements. It spans disciplines product, processes, ways of working, marketing it's very broad. The key is that innovation must link to business strategy or to value propositions for customers, employees, or stakeholders. Innovation should have a purpose.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |               |          |
| <i>Participant 13T: “I'm a big believer in experimentation. Innovation is only theory until you test it in a real environment. My approach is to innovate, experiment, implement, and operate.” ... Innovation doesn't always have to be digital it's about thinking differently.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| <i>Participant 14T: “...they use cloud-based services. However, innovation remains critical. Too often, innovation is treated as a side project rather than a core priority. Failure to innovate can determine whether a business succeeds or not. Innovation doesn't have to be radical it can mean simplifying processes or improving small things that matter.” “...It started as an internal requirement, and we co-created a product that didn't exist on the market. Eventually, it was sold to other customers too. That's an example of innovation built from operational need.”</i>                                                                                            |               |          |
| <i>Participant 15A: “I often use the coffee example with my team. Today, you press a button and get a cappuccino; in the past, it was more manual. That is innovation making life easier, whether through technology or manual process improvements.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |               |          |
| <i>Participant 5T: “And that was just after the pandemic, beginning of 2021, that was for us as a company to meet the shift to online shopping after the changes that were happening in the industry.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |               |          |
| <i>Participant 6T: “Innovation can be considered moving the needle or serving a customer need a lot better.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |               |          |
| <i>Participant 7T: “Today my current role means that I'm the client for largely parts of this, which means that I can apply my experience and ask the tough questions in the room and really push people to innovate.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |               |          |
| <i>Participant 7T: “You know what's worse for anybody in retail or anywhere else in innovation is when you believe you have a solution to a problem is there a real problem or is there a solution looking for a problem?”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |               |          |
| <i>“And there are times where people can develop and go down a rabbit hole, creating solutions where there isn't actually a problem.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |               |          |
| <i>Participant 11C: “We debated the term “innovation”. People think it means Elon Musk-level breakthroughs, but our CEO reminded us that something like a menu change, which happens twice a year (April and November), involves innovation.”</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |               |          |
| <i>Participant 15A: “The Innovation Committee was set up a few years ago, before I joined. I only joined about a year after it was formed, so I don't know the exact original reason. However, the chairperson</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |               |          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>remains the same as the initial committee. The focus has always been that we can't keep doing the same things and expect different results. You need change. With innovation and technology, you need different people talking and thinking, with different opinions. Sometimes, at senior levels, there can be resistance to change if leadership has been around since the early days."</p> |
| <p>Participant 16A: "One idea was to add a "reorder favourite" button on the app. A store manager suggested it, and when we added it, repeat orders went up 18%. So, innovation isn't always big and flashy sometimes it's a small, human insight."</p>                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>Participant 17C: "So it wasn't just about innovation for the sake of it, it created measurable value." "Innovation used to be top-down senior people brainstorming ideas in a boardroom. Now it's ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly. It's taught me to be more experimental prototype fast, fail cheap."</p>   |

#### 5.3.1.2. In-group analysis of evidence of how strategic leaders understand of innovation

##### 5.3.1.2.1. Trade group

Participants across the trade group were similar in viewing innovation as a strategic and execution-oriented process rather than an abstract pursuit of novelty. They described innovation as an organisational imperative and a deliberate mechanism to create value and maintain competitiveness. Participant 1T and Participant 2T linked innovation explicitly to the organisational purpose: *"Innovation can also standalone... Innovation is an organisational imperative". "Innovation is about finding new ways to create value"*. For several participants, innovation was less about invention and more about operational excellence and responsiveness to customers' needs. Participant 6T captured this pragmatism by personal reflection that the Participant 6T was *"not necessarily the biggest believer in innovation... [but] the biggest believer in execution,"* arguing that success lies in executing existing ideas effectively to meet neglected customer segments. The same disciplined mindset appeared in Participant 13T's focus on experimentation *"Innovation is only theory until you test it in a real environment"* and Participant 14T's warning that innovation too often becomes a side project divorced from core business priorities. Other participants such as Participant 5T and Participant 7T reinforced a contextual and problem-driven view, stressing that innovation arises from market shifts or genuine customer problems rather than theoretical design.

##### 5.3.1.2.2. Accommodation group

There was a shared understanding among participants in the Accommodation group that innovation is best understood through a service and experience lens, focusing on incremental improvements in guest or user interactions rather than radical transformation. Their accounts positioned innovation as part of daily operational refinement. Participant 15A explained, *"Innovation makes life easier... whether through technology or manual process improvements,"* illustrating the group's emphasis on efficiency and simplicity. Governance structures, such as the Innovation Committee

referenced by the same participant, provided formal mechanisms to promote new thinking, though Participant 15A acknowledged the persistence of resistance to change at senior levels. Participant 16A described a practical, data-driven example of frontline innovation: *“One idea was to add a ‘reorder favourite’ button on the app... repeat orders went up 18 percent... innovation isn’t always big and flashy.”*

#### 5.3.1.2.3. Catering Group

In the Catering group, participants described innovation as a cultural and participatory process grounded in experimentation and measurable value. Their examples highlighted the democratisation of idea generation and the tangible outcomes that follow. Participant 11C remarked that even routine menu revisions constitute innovation, countering the belief that only radical change qualifies as innovation: *“People think it means Elon Musk-level breakthroughs, but something like a menu change... involves innovation.”* Participant 17C reinforced a results-oriented perspective: *“It wasn’t just innovation for the sake of it; it created measurable value” and captured the cultural shift toward inclusivity when noting that “Innovation used to be top-down... now it’s ecosystem-wide. Anyone can contribute... prototype fast, fail cheap.”*

#### 5.3.1.3. Cross-group analysis of evidence of how strategic leaders understand innovation

A comparison across the three groups reveals both shared and different understandings of innovation. Similarities across all participants perceived innovation as purposeful and value-seeking, rather than creative improvisation detached from business outcomes. However, the Trade group viewed innovation through a strategic and disciplined lens, emphasising execution, experimentation, and measurable contribution to performance. The Accommodation group framed it as incremental and service-oriented, focusing on guest experience and process efficiency within established operational structures. The Catering group, by contrast, interpreted innovation as a collective and cultural practice, where experimentation, inclusion, and rapid prototyping define success.

#### 5.3.1.4. Conclusion: how strategic leaders understand innovation

Considering these contextual similarities and differences, a unifying pattern emerges: innovation is considered a continuous, human-centred process shaped by leadership attitude and organisational culture. In the Trade group, leadership ensures strategic alignment and disciplined delivery; in the Accommodation group, it provides encouragement and cultural permission; and in the Catering group, it enables participation and experimentation. Together, these groups suggest that, across diverse organisational

environments, innovation thrives when it is embedded in day-to-day practice, linked to clear value, and supported by leaders who cultivate trust and openness to culture change. Therefore, these understanding positions innovation not as an isolated act of creativity, but as a strategic, evolving and cultural capability that sustains competitiveness and prepares organisations for broader digital transformation, the focus of the next theme.

### 5.3.2 Research sub-question 1: Theme 2 – how strategic leaders understand digital transformation

This theme relates to the first sub-question by establishing the context within which strategic leaders operate when driving innovation through digital transformation. It explores how participants define and interpret the concept of digital transformation within their organisations, offering insights into how they understand its purpose, scope, and significance. By clarifying what digital transformation means in practice, this theme provides the conceptual grounding necessary to understand the environment in which strategic leadership roles are enacted, and innovation is pursued.

#### 5.3.2.1 Evidence of conceptual and contextual understanding of digital transformation

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Accommodation | Catering |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| <i>P2: "The transformation was both defensive to catch up with competitors and offensive to create new value for customers."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |               |          |
| <i>P1: "The second part was restructuring teams into what was called scaled Agile, creating cross-functional teams focused on specific digital products such as payments, fulfilment, and loyalty. These teams took ownership end-to-end. Implementing this in a system not designed for agility was complex, and even today it remains challenging."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                       |               |          |
| <i>Participant 14T: "Digital transformation has been a buzzword for so long that it means different things to different people. Ten years ago, it meant digitising manual processes moving from notebooks to computers. Today, it's about leveraging technologies like AI to do more for the organisation."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |               |          |
| <i>Participant 2T: "The transformation was both defensive to catch up with competitors and offensive to create new value for customers."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |               |          |
| <i>Participant 2T: "...moving to AI-driven analytics was not just a technology upgrade it changed how managers think about decision-making."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |               |          |
| <i>Participant 3C: "Yes, I have. Most of my jobs have been in technology, so digital touches technology within this business as well. Any digital transformation initiatives would flow through the technology division."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |               |          |
| <i>Participant 5T: "Yes, yes, yes. I'd say we had to move with the times because, remember now, after COVID a lot had changed in many industries, basically every industry is digital."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |               |          |
| <i>P2: "One was resistance from employees who feared automation would replace their roles. Another was integration our legacy systems did not easily connect with newer platforms. We also underestimated the cultural change required; technology was the easier part. People and process change was harder."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |               |          |
| <i>Participant 8A: "What do I want to transform today? It's project initiatives that you implement because of the environment you're in and the requirements of that environment. Some are innovative in nature, but some are also industry-responsive in nature things you need to do to be relevant in the industry, to be profitable, and to compete against your peers. They're not techies, but future digital-transformation leaders will not come only from IT...They'll come from different departments -HR, finance, operations across the board."</i> |               |          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>"Digital transformation also depends on if you mean the full enterprise digital strategy where you've got a formalised, approved strategy, with teams and sub-projects, that's different. We're able to manage food usage and wastage at the hotel level without being there. We can see how many burgers we've used today as opposed to the revenue from burgers made. That reduces wastage."</i> |
| <i>Participants 16A: "My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people both customers and staff not the other way around."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <i>Participant 9T: "My learning through these projects has been that digital transformations aren't quick switches. They require extensive change management and leadership over multiple years."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>Participant 7T: "If you adopt a customer-first approach always, and if you can find ways to collaborate, you will win. What that means is that sometimes the smartest technology or the strongest commercial model if it doesn't solve a real customer problem, it doesn't succeed."</i>                                                                                                           |
| <i>Participant 16A: "Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool. We used to be a dine-in brand, but now nearly half our orders come through digital channels. My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people both customers and staff not the other way around."</i>                                                                                                            |
| <i>Participant 17C: "Since COVID, we've had to accelerate all things digital from online bookings and contactless check-ins to digital gaming. I've led a few cross-functional teams driving that change. The goal has been to blend our physical guest experience with the digital one, making it seamless no matter where the customer interacts with us."</i>                                      |
| <i>Participant 17C: "Leaders shouldn't just talk about technology and digitalisation; they should emphasise benefits—operational effectiveness, guest satisfaction, and lower operating costs. Don't just talk about what you want, but why you want it."</i>                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>Participant 15A: "Leaders shouldn't just talk about technology and digitalisation; they should emphasise benefits operational effectiveness, guest satisfaction, and lower operating costs."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Participant 13T: "Digitisation isn't new; we've been on this journey for quite some time."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <i>"Digitisation focuses on automation, removing manual tasks, and improving speed and efficiency... we automated processes related to compliance and visual merchandising."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

### 5.3.2.2 In-group analysis of how strategic leaders understand digital transformation

#### 5.3.2.2.1 Trade group

Within the Trade group, participants showed both similarities and differences in their understanding of digital transformation. Participant 14T reflected that *"digital transformation has been a buzzword for so long that it means different things to different people." Ten years ago, it meant digitising manual processes moving from notebooks to computers. Today, it's about leveraging technologies like AI to do more for the organisation.* Similarly, Participant 2T noted that *"The transformation was both defensive to catch up with competitors and offensive to create new value for customers."* These perspectives reflect a common understanding that digital transformation combines efficiency and innovation. However, differences were also evident in how leaders experienced and executed transformation. For example, Participant 9T emphasised the leadership dimension, stating: *"My learning through these projects has been that digital transformations aren't quick switches. They require extensive change management and leadership over multiple years."*

On the other hand, Participant 1T highlighted the structural and operational challenges, explaining: *“The second part was restructuring teams into what was called scaled Agile, creating cross-functional teams focused on specific digital products such as payments, fulfilment, and loyalty.”* Participant 7A added a customer-driven view: *“If you adopt a customer-first approach always, and if you can find ways to collaborate, you will win.”* These reflections demonstrate that for catering leaders, transformation was both a strategic and cultural evolution, achieved through integration, experimentation, and learning. These teams took ownership end-to-end. Implementing this in a system not designed for agility was complex, and even today it remains challenging.”

#### 5.3.2.2.2 Accommodation group

The Accommodation group presented similarities in viewing digital transformation as a leadership-driven journey aimed at service improvement and efficiency. Participant 15A explained, *“Leaders shouldn’t just talk about technology and digitalisation; they should emphasise benefits operational effectiveness, guest satisfaction, and lower operating costs.”* Participant 8T described DT’s practical effect on operations: *“We’re able to manage food usage and wastage at the hotel level without being there. We can see how many burgers we’ve used today as opposed to the revenue from burgers made. That reduces wastage.”* There were differences in how transformation was linked to context and resilience. Participant 16A further noted that *“Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool. We used to be a dine-in brand, but now nearly half our orders come through digital channels.”* This view links transformation to resilience and adaptability. Collectively, these participants positioned digital transformation as purpose-led, people-focused, and critical for service improvement and resilience.

#### 5.3.2.2.3 Catering group

In the Catering group, participants shared similarities in describing digital transformation as a collaborative, data-driven, and ongoing. Participant 17C stated, *“Since COVID, we’ve had to accelerate all things digital from online bookings and contactless check-ins to digital gaming. I’ve led a few cross-functional teams driving that change.”* Participant 11C highlighted how digital processes influence decisions: *“Digitisation focuses on automation, removing manual tasks, and improving speed and efficiency...we automated processes related to compliance and visual merchandising* These views demonstrate that transformation extends beyond IT functions because it reshapes decision-making, culture, and operations.

#### 5.3.2.3 Cross-group analysis of how strategic leaders understand digital transformation

Across the three groups, similarities of digital transformation were conceptualised as an ongoing, human-centred, and strategically driven process rather than a once-off technology project. All participants acknowledged that successful transformation requires balancing technology with people and purpose. However, the emphasis differed depending on context. In the trade group, participants spoke of transformation as a strategic evolution; a continuous redefinition of how the organisation competes and creates value. Their narratives were strongly shaped by competition, innovation, and leadership endurance. In contrast, participants in the accommodation group viewed transformation as environmentally responsive and service driven. For this group, transformation is about using technology to enhance guest satisfaction and operational efficiency while maintaining a human touch. The catering group focused on integration and survival, using digital transformation to bridge physical and digital experiences by ensuring continuity in a rapidly changing market.

#### 5.3.2.4 Conclusion analysis of how strategic leaders understand digital transformation

Participants across all three industry groups shared similarities in viewing digital transformation as a strategic and evolving process that extends far beyond digitising manual tasks rather than a technical exercise. They understood it as a living, evolving capability one that combines technology, leadership, culture, and customer focus to create ongoing organisational value. While each sector highlighted different contextual drivers, a common understanding emerged: Digital transformation is not about technology itself but about how technology is used to achieve business purpose, adapt to change, and meet human needs. Participants position digital transformation as a leadership-led and human-centred evolution; a journey defined as much by mindset and collaboration as by technological capabilities. Similarities observed across all groups is the view that transformation is continuous, iterative, and context-specific, shaped by both external pressures and internal culture.

### 5.3.3 Research sub-question 1: theme 3 – evolving roles of strategic leaders

This theme addresses the first sub-research question by examining the specific roles that strategic leaders perform in driving innovation through digital transformation. It focuses on how participants describe their leadership roles. By exploring how strategic

leadership roles are defined and enacted within the context of digital transformation. This theme provides insight into the mechanisms through which leaders influence innovation and guide change across their organisations.

#### 5.3.3.1 Evidence of evolving roles of strategic leaders

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Accommodation | Catering |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Participant 2T: "My role was to set the vision, build the business case, and secure executive and board support."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 9T: "You have to really have the vision in mind and be able to share that with people who may never have encountered something like this before. You've got to make the value and the 'why' really clear. Communication is key explaining why it's important, helping others see the bigger picture."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 16A: "Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool. We used to be a dine-in brand, but now nearly half our orders come through digital channels. My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people both customers and staff not the other way around."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |               |          |
| Participant 3C: "People like me align everyone by influence, not instruction. We move slow to move fast, getting buy-in across stakeholders."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |               |          |
| Participant 14T: "For digital transformation, strategic leaders should focus on enablement helping people understand what transformation means and supporting them with time, capability, and resources to deliver it. For innovation, leaders should be deliberate creating opportunities and space for experimentation. Not everyone will innovate, but those who do need support, encouragement, and clear but flexible guidelines."                                                                                                                                                                                            |               |          |
| Participant 6T: "I am not necessarily the biggest believer in innovation. I am the biggest believer in execution. The whole purpose and the whole existence for these businesses is to provide that service to a customer. So, the role of the leader is to put the customer at the centre of it."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |               |          |
| Participant 7T: "My role means I can ask the tough questions in the room and really push people to innovate."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |               |          |
| Participant 17C: "Innovation used to be top-down senior people brainstorming ideas in a boardroom. Now it's ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly. Stakeholder orchestration bringing together IT, regulators, finance, and front-line teams so everyone pulls in the same direction."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 13T: "Innovation is only theory until you test it in a real environment. My approach is to innovate, experiment, implement, and operate."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |               |          |
| "We were building the customer data platform to support digital loyalty solutions. For us, we were providing shared services integrated into the retail app."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |               |          |
| Participant 4T: "But sometimes you need to know when to lead from the front and when to lead from the back, because not everything requires you to lead from the front. Sometimes you have to be a servant leader. It just depends on the situation you're navigating, that will require you to pull out different skill sets in that moment"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |               |          |
| "Try and continuously learn. It's about continuous learning because unfortunately technology changes exponentially. So, what's in today is not necessarily going to be in tomorrow."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |               |          |
| Participant 1T: "Knowing when to move forward with a release that was not perfect but functional. In our business, quality is essential, so it was a fine balance. The key was deciding when something was acceptable for release, with the understanding it would need iteration."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |               |          |
| Participant 3C: "Finger on the pulse: Know blind spots, anticipate change. BlackBerry ignored touchscreens failed adaptation. Digital enables testing/learning/iterating. Understand industry pain points digital solves logistics (e.g., map APIs for routes). Duality: External (customer) and internal (employee experiences) we fixate on customers but neglect staff tools."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 5T: "So, over the past five years, I've championed several digital transformation initiatives. For instance, one flagship project was to launch an integrated e-commerce and store inventory system, which was like a morphing omni-channel platform integrating online and physical stock... So, as I mentioned earlier, it's more of a chicken and egg kind of a situation. So, the leader needs to know when it's the right time to innovate or yeah, to put it like that and not just for the sake of doing it. You see, it's evolving, and new trends will come, and a leader needs to be ready for the changes." |               |          |
| Participant 8A: "So we've moved away from being just IT executives. Leadership now requires the ability to lobby other departments sales, marketing, HR, operations, property development to buy into the projects you want to implement. You must be human-centred during transformations - people are being disrupted."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |               |          |
| Participant 10T: "As a leader, you carry that with them. Leadership is service serving your people"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |               |          |
| Participant 16A: "During the rollout, I acted as translator between IT and the people on the ground. After launch, my job was to measure results and keep improving it based on customer data."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |               |          |

### 5.3.3.2 In-group analysis of evidence of evolving roles of strategic leaders

#### 5.3.3.2.1 Trade group

In the trade group, participants described the role of strategic leaders as one that balances vision, communication, execution, and adaptability. Participant 2T stated: *"My role was to set the vision, build the business case, and secure executive and board support."* This shows how leadership begins with direction-setting and legitimising transformation. Participant 9T highlighted the importance of communication and shared understanding: *"You have to really have the vision in mind and be able to share that with people who may never have encountered something like this before. You've got to make the value and the 'why' really clear. Communication is key - explaining why it's important, helping others see the bigger picture."*

For others, leadership was not just about ideas but about disciplined execution. Participant 6T emphasised this balance, saying: *"I am not necessarily the biggest believer in innovation. I am the biggest believer in execution. The whole purpose and the whole existence for these businesses is to provide that service to a customer. So, the role of the leader is to put the customer at the centre of it."* Leaders also spoke of adaptability and judgment. Participant 4T noted that leadership required shifting approaches depending on the situation, while Participant 1T reflected on balancing speed and quality, saying: *"Knowing when to move forward with a release that was not perfect but functional. In our business, quality is essential, so it was a fine balance. The key was deciding when something was acceptable for release, with the understanding it would need iteration."* Similarly, Participant 5T added: *"It's more of a chicken and egg kind of a situation. So, the leader needs to know when it's the right time to innovate and not just for the sake of doing it... new trends will come, and a leader needs to be ready for the changes."* Participant 13T echoed the value of action-oriented mindset: *"Innovation is only theory until you test it in a real environment. My approach is to innovate, experiment, implement, and operate."* These reflections show that, in catering, leaders acted as facilitators of innovation encouraging participation, experimentation, and learning across teams.

#### 5.3.3.2.2 Accommodation group

In the accommodation group, leaders placed strong emphasis on ensuring that technology served people rather than the other way around. Participant 16A reflected on this human-centred approach: *“Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool. We used to be a dine-in brand, but now nearly half our orders come through digital channels. My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people both customers and staff, not the other way around.”* Similarly, Participant 8A explained how leadership now requires influence across multiple business functions: *“We’ve moved away from being just IT executives. Leadership now requires the ability to lobby other departments sales, marketing, HR, operations, property development to buy into the projects you want to implement.”* In this group, strategic leadership was about relational influence and integration ensuring digital and innovation initiatives were embraced across the organisation and aligned with its human and service values.

#### 5.3.3.2.3 Catering group

In the catering group, participants described a move away from top-down management towards collective leadership. Participant 17C illustrated this shift, explaining: *“Innovation used to be top-down senior people brainstorming ideas in a boardroom. Now it’s ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly.”* Similarly, Participant 3C described a more adaptive, responsive style of leadership: *“Finger on the pulse: Know blind spots, anticipate change. BlackBerry ignored touchscreens failed adaptation. Digital enables testing, learning, iterating. Understand industry pain points digital solves logistics (e.g., map APIs for routes). Duality: External (customer) and internal (employee experiences) we fixate on customers but neglect staff tools.”*

#### 5.3.3.3 Cross-group analysis of the evolving role of strategic leader

Across all three groups, participants shared a consistent understanding of the strategic leader’s role as multi-dimensional and contextually adaptive. Leaders were seen as the central link between vision, people, and performance individuals who navigate uncertainty through communication, inclusion, and timely decision-making. In the trade group, participants put emphasis on vision, execution, and adaptability. Strategic leaders such as Participant 2T and Participant 9T prioritised clarity of purpose, communication of the “why,” and balancing ambition with practical delivery. In the accommodation sector, the role was human-centred and relational, as Participant 16A and Participant 8A emphasised ensuring that technology enhances both the employee and customer experience while gaining organisational buy-in. The catering industry reflected a more

distributed and participatory model of leadership. Participant 17C and Participant 3C described collaborative innovation and continuous learning as central to leading effectively.

#### 5.3.3.4 Conclusion of the analysis of the evidence on the evolving role of strategic leader

The findings show that participants view the role of strategic leaders as an evolving capability that combines vision, communication, and adaptability. In the trade sector, leaders were visionaries who emphasised strategic clarity, execution, and readiness for change. In the accommodation sector, they were integrators who ensured technology served human and organisational goals. In the catering group, they were facilitators of innovation who championed inclusion and agility.

Across all groups, strategic leaders are seen as visionary orchestrators who enable innovation through adaptive learning, empathy, and collaboration. They bridge the divide between technology and people, balancing strategic foresight with execution discipline. Their leadership is less about control and more about facilitation, influence, and ethical stewardship, ensuring that digital transformation translates into sustainable organisational value and human-centred progress.

#### 5.4. Research sub-question 2: What strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation?

The second sub-question, “What strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation?” is addressed through the theme Competencies, which identifies the skills, mindsets, and abilities that enable leaders to perform their roles effectively within a digital and innovative context.

**Table 7** below presents each of the themes derived from sub-question 2, along with the key topics discussed within each theme. The table also indicates the relative prevalence of mentions.

**Table 7: Topic prevalence by participant group – research sub-question 2**

| Theme        | Topic                                                                                                                                        | Trade                                                                                                                                                              | Accommodation                                                                                                                                                     | Catering                                                                                                                             |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Competencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People Management</li> <li>• Relational and Influential</li> <li>• Crises and Resilience</li> </ul> | <b>Multi-mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People Management</li> <li>• Relational and influential</li> <li>• Crises and Resilience</li> </ul> | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People Management</li> <li>• Relational and Influential</li> <li>• Crises and Resilience</li> </ul> | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational and Influential</li> <li>• Crises and Resilience</li> </ul> |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                             |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital and Analytical Competency</li> <li>• Strategic and Cognitive Capability</li> <li>• Human Capital Development</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital and Analytical Competency</li> <li>• Strategic and Cognitive Capability</li> <li>• Human Capital Development</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital and Analytical Competency</li> <li>• Strategic and Cognitive Capability</li> <li>• Human Capital Development</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic and Cognitive Capability</li> <li>• Human Capital Development</li> </ul> |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

#### 5.4.1 Research sub-question 2: Theme 1 – competencies of strategic leaders

This theme corresponds with the second sub-research question, which explores what strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation. It focuses on the knowledge, skills, and behavioural attributes that enable leaders to perform their roles effectively within a rapidly evolving digital and innovative environment. By identifying the competencies required to navigate complexity, influence others, and sustain organisational change, this theme establishes the foundation for understanding how leadership capability supports innovation and transformation.

##### 5.4.1.1 Evidence of Competencies of strategic leader

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Accommodation | Catering |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Participant 15A: "Being a visionary. We can get consumed by what we're taught to do and stop looking outside. You need to look two or five years ahead and ask what you want to change. We think some current tools are the best possible, but they keep getting better. If we don't drive that change for our company or industry, who will? We know our industry best - no one from outside will solve our problems."                                                                                                                                                                                                   |               |          |
| Participant 2T: "My role was to set the vision, build the business case, and secure executive and board support. I had to ensure funding, manage risk, and keep stakeholders aligned. Competencies included strategic foresight, stakeholder engagement, resilience, and the ability to translate technical language into business value. You can't just be a manager of today's problems — you must see what's coming."                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 4T: "You know, I don't think there's...Well, anyway, in my opinion, I don't think there's competencies that you can go to school for in order to lead people, right? I mean, you can get hard skills, like if you're an accountant, you're going to study BCom accounting. Those are hard skills you learn to be effective at your job. But I think when you move into senior leadership or executive roles, what helps you is if you've had the opportunity to deal with complexity, to juggle multiple balls in the air and deal with all those while still giving direction to the people you're leading." |               |          |
| Participant 1T: "We were providing shared services integrated into the retail app. We were also reorganising teams to work in agile sprints and adopting high-velocity builds. This required changing people, organisational structures, and infrastructure. Competencies I drew on included strategic orientation to explain why change was required, stakeholder management to ensure support, and business case development to connect investments to strategy. Change management and people leadership were critical ensuring skills, processes, and infrastructure supported success."                               |               |          |
| Participant 3C: "AI scares me, accelerates change. Leaders must grasp AI: Use for good/growth, or others will use it against you. Embrace; it's embedded (e.g., Vodacom's agentic AI 'Toby' handles queries). Be curious, expose yourself, adapt. MTN/Vodacom innovated from airtime to platforms/financial services by responding curiously."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |               |          |
| Participant 4T: "That's how most people would describe me. Like, I'm very hard on delivery, I have high expectations when it comes to output, but I'm very soft on people at the same time, which may sound like a contradiction, but... Yeah, I'm hard on delivery and soft on people."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 5T: "So I'd say strategic foresight, you know, yes and stakeholder alignment were more critical. The ability to transform technology opportunities into a business growth story actually helped me."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |               |          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Participant 8A: "Sometimes you must decide quickly with little data; sometimes you have enough to make an informed decision. It depends on where you are. Also, being able to consult and listen to other departments. This is the issue we're having; how do you think we should look at it? I've been here two years, so I'm not afraid to tell my team, "I don't know how to do this. Tell me, what do you suggest?"</p> <p>"In most cases, we get good answers when you give your team that comfort that they can make decisions and advise you. It doesn't mean you'll always go with their decision, but being open to it helps a lot. You don't expect people to be yes-men. I'm very comfortable with my level of experience and qualifications, but I'm also comfortable admitting I don't know everything. That helps me pick the right ideas. Sometimes someone already has the right answer they just need you to confirm it."</p> |
| <p>Participant 8A: "I cannot downplay having technical knowledge of how systems, infrastructure, and everything connects and works. That background goes a long way. Having soft skills being able to engage, negotiate, influence decisions and confidence to give management faith that you'll deliver success. Also, having well-rounded leadership skills where you can steer projects and people in the direction you believe in. It's a mix of education and experience but mostly experience. Being able to adapt to the environment is critical."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>Participant 2T: "Competencies included strategic foresight, stakeholder engagement, resilience, and the ability to translate technical language into business value."</p> <p>"There were difficult moments, like when projects went over budget or when system cutovers disrupted operations. In those cases, I had to demonstrate calm under pressure, make tough calls, and communicate transparently with both executives and employees."</p> <p>"Resilience, communication, empathy, and stakeholder management are critical."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <p>Participant 9T: "You've got to be human centred as a leader during large-scale digital transformations, because at the heart of it are people and people are being disrupted. This kind of change moves people's 'cheese,' so you have to be empathetic, make time for them, and carry their anxieties and challenges as you go."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>Participant 10T: "Listening is crucial not just to respond but to understand. Knowledge sharing is another area we underutilise in corporates. Everyone brings something different. I'm always open to learning from younger or older colleagues and sometimes helping others unlock their potential."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>Participant 11C: "All leaders are measured on collaboration, accountability, and empathy."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <p>Participant 14T: "Empathy is a big one it's often undervalued. Curiosity is another. Inclusiveness is key; I don't assume I have all the answers, so I surround myself with people who do. Leadership requires humility and an understanding that people drive business success."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>Participant 17C: "Stakeholder orchestration bringing together IT, regulators, finance, and front-line teams so everyone pulls in the same direction. Now it's ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly. It's taught me to be more experimental prototype fast, fail cheap."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p>Participant 16A: "Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool. We used to be a dine-in brand, but now nearly half our orders come through digital channels. My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people both customers and staff not the other way around. My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people; both customers and staff, not the other way around."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p>Participant 15A: "In our Innovation Committee, we talk about the 'next big idea.' But we must not forget the many small ideas that got us here. Do the research, talk to people, network, and don't be afraid. Also, never stop learning whether related to your industry or adjacent areas...The focus has always been that we can't keep doing the same things and expect different results. You need change. With innovation and technology, you need different people talking and thinking, with different opinions. Sometimes, at senior levels, there can be resistance to change if leadership has been around since the early days."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

#### 5.4.1.2 In-group analysis of evidence of competencies of strategic leader

##### 5.4.1.2.1 Trade group

Participants in the trade group described strategic leader competencies as an integration of strategic foresight, analytical skill, and the ability to manage people through continual change. There were similarities on how strategic leaders view their competencies which

they described as an active, hands-on process requiring both technical understanding and emotional intelligence. Participant 2T explained: *“One was resistance from employees who feared automation would replace their roles...We also underestimated the cultural change required; technology was the easier part.”* This reflects the highlights that people management and empathy were not peripheral skills but central to effective transformation. Participant 9T also reflected on this sentiment, noting that *“leadership is about translating complex change into something meaningful for people. It’s about leading them through uncertainty.”* Alongside interpersonal skills, trade participants emphasised cognitive and strategic ability as the capacity to see the bigger picture and translate it into direction. Participant 2T remarked: *“My role was to set the vision, build the business case, and secure executive and board support.”* Participant 9T added: *“You have to really have the vision in mind and be able to share that with people who may never have encountered something like this before.”* These statements reveal how leaders frame digital and innovation efforts within a coherent strategic logic that employees can understand and support. Technical and analytical competence also featured strongly. Participant 2T explained: *“Moving to AI-driven analytics was not just a technology upgrade; it changed how managers think about decision-making.”* This indicates that leaders must interpret data and turn it into strategic insight. Resilience emerged as another theme, with Participant 9T cautioning that “digital transformations aren’t quick switches”.

#### 5.4.1.2.2 Accommodation group

Strategist leaders in the accommodation group placed greater emphasis on human capital development, communication, and resilience. They understood leadership as ensuring that digital and innovation efforts remain centred on people and purpose. Participant 15A explained: *“Leaders shouldn’t just talk about technology and digitalisation; they should emphasise benefits operational effectiveness, guest satisfaction, and lower operating costs.”* Participant 15A’s view underscores the communicative competence required to translate technical language into human meaning. Cultural awareness and team development also defined competence in this context. Participant 15A described how an innovation committee was introduced because *“we can’t keep doing the same things and expect different results”*. This demonstrates how leaders create structures that empower others. Similarly, Participant 16A reflected on this: *“My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people; both customers and staff, not the other way around.”* This captures both empathy and adaptability. The accommodation strategist leaders frequently mentioned resilience as a

competency born from crisis experience. As Participant 16A put it, *“Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool...Now nearly half our orders come through digital channels.”* These insights suggest that, in service-oriented settings, the strategic leader competence revolves around communication, empowerment, and emotional resilience.

#### 5.4.1.2.3 Catering group

In the catering group, leaders highlighted competencies linked to collaboration, adaptability, and collective learning. Participant 17C explained: *“Since COVID, we’ve had to accelerate all things digital...I’ve led a few cross-functional teams driving that change.”* This comment reveals a leadership style built on relational influence - the ability to convene diverse functions and align them around a shared goal. Another aspect of competence was maintaining team morale under pressure. Participant 17C described how innovation was encouraged through inclusivity: *“Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly.”* These examples reflect competencies of facilitation, empowerment, and resilience that allowed catering organisations to remain agile and innovative during disruption.

#### 5.4.1.3 Cross-Group analysis of the evidence of competencies

Across all three groups, similarities were noted from the participants who viewed competencies for strategic leadership as multi-dimensional and deeply human. In the trade sector, competencies were dominated by strategic and analytical capabilities such as vision, data interpretation, and disciplined execution, coupled with strong people-management skills. In the accommodation sector, the emphasis shifted towards relational and developmental competencies such as communicating benefits, nurturing teams, and cultivating resilience. In the catering sector, leaders demonstrated collaborative agility, blending influence, empowerment, and adaptability.

#### 5.4.1.4 Conclusion of the analysis of the evidence on research sub-question 2: Theme 1

The findings suggest that participants conceptualise strategic leader competencies as a combination of strategic insight and human capability. The most effective leaders were described as those who balance analytical intelligence with emotional awareness, foresight with flexibility, and authority with collaboration. In the trade sector, leaders demonstrated strategic and cognitive competence, supported by data-driven decision-making and people leadership. In the accommodation group, competence was defined by communication, development of others, and emotional resilience. In the catering group, it was expressed through collaboration, adaptability, and empowerment.

In summary, the similarity of the evidence points to enduring competencies as shown below:

- People Management
- Relational and Influential Leadership
- Crises and Resilience
- Digital and Analytical Competence
- Strategic and Cognitive Capability
- Human Capital Development

#### 5.5. Research Sub-Question 3: How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?

The third sub-question, “How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?” is addressed through the themes Strategic Leadership as the Linking Mechanism, Barriers and Enablers of Digital Transformation, Barriers and Enablers of Innovation and Bidirectional Relationship between Digital Transformation and Innovation. These themes explain how digital transformation shapes the environment in which strategic leaders operate and how strategic leaders respond to these changes to foster innovation.

**Table 8** presents each of the themes derived from sub-question 3, along with the key topics discussed within each theme. The table also indicates the relative prevalence of mentions.

***Table 8: Topic prevalence by participant group – research sub-question 3***

| Theme                       | Topic                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Accommodation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Catering                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Barriers and Enablers of DT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bureaucratic Inertia</li> <li>• Fear of Redundancy</li> <li>• Human and Behavioural Concepts</li> <li>• Leadership &amp; Strategic Alignment Enablers</li> <li>• Legacy systems</li> <li>• Organisational and Human Enablers</li> <li>• Resource Limitation</li> <li>• Strategic Misalignment</li> <li>• Technological Enablers</li> </ul> | <b>Multi mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bureaucratic Inertia</li> <li>• Human and Behavioural concepts</li> <li>• Leadership &amp; Strategic Alignment Enablers</li> <li>• Legacy systems</li> <li>• Organisational and Human Enablers</li> <li>• Resource Limitation</li> <li>• Strategic misalignment</li> </ul> | <b>Few mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human and Behavioural Concepts</li> <li>• Fear of Redundancy</li> <li>• Leadership &amp; Strategic Alignment Enablers</li> <li>• Legacy systems</li> <li>• Organisational and Human Enablers</li> <li>• Resource Limitation</li> <li>• Technological Enablers</li> </ul> | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human and Behavioural Concepts</li> <li>• Leadership &amp; Strategic Alignment Enablers</li> <li>• Legacy systems</li> <li>• Organisational and Human enablers</li> <li>• Resource Limitation</li> <li>• Technological Enablers</li> <li>• Fear of redundancy Skills</li> </ul> |

|                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear Redundancy of Skills</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technological enablers of Fear Redundancy Skills</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear Redundancy of Skills</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Barriers and Enablers of Innovation           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Alignment</li> <li>• Dynamic and learning</li> <li>• Technological and Digital</li> <li>• Ambiguity</li> <li>• Resource Limitation</li> <li>• Human and Behavioural</li> </ul>                                               | <b>Multi mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Alignment</li> <li>• Dynamic and Learning</li> <li>• Technological and Digital</li> <li>• Ambiguity</li> <li>• Resource Limitation</li> <li>• Human and Behavioural</li> </ul>                                               | <b>Few mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Alignment</li> <li>• Technological and Digital</li> <li>• Human and Behavioural</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                     | <b>Some mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dynamic and Learning</li> <li>• Leadership Alignment</li> <li>• Technological and Digital</li> <li>• Human and Behavioural</li> </ul>                                                                                                    |
| Strategic Leadership as the Linking Mechanism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Alignment and Vision Integration</li> <li>• Cultural and Human Linkage</li> <li>• Operational and Process Integration</li> <li>• Boundary-Spanning and Collaboration</li> <li>• Balancing Innovation and Execution</li> </ul> | <b>Multi-mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Alignment and Vision integration</li> <li>• Cultural and Human Linkage</li> <li>• Operational and Process Integration</li> <li>• Boundary-Spanning and Collaboration</li> <li>• Balancing Innovation and Execution</li> </ul> | <b>Multi-mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Alignment and Vision integration</li> <li>• Cultural and Human Linkage</li> <li>• Operational and Process Integration</li> <li>• Boundary-Spanning and Collaboration</li> <li>• Balancing Innovation and Execution</li> </ul> | <b>Multi-mentions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Alignment and Vision integration</li> <li>• Cultural and Human Linkage</li> <li>• Operational and Process Integration</li> <li>• Boundary-Spanning and Collaboration</li> <li>• Balancing Innovation and Execution</li> </ul> |

### 5.5.1. Research sub-question 3: Theme 1 – barriers and enablers of DT

This theme relates to the third sub-research question, which examines how digital transformation impacts the way strategic leaders foster innovation. It focuses on the organisational, technological, and human factors that either support or hinder the process of digital transformation. By identifying these barriers and enablers, the theme provides insights into the contextual conditions that shape leadership practice and determine how effectively digital transformation can be leveraged to promote innovation.

#### 5.5.1.1. Evidence of barriers and enablers of DT

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Accommodation | Catering |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| <p><i>Participant 9T: "My learning through these projects has been that digital transformations aren't quick switches. They require extensive change management and leadership over multiple years. Our systems are geared toward traditional, non-data-centric thinking, so people often want to revert. Also, while executives and boards focus on profits and shareholder returns, employees at the operational level just want their lives to be easier. Unfortunately, many transformations initially drive efficiency for the business, not the user, that only comes later. So, there's a balance between improving user experience and achieving the profit and efficiency goals demanded by executives and shareholders."</i></p> |               |          |
| <p><i>Participant 2T: "A combination of external pressures and internal inefficiencies. Externally, customer expectations for faster, more personalised services increased. Internally, we were facing challenges with outdated systems that slowed down operations. The transformation was both defensive to catch up with competitors and offensive to create new value for customers."</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |               |          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participant 17C: "We also struggled with legacy systems that didn't integrate easily with new cloud-based platforms. But tackling those forced us to modernise faster, and it positioned us well compared to competitors."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Participant 2T: "One was resistance from employees who feared automation would replace their roles. Another was integration our legacy systems did not easily connect with newer platforms. We also underestimated the cultural change required; technology was the easier part. People and process change was harder."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Participant 4T: "So projects, simply, projects never always go as planned. If your MVP one is perfect, you've taken too long to release it into the market. That's just the rule of thumb, right? If your first iteration of whatever you're learning in the market doesn't go well, it gives you an opportunity to enhance that, take the lessons learned from client feedback to improve on version two that will be released into the market. The key is to fail fast and take lessons learned to improve the next iteration."                                                                      |
| Participant 16A: "My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people-both customers and staff-not the other way around."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Participant 8A: "Every time I speak, my CEO asks, 'When are we implementing AI?' But we still have legacy systems. If I put AI in, it will crash them."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Participant 14T: "Too often, innovation is treated as a side project rather than a core priority. Failure to innovate can determine whether a business succeeds or not. The driver for AI wasn't actually security it was more that everyone else was doing it. There was pressure to enable AI functionalities within existing systems because it was seen as the next big thing."                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Participant 6T: "After launch, I focused on metrics tracking user retention, customer satisfaction, and then expanding the model to other regions. Things were fast. We had a data integration error that caused downtime over a peak weekend, which cost us quite a bit in potential revenue. My mistake was underestimating cultural resistance. Teams were working in silos, and communication broke down. The fix wasn't technical; it was leadership related. I had to slow things down, hold town-hall sessions, and involve people in shaping the solution. It taught me to lead with empathy." |
| Participant 8A: "I'd be cocky if I said I possessed them. You learn them as you go. Some you acquire through reading, podcasts, conversations with peers, conferences, forums...You harness these skills as you go. You can't buy experience."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Participant 12T: "Because the pace is so fast, it's easy for organisations to go in many directions and take on too many things. I've seen that even where I am now. So, the role of the strategic leader is to make sure things are streamlined — that transformations align with strategy and move the needle, not just follow trends." The key one was understanding analytics and data-science concepts...It helped me brief data-science teams and partners properly and understand their approaches."                                                                                            |
| Participant 16A: "Empathy grew with experience. I used to think transformation was about processes. It's not it's about people letting go of what's familiar."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

#### 5.5.1.2. In group analysis of the evidence of barriers and enablers of DT

##### 5.5.1.2.1. Trade group

Similarities among participants in the trade group indicated that digital transformation was viewed as a complex, continuous process influenced by both structural and behavioural barriers. Bureaucratic inertia and siloed structures slowed progress, while leadership was often the decisive enabler. Participant 9T reflected that transformation is a long-term process requiring sustained leadership and change management, as organisations often revert to traditional thinking and must balance profit-driven efficiency with improving employee and user experience. Participant 2T described transformation as being driven by both external pressures and internal inefficiencies, explaining that *"the transformation was both defensive to catch up with competitors and offensive to create new value for customers"*. This reflection captures the dual nature of transformation as both a survival response and a growth enabler.

However, Participant 2T emphasises human and behavioural barriers, noting that *“resistance from employees who feared automation would replace their roles”* complicated digital progress. This directly links to the fear of redundancy theme and highlights the need for empathy and communication. Participant 6T shared a similar lesson, describing how leadership intervention was key to overcoming cultural resistance: *“After launch, I focused on metrics tracking user retention, customer satisfaction, and then expanding the model to other regions. Things were fast. We had a data integration error that caused downtime over a peak weekend, which cost us quite a bit in potential revenue. My mistake was underestimating cultural resistance. Teams were working in silos, and communication broke down. The fix wasn’t technical; it was leadership related. I had to slow things down, hold town-hall sessions, and involve people in shaping the solution. It taught me to lead with empathy.”* Participant 14T further pointed out the issue of strategic misalignment, noting that *“innovation was treated as a side project”*. This highlights leadership’s failure to integrate innovation within core digital transformation strategy.

#### 5.5.1.2.2. Accommodation group

In the accommodation group, participants reinforced that legacy systems and integration barriers remain the most pressing challenges. Participant 8A expressed the frustration vividly: *“Every time I speak, my CEO asks, ‘When are we implementing AI?’ But we still have legacy systems. If I put AI in, it will crash them.”*

This shows both technological limitations and strategic misalignment, as organisational readiness did not match executive ambition. For Participant 16A, the key barrier was not technology itself but its impact on people: *“My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people both customers and staff, not the other way around.”* These insights underline how leaders in the accommodation sector prioritised human and behavioural enablers, ensuring technology supported people rather than dictating work patterns. Similarities again revealed leadership as the bridge connecting technological enablers with cultural adaptation, reaffirming the central role of empathy and strategic alignment in sustaining digital transformation.

#### 5.5.1.2.3. Catering group

In the catering group, similarities in barriers centred on legacy systems and resource constraints, whereas learning and experimentation consistently emerged as the primary enablers of progress. Participant 17C described both the difficulty and benefit of upgrading infrastructure: *“We also struggled with legacy systems that didn’t integrate*

*easily with new cloud-based platforms. But tackling those forced us to modernise faster, and it positioned us well compared to competitors.”* This reflection illustrates how organisational and human enablers, such as iterative learning, adaptability, and openness to feedback, help overcome structural and resource-related barriers. Leadership in this group facilitated innovation by creating safe spaces for experimentation and rapid learning cycles.

#### 5.5.1.3. Cross-Group Analysis

Across all three groups, participants consistently portrayed digital transformation as a negotiation between technology, people, and purpose, reflecting the interconnectedness of structural and behavioural factors. In the trade group, leaders such as Participant 9T and Participant 2T described transformation as a tension between efficiency, innovation, and cultural inertia, confirming that transformation requires persistent leadership alignment, empathy, and communication. Participant 6T's reflection illustrates that empathy and inclusion, rather than technical fixes, turn setbacks into progress. In the accommodation sector, the human dimension was more pronounced. Participant 8A and Participant 16A emphasised that transformation only succeeds when technology aligns with people's needs, making human and behavioural factors both barriers and enablers. In the catering sector, adaptability, iteration, and experimentation defined success. Participant 17C captured the value of iterative learning and feedback, turning system and resource limitations into catalysts for innovation.

#### 5.5.1.4. Conclusion of the analysis of the evidence on Theme 1

The findings reveal that participants experienced digital transformation as a continuous negotiation between technology, people, and purpose. Barriers such as legacy systems, siloed structures, and employee resistance were common across all sectors. Yet, these challenges prompted learning and improvement.

In the trade sector, leaders learned that sustained transformation requires empathy and communication to align diverse expectations. In the accommodation sector, leaders balanced the urgency of technology adoption with the imperative to protect human experience. In the catering sector, transformation was defined by experimentation and learning-by-doing, turning system limitations into opportunities for renewal. Ultimately, the participants viewed leadership as a pivotal enabling factor that transforms structural barriers into cultural growth. Effective leaders bridged the gap between innovation and execution, technology and people. Their experiences affirm that digital transformation is less about implementing tools and more about cultivating adaptive systems, empowered

teams, and human understanding over time. In summary the barriers and enablers are noted as;

Barriers:

- Bureaucratic inertia
- Human resistance
- Legacy systems
- Resource constraints
- strategic misalignment

Enablers:

- Leadership and strategic alignment
- Human-centred culture
- Technological integration
- Skills development, and iterative learning

### 5.5.2. Research sub-question 3: Theme 2 – barriers and enablers of innovation

This theme also relates to the third sub-research question, which explores how digital transformation impacts the way strategic leaders foster innovation. It examines the organisational and behavioural factors that either facilitate or constrain innovation within the context of ongoing digital change. By identifying these conditions, the theme provides a basis for understanding how strategic leaders respond to and manage the internal and external influences that shape innovation performance in their organisations.

#### 5.5.2.1. Evidence of barriers and enablers of innovation

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Accommodation | Catering |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Participant 3C: "Innovation is tricky, do we innovate or respond to dynamics? Traditional business resisted: 'Customers aren't online' hindering investment. But data showed they are."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |               |          |
| Participant 17C: Completely. Innovation used to be top-down senior people brainstorming ideas in a boardroom. Now it's ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |               |          |
| Participant 4T: "Any digital transformation within that business, then you're not being pulled by innovation. You're being pulled by digital, and like you're forced to now digitise not because from an innovation perspective you are on the bleeding edge of technology; you are not. You're being forced into having...to upgrade, to digitise because you're behind, you're lagging behind from a market perspective. However, if you are in a business that is at the; let's call it; the bleeding edge of technology, then innovation is pulling digital. So, if you look at a business like Apple, in that kind of organisation...you know, like innovation is pulling digital." |               |          |
| Participant 6T: "So based on your innovation, is your innovation definition based on what is fundamentally shifting the needle and new product innovation? Or is innovation defined from a perspective of how you execute your product because in principle Capitec Bank for example?"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |               |          |
| Participant 7T: "For me, what I've learned along my journey is that it's not always about the technology; it's really about leadership decisions, values, and culture. Whether it was looking at new ways to increase payments at XX and then of course, you know, we used to be the only acceptance of Bitcoin and cryptocurrency - that was really about how do you reshape teams to drive digital transformation."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |               |          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participant 7T: <i>"One can always go to the use cases from there, but one of the biggest challenges that we face as executives, and I've certainly experienced it first-hand, is how do you balance ambition with execution? Because one, the chequebook isn't that big, because you're always trying to drive an ROI."</i>                                                                                                                                             |
| Participant 6T: <i>"We had to do more with less, particularly when shifting resources to support online operations."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Participant 15A: <i>"Sometimes at senior levels, there can be resistance to change if leadership has been around since the early day."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Participant 14T: <i>"It's about leveraging technologies like AI to do more for the organisation."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Participant 17C: <i>"We test ideas quickly and learn as we go. It wasn't just a tech project, it was strategic. We wanted to create a personalised experience, so we introduced AI to tailor content for users."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Participant 13T: <i>"Innovation is only theory until you test it in a real environment. My approach is to innovate, experiment, implement, and operate. Digital transformation accelerates innovation, and innovation pushes further digital adoption they reinforce each other."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Participant 13: <i>"I advise my teams not to request full funding for the entire project upfront... Start with proof of concept and pilot testing."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Participant 9T: <i>"The key is that innovation must link to business strategy or to value propositions for customers, employees, or stakeholders. Innovation should have a purpose. A leader's role is to constantly link innovation back to strategy, value, and customer or employee propositions. You've got to be human-centred as a leader during large-scale digital transformations, because at the heart of it are people — and people are being disrupted."</i> |
| Participant 16A: <i>"My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people — both customers and staff — not the other way around."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

#### 5.5.2.2. In-group analysis of evidence of barrier and enablers of innovation

##### 5.5.2.2.1. Trade group

Within the trade group, similarities were observed in how participants viewed innovation as both strategic and constrained. Participants agreed that innovation should be anchored in business purpose and guided by leadership alignment. Participant 9T stated it in this way: *"The key is that innovation must link to business strategy or to value propositions for customers, employees, or stakeholders."* The participant also emphasised that "a leader's role is to constantly link innovation back to strategy, value, and customer or employee propositions".

Over and above this shared view, participants also highlighted similar barriers of ambiguity and resource pressure. Participant 4T put it this way: "You're not being pulled by innovation; you're being pulled by digital... You're forced to digitise because you're behind." This sentiment indicates confusion between digital adaptation and true innovation. Similarly, Participant 7T reflected that balancing ambition and funding was a challenge: *"One of the biggest challenges... is how do you balance ambition with execution? Because one, the chequebook isn't that big."*

Differences within the group emerged in how leaders responded to these pressures. Some of the participants, such as Participant 13T, used iteration as an enabling strategy: *"Innovation is only theory until you test it in a real environment. My approach is to innovate, experiment, implement, and operate."* Others, such as Participant 7T, linked

success to culture and leadership values, asserting that *“it’s not always about the technology; it’s really about leadership decisions, values, and culture”*.

#### 5.5.2.2.2. Accommodation group

Among the accommodation participants, similarities were clear in their focus on human and behavioural barriers. Participant 15A noted: *“Sometimes at senior levels, there can be resistance to change if leadership has been around since the early days.”* This view highlights how long-established practices can hinder innovation. Similarly, Participant 16A described how innovation could fail if misaligned with human needs: *“My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people, both customers and staff, not the other way around.”*

While participants shared similar views on the importance of empathy and inclusion, differences emerged in the interpretation of leadership alignment. Some participants saw innovation as dependent on strong top-down vision, whereas others described a more collaborative, people-led approach. For instance, Participant 16A’s emphasis on human-centred technology contrasted with leaders who viewed innovation as a management responsibility.

#### 5.5.2.2.3. Catering group

In the catering group, similarities appeared in framing innovation as collaborative, learning-based, and resource-dependent. Participant 3C described early resistance to digital adoption: *“Traditional business resisted ‘customers aren’t online’ hindering investment. But data showed they are.”* This view demonstrates shared experiences of behavioural barriers and outdated mindsets. Similarly, Participant 17C confirmed the cultural shift aspect: *“Innovation used to be top-down...Now it’s ecosystem-wide. Anyone can contribute.”* Participants also shared similar recognition of resource limitations as both constraint and catalyst. Participant 17C explained that innovation was iterative and pragmatic: *“We test ideas quickly and learn as we go. It wasn’t just a tech project, it was strategic. We wanted to create a personalised experience, so we introduced AI to tailor content for users.”*

#### 5.5.2.3. Cross-Group Analysis of evidence of barrier and enablers of innovation

Across the three groups, several similarities emerged. Participants in all groups described innovation as a continuous learning process influenced by leadership alignment, resource management, and human behaviour. Common barriers included resource constraints, behavioural resistance, legacy thinking, and ambiguity about the

role of innovation versus digital transformation. Moreover, across all groups, enablers included leadership vision, iterative learning, empathy, and collaboration.

#### 5.5.2.4. Conclusion

Participants agreed that innovation only thrives when it is embedded into the organisation's culture, guided by leadership that values both experimentation and execution. Leaders shaped innovation through their values, communication, and willingness to empower teams. The most innovative environments are found where leaders embraced uncertainty, allowed experimentation, and learned from failure.

In summary the following were seen as barrier and enablers:

Barrier:

- Resource constraints
- Behavioural resistance
- Legacy thinking
- Ambiguity

Enablers:

- Leadership vision
- Leadership vision
- Empathy
- Collaboration.

### 5.5.3. Research sub-question 3: Theme 3 - strategic leadership as the linking mechanism

This theme is connected to the third sub-research question, which investigates how digital transformation impacts the way strategic leaders foster innovation. It focuses on understanding how strategic leadership functions as the integrative force that connects digital transformation efforts with innovation outcomes. By exploring how leaders align strategy, culture, and operations, this theme establishes the link between the enabling conditions of transformation and the realisation of innovation within organisations.

#### 5.5.3.1. Evidence of strategic leadership as the linking mechanism

| Trade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Accommodation | Catering |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Participant 9T: "You have to really have the vision in mind and be able to share that with people who may never have encountered something like this before. You've got to make the value and the 'why' really clear. Communication is key explaining why it's important, helping others see the bigger picture." |               |          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participant 4T: "Well, digital transformation, the main sponsor is the CEO of any business, right? Because you can't drive digital innovation outside of them. So, it's an EXCO responsibility. I'd be part of the executive team responsible for the strategy as well as the execution."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Participant 3C: "People like me align everyone by influence, not instruction. We move slow to move fast, getting buy-in across stakeholders..."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Participant 3C: "Relationships are key my philosophy: Everything touches humans; it starts and ends with relationships. Respect and cordiality enable seeing value, even if you're the best provider."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Participant 5T: "At the top of my head that I can think of it was during the planning phase. The systems that we had to adopt, you know, we initially on paper we thought it would be as easy, you know. But it was actually a challenge, you know, bringing everyone on board with the new systems, whereas everyone was used to operating the old systems, the operating systems that we were using for sales and things like that. We had failures there. It took us actually a bit longer. We had to go back to the drawing board, you know, and plan again, strategies."<br>"Also, doing research on systems that are more suitable for our business, and I think we spent less time on doing the research, we were more rushing on the time to achieve the goal, which led to a lot of failures because we were supposed to do more research on the systems that we were picking or deciding to utilize, but we didn't do that, which was actually a failure." |
| Participant 17C: "Innovation used to be top-down — senior people brainstorming ideas in a boardroom. Now it's ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Participant 16A: "My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people, both customers and staff, not the other way around."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Participant 8A: "We've moved away from being just IT executives. Leadership now requires the ability to lobby other departments - sales, marketing, HR, operations, property development - to buy into the projects you want to implement. Internally, we set up small cross-functional pods mixing hotel managers and IT staff. Externally, we worked closely with regulators through regular roundtables and partnered with fintech companies for payment integration"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Participant 7T: "If you adopt a customer-first approach always, and if you can find ways to collaborate, you will win. What that means is that sometimes the smartest technology or the strongest commercial model if it doesn't solve a real customer problem, it doesn't succeed."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Participant 9T: "You've got to be human centred as a leader during large-scale digital transformations, because at the heart of it are people and people are being disrupted. This kind of change moves people's 'cheese,' so you have to be empathetic, make time for them, and carry their anxieties and challenges as you go."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Participant 17C: "Stakeholder orchestration bringing together IT, regulators, finance, and front-line teams so everyone pulls in the same direction."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

### 5.5.3.2. In-group analysis of evidence of Strategic Leadership as the Linking Mechanism

#### 5.5.3.2.1. Trade group

In the trade group, participants consistently described strategic leadership as the mechanism that links vision, people, and transformation. Participant 2T explained that his role was not limited to managing projects but to aligning purpose across multiple levels of the organisation: *"My role was to set the vision, build the business case, and secure executive and board support."* For Participant 9T, this alignment required communication and storytelling: *"You have to really have the vision in mind and be able to share that with people who may never have encountered something like this before. You've got to make the value and the 'why' really clear. Communication is key explaining why it's important, helping others see the bigger picture."* Trade leaders described themselves as interpreters and translators of change by bridging technical innovation with human experience. Participant 6T provided an example of this connection between innovation and execution, in the following manner: *"I am not necessarily the biggest*

*believer in innovation. I am the biggest believer in execution. The whole purpose and the whole existence for these businesses is to provide that service to a customer. So, the role of the leader is to put the customer at the centre of it.*" Similarly, Participant 7T highlighted the leader's function in challenging teams to innovate meaningfully. Said Participant 7T: *"My role means I can ask the tough questions in the room and really push people to innovate."* Together, these voices portray trade leaders as *strategic integrators* balancing ambition with discipline, technology with purpose, and innovation with operational execution.

#### 5.5.3.2.2. Accommodation group

In the accommodation group, leaders saw their linking role as ensuring technology serve people and organisational culture. Participant 16A described this connection clearly: *"Since COVID, digital really became a survival tool. We used to be a dine-in brand, but now nearly half our orders come through digital channels. My focus has been to make sure the tech works for the people, both customers and staff, not the other way around."* For her, leadership is about ensuring that digital transformation remains human-centred, where innovation-reinforced service quality and staff empowerment is important. Similarly, Participant 8A emphasised the need for influence and integration across departments; saying: *"We've moved away from being just IT executives. Leadership now requires the ability to lobby other departments sales, marketing, HR, operations, property development to buy into the projects you want to implement."* Their accounts reveal leadership as an enabling bridge connecting functions, people, and technology to deliver shared goals.

#### 5.5.3.2.3. Catering group

In the catering group, strategic leadership was understood as collaborative and boundary-spanning. Participant 17C described a major shift in how leadership links innovation and transformation: *"Innovation used to be top-down senior people brainstorming ideas in a boardroom. Now it's ecosystem wide. Anyone can contribute. We use an internal app where staff submit ideas, and we test them quickly."* This evolution shows how leaders had to create inclusive structures that integrated digital tools, innovation practices, and employee participation. The leader's linking role, therefore, is not hierarchical but connective creating flow between technology, ideas, and people.

#### 5.5.3.3. Cross-Group Analysis

Across all sectors, participants portrayed strategic leadership as the integrative mechanism that aligns vision, culture, and innovation. In addition, the leaders saw themselves as bridges connecting the logic of technology and the creativity of innovation through people and communication.

In the trade sector, leadership as a linking mechanism was expressed through strategic alignment and disciplined execution. Leaders such as Participants 2T and 9T demonstrated how communication and storytelling act as levers to translate complex change into shared understanding. Participants 6T and 7T reflected on how this alignment extended to behaviour by ensuring innovation and transformation remained purposeful, customer-centred, and grounded in execution. On the other hand, in the accommodation group, the linking mechanism was influence and integration. Leaders such as Participants 16A and 8A described how digital and innovation efforts only succeed when departments and functions work together. For these two participants, the leader's role is to ensure unity of purpose to connect technology adoption to service outcomes and to humanise transformation.

The catering sector presented the most collaborative perspective. Participant 17C's experience illustrated how leadership connects innovation and digital transformation through ecosystem-wide engagement. Rather than being a central command, leadership acted as a catalyst for participation, trust, and continuous improvement.

#### 5.5.3.4. Conclusion

The findings reveal that participants viewed strategic leadership as a critical linking mechanism that integrates digital transformation and innovation into coherent organisational change. In the trade sector, this role was expressed through strategic vision and disciplined alignment while in the accommodation sector, this role was centred around relational influence and human-centred integration; and in the catering sector, through collaboration and ecosystem engagement.

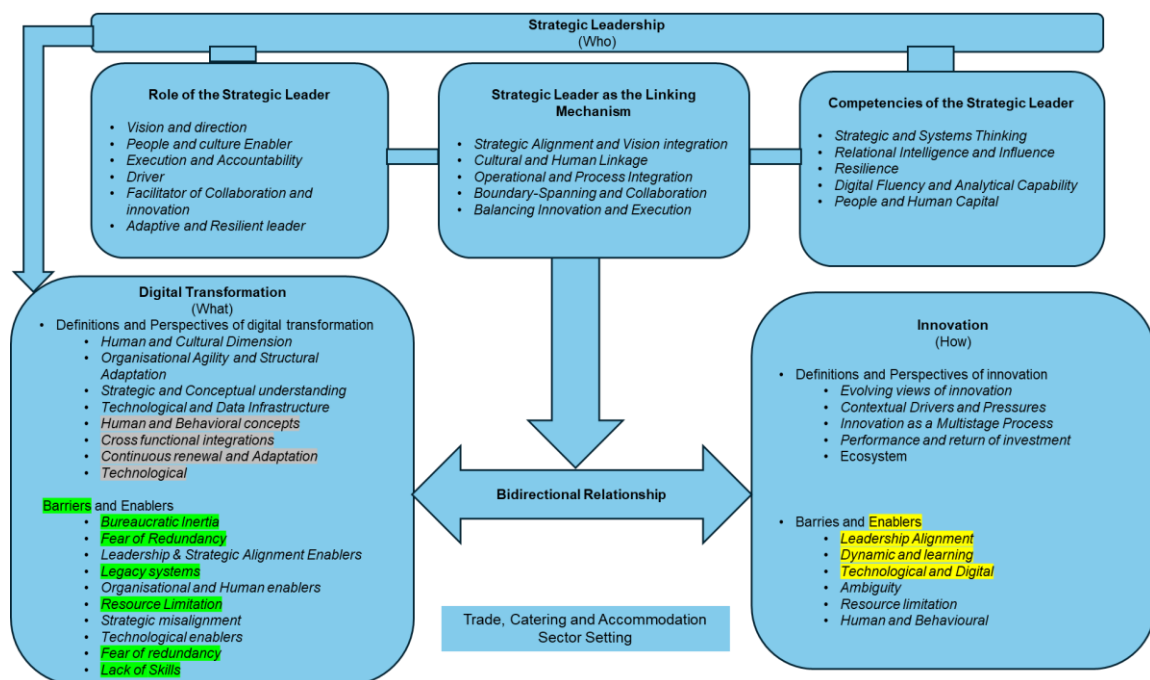
Across all the groups, participants agreed that digital and innovation initiatives succeed only when leadership creates alignment between strategy, culture, and execution. The leader becomes the "translator" bridging technical ambitions with organisational values and employee experience. By articulating the "why," fostering collaboration, and maintaining customer and employee focus, strategic leaders transform disconnected initiatives into unified progress. Ultimately, participants showed strategic leadership not as a title or authority, but as an enabling force of a connective tissue that links digital

ambition with innovation reality, ensuring that transformation is both meaningful and sustainable.

## 5.6. Conclusion

The findings presented in Chapter 5 provide an integrated understanding of how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation across the TCA sectors. The conceptual framework has been adapted and is shown below (Figure 8). This updated version now incorporates sub-themes that emerged inductively from the data analysis, offering a more detailed representation of the relationships within each major construct. These additions reflect how participants lived experiences expanded the theoretical boundaries of the original framework. The adapted model serves as the basis for discussion in Chapter 6, where the implications of these findings will be examined in relation to existing literature.

**Figure 8: Adapted conceptual framework**



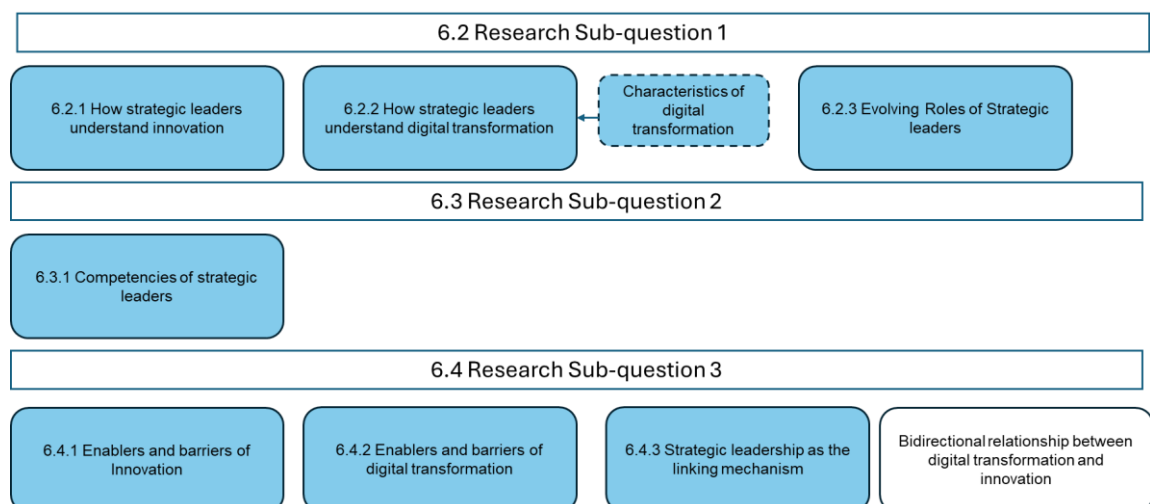
## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of this study' findings outlined in Chapter 5, by systematically comparing them with the literature drawn from top scholarly journals reviewed in Chapter 2. The presentation of these discussions follows the same structure as the presentation of findings, ensuring alignment with the three research sub-questions.

Each of the eight themes is examined through a structured and systematic approach, as shown below (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Structure of discussion**



**Source: Author's own**

Every section begins with a brief recap of the key findings from Chapter 5 and the relevant theoretical insights from Chapter 2. This is followed by an interpretive comparison between the empirical evidence and the literature, leading to a conclusion for each theme. Where similarities are observed, they are noted in the concluding paragraph of the section, indicating that the theme or sub-theme supports existing theory and therefore, represents an expected outcome. Where differences emerge, a further review is undertaken to determine whether these represent a potential contribution to the body of knowledge or may be nuances of difference extending the existing literature. A consistent three-step procedure is followed to ensure that all potential differences were thoroughly verified before being considered as contributions.

**Step 1:** A targeted keyword search was conducted within each of the key articles cited in Chapter 2 and related to the relevant research question. Keywords drawn from the theme or sub-theme were used to identify any comparable concepts or findings.

**Step 2:** Where no matches were found, the search was broadened to include at least three additional sources already referenced in Chapter 2. The same keyword mapping process was applied to determine whether comparable concepts existed within these studies.

**Step 3:** If no alignment could be established in the existing literature, a supplementary search was conducted using Google Scholar to identify recent peer-reviewed articles by leading scholars in the field published within the past two years. As a result, these were analysed using the same keyword approach to test for similarity or divergence.

Only after all three steps yielded no comparable evidence was a theme or sub-theme regarded as representing a potential difference and thus a potential theoretical contribution. This systematic procedure, while not exhaustive, ensured consistency and transparency in how the findings were compared with extant literature.

This chapter concludes with a revision of the conceptual framework presented at the end of Chapter 5. The updated framework identifies which of the themes and sub-themes were confirmed by existing literature and which remain as potential contributions to be further explored in Chapter 7 (Conclusion).

6.2. Research sub-question 1: What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?

### **6.2.1. Theme 1: How strategic leader understand innovation**

#### **6.2.1.1 Recap of the finding's how strategic leader understand of innovation**

Research findings across the TCA groups offered similarities and complementary understandings of innovation. Rather than associating it solely with novelty or breakthrough ideas, participants viewed innovation as a strategic and execution-oriented process, grounded in solving operational challenges and improving customer experiences. Participants described innovation as contextual and adaptive, shaped by industry demands, organisational constraints, and customer expectations. Within the trade group, participants shared that innovation often involves reconfiguring existing ideas or processes to achieve efficiency or relevance in a competitive environment.

Participants emphasised that success lies in applying ideas effectively rather than inventing new ones. Similarly, participants in the accommodation group conceptualised innovation through a service and experience lens, focusing on incremental improvements in guest interactions rather than radical transformation.

Across all the three groups, there were further similarities that innovation is a continuous and collective process, emerging through collaboration and responsiveness to the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment in which customer-centric industries operate, a condition exacerbated by ongoing customer shifts. While participants acknowledged the role of creativity, they placed stronger emphasis on practical execution, adaptability, and learning, thus indicating innovation in these sectors is less about technological novelty and more about sustained improvement and relevance.

#### 6.2.1.1. Recap of the literature on innovation

The phenomenon of innovation has received significant scholarly attention because of its critical role in organisational competitiveness and growth (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). Earlier researchers found the process of innovation to be neither straightforward nor free of failures, evolving from being viewed primarily as the introduction of new products, processes, or practices by individual firms or inventors (Dahlander & Gann, 2010). Recent scholars describe innovation as the combination of novelty and valuable application, emerging through the interaction of multiple actors across organisational and national boundaries (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020). What constitutes “new” varies by context, whether globally, within a specific industry, or internally within an organisation (Marion & Fixson, 2021). Despite definitional progress, literature remains fragmented, with ongoing debates about conceptual clarity from earlier and recent scholars (Oh et al., 2016; Varadarajan, 2024).

Granstrand and Holgersson (2020) define innovation ecosystems as processes involving the creation, development, and implementation of new ideas, products, processes, or business models that generate value. Cortes and Herrmann (2021) outline four interlinked stages of this process, and name them as idea generation, idea elaboration, idea championing, and idea implementation. Similarly, De Paula et al. (2023) describe innovation as a multifaceted concept that includes new behaviours and cognitive models supporting digital transformation, while Mariani et al. (2023) highlight that digital transformation itself can represent a distinct form of innovation. Varadarajan (2024) consolidates these perspectives, defining innovation as the implementation of a novel

idea that creates stakeholder value and proposing a typology based on novelty, domain, impact, and approach. This broad understanding is further supported by Melnychuk and Schultz (2025), who link innovation effectiveness to organisational capabilities such as collaboration and knowledge integration, and by Maier and Baccarella (2025), who emphasise the role of customer empowerment in shaping product and service innovation outcomes. Cooper (2024) adds that emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, accelerate innovation cycles while introducing new adoption barriers.

#### 6.2.1.2. Comparative Analysis of findings and literature on how strategic leaders understand innovation

These research findings provide similarities in understanding of innovation as continuous, pragmatic, and value driven. This aligns with Varadarajan's (2024) inclusive definition of innovation as the implementation of a novel idea that creates stakeholder value. The findings' emphasis on cross-functional collaboration and measurable impact reflect Granstrand and Holgersson's (2020) view of innovation as a multi-actor, ecosystem process, and corresponds with Cortes and Herrmann's (2021) process model, highlighting implementation as a critical phase. The finding that innovation is embedded in organisational practice and focuses on performance improvement rather than radical novelty also corresponds with Marion and Fixson's (2021) contextual interpretation of "newness," where innovation may simply be new to the organisation rather than new to the world.

Furthermore, the portrayal of innovation as culturally participatory and execution-driven supports De Paula et al. (2023) and Mariani et al. (2023), who link innovation to behavioural and cognitive change within digital environments. Participants' emphasis on human-centred and experience-oriented innovation resonates with Maier and Baccarella's (2025) focus on customer empowerment in shaping innovation outcomes. However, the strong preference for disciplined execution observed in the research findings extends beyond what is explicitly detailed in the existing literature. While Cortes and Herrmann (2021) acknowledge implementation as one phase of the innovation process, the participants' framing of execution as the defining essence of innovation rather than its outcome represents a context-specific nuance. Similarly, the institutionalised governance mechanisms for encouraging innovation (such as formal committees and structured feedback loops) are not directly covered by the current literature set, although they are conceptually consistent with the collaborative structures proposed in ecosystem models.

#### 6.2.1.3. Conclusion of discussion on findings how strategic leaders understand innovation

This study's findings are consistent with the literature describing innovation as a process that converts novel ideas into value-creating outcomes through collaboration and contextual adaptation (Varadarajan, 2024; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020). The participants' understanding extends existing theory by positioning innovation as an execution-centred and culturally participatory capability that is embedded in routine practice rather than confined to ideation or product development. A further nuance is the institutionalisation of innovation through formal committees, feedback loops, and structured participation, thus illustrating how innovation becomes a managed and repeatable process rather than a spontaneous one. This nuance extends existing theory by highlighting that, in customer-centric sectors, innovation operates as both a cultural capability and a formally coordinated organisational discipline driven by strategic leaders. The revised conceptual framework and sub-themes have been updated to reflect these extensions. In summary strategic leaders understand innovation can be seen as;

- Ongoing process of innovation
- Execution-centred and contextually adaptive
- Value-creating and outcome-driven
- Collaborative and cross-functional innovation
- Leadership-driven and culturally embedded innovation

#### 6.2.2. Theme 2: How strategic leaders understand digital transformation

##### 6.2.2.1. Recap of findings on how strategic leaders understand digital transformation

This research's findings showed similarities in how strategic leaders view digital transformation (DT) as a continuous, leadership-driven, and human-centred process rather than a once-off technology initiative. While the meaning of DT has evolved from digitising manual processes to leveraging artificial intelligence for decision-making strategic leaders across sectors agreed that transformation now represents both a defensive response to competition and an offensive strategy for creating new customer value. Research findings highlight the long-term nature of change and the leadership endurance required to overcome legacy systems and drive structural agility.

In service-oriented environments within the customer centric industries, DT was closely tied to improving efficiency, customer experience, and organisational resilience, with COVID-19 reinforcing its role as a survival mechanism. Research findings further show

that transformation success relies on a strong human and cultural foundation that encourages adaptability, behavioural alignment, and participation across teams. They also emphasise the need for cross-functional integration, linking digital, operational, and customer processes to sustain agility. Technological and data infrastructures, particularly automation and analytics, are viewed as important enablers but not the essence of transformation. Instead, leaders frame DT as a process of continuous renewal and adaptation supported by culture, leadership capability, and learning. Overall, DT is defined and experienced as an adaptive, context-specific journey that balances technology with people and purpose, anchored in mindset, collaboration, and continuous improvement rather than technology alone.

#### 6.2.2.2. Recap of the literature on digital transformation

Digital transformation remains a concept under refinement, with scholars distinguishing it from the related notions of digitisation and digitalisation. Digitisation refers to the conversion of analogue data into digital form, while digitalisation applies those digital capabilities to automate and enhance processes. In contrast, DT entails a deeper, strategic reinvention of organisational models, structures, and stakeholder relationships (Verhoef et al., 2021; Gradillas & Thomas, 2023; Gong & Ribiere, 2021; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Scholars such as Abhari (2025) and Verhoef et al. (2021) define DT as the strategic integration of digital technologies that reshape structures, functions, and employee dynamics to enhance competitiveness and identity. Other researchers, such as Piccoli et al. (2024), argue for maintaining the technological core of DT, while Wessel et al. (2021) and Dąbrowska et al. (2022) emphasise its socio-technical nature, where employees actively shape adoption and outcomes.

In customer-service industries, DT is recognised as a means to personalise and elevate customer experience rather than merely digitise existing touchpoints (Compagnucci et al., 2025). Its key characteristics include being continuous and organisation-wide (Porfirio et al., 2021; Vial, 2020), fostering agility and data-driven decision-making (Hanelt et al., 2021), promoting ecosystem collaboration (Hanelt et al., 2021), and depending on leadership alignment to organisational purpose (Porfirio et al., 2021). Data governance and reuse further enable ongoing learning loops and evidence-based decisions (Verhoef et al., 2021).

#### 6.2.2.3. Comparative analysis of findings and literature on how strategic leaders understand digital transformation

This study's findings are similar with the dominant scholarly perspectives on DT. Participants' understanding of DT as a holistic, socio-technical, and continuous process resonates with Verhoef et al. (2021), Wessel et al. (2021), and Vial (2020), all of whom emphasise that transformation extends across the entire enterprise and unfolds as an ongoing process of renewal rather than a one-time project. The dual view of transformation as both defensive and offensive mirrors literature's notion of DT encompassing value protection and value creation. The customer-first and service-improvement orientation observed in the accommodation and catering sectors confirms the importance of customer experience and data-driven decision-making noted by Compagnucci et al. (2025) and Verhoef et al. (2021). Similarly, the emphasis on leadership vision, cultural alignment, and adaptability aligns with Porfirio et al. (2021) and Dąbrowska et al. (2022), who position leadership as a critical enabler of socio-technical change.

The framing of DT as a survival mechanism in response to environmental shocks such as COVID-19, and the emphasis on multi-year leadership endurance under legacy constraints, add dimensions of resilience and implementation friction that are underrepresented in mainstream DT frameworks. Participants' evolving interpretation of DT, from digitisation to AI-driven decision-making, supports Markus and Rowe's (2023) argument that scholars should avoid rigid definitions, and instead, justify contextually relevant interpretations. The findings also challenge the more IT-centric perspective proposed by Piccoli et al. (2024), showing that in service-intensive contexts, transformation outcomes depend more heavily on leadership, culture, and ecosystem orchestration than on technology alone.

#### 6.2.1. Conclusion

The findings confirm DT literature that frames transformation as a continuous, organisation-wide, and socio-technical process (Verhoef et al., 2021; Wessel et al., 2021; Porfirio et al., 2021; Vial, 2020). Nuances were identified that extend current theory; participants framed transformation as a survival mechanism in response to crisis such as COVID-19, highlighting its defensive and resilience-building function rarely emphasised in mainstream models. The participants' accounts of leadership endurance and implementation friction reveal the temporal and human dimensions of sustaining transformation under legacy constraints. Finally, the findings challenge technology-centred views by showing that within service-intensive sectors, successful transformation depends more on leadership, culture, and ecosystem orchestration than

on digital tools alone. Collectively, these nuances have been incorporated into the revised conceptual framework and captured as;

- Survival and Resilience Mechanism
- Leadership Endurance and Implementation Friction
- Continuous and Organisation-Wide Process
- Human and Temporal Dimensions of Transformation
- Beyond Technology, Culture and Ecosystem Orchestration
- Ecosystem and Collaborative Orientation
- Continuous and Organisation-Wide Process
- Performance-Linked and Learning-Driven Transformation

### **6.2.3. Theme 3: Evolving roles of strategic leaders**

#### **6.2.3.1. Recap of the findings on evolving roles of strategic leaders**

Research findings are similar in describing strategic leaders as central actors whose roles have evolved in response to the demands of digital transformation and innovation. The findings reveal that strategic leaders are responsible for providing vision and direction, articulating a clear purpose, and balancing ambition with disciplined execution and accountability. For these reasons, strategic leaders are seen as adaptive decision-makers who demonstrate resilience under uncertainty and the capacity to sustain long-term transformation efforts. These strategic leaders served as people and culture enablers, ensuring that innovation and digital initiatives enhance both employee engagement and customer experience. Their influence extends beyond departments as they act as facilitators of collaboration and innovation, aligning digital objectives with service delivery and fostering a culture of trust and inclusion.

Furthermore, the findings found that strategic leadership was characterised by participatory and ecosystem-oriented approaches. Leaders function as drivers of transformation by encouraging experimentation and shared ownership across teams and partners. Their adaptability and resilience allow them to balance the pace of technological change with human capacity and operational stability. Across groups, strategic leaders are perceived as adaptive and resilient agents of change who link strategic intent to practical outcomes. They mobilise people, culture, and resources to translate digital and innovation strategies into measurable results, demonstrating a dynamic evolution of leadership roles from directive to collaborative, and from controlling to enabling.

#### 6.2.3.2. Recap of the literature

Strategic leadership roles have evolved significantly over the past decades, reflecting increasing complexity and environmental turbulence (Van Doorn et al., 2022). Modern leaders are required to balance operational oversight with strategic foresight and to enable long-term decision-making that positions their organisations for sustainable growth (Fernandes et al., 2022). Samimi et al. (2022) identify eight interrelated roles that capture the essence of strategic leadership. According to Samimi et al, (2022), these are:

- Making strategic decisions;
- Engaging with external stakeholders;
- Performing human resource management;
- Motivating and influencing;
- Managing information;
- Overseeing operations;
- Managing social and ethical issues; and
- Balancing conflicting demands.

Scholars do offers expansion on these interrelated roles. Therefore, scholars contend that in relation to vision and direction, strategic leaders provide long-term orientation and sense-making under uncertainty, integrating digital and business strategies while allocating resources to realise that vision (Porfírio et al., 2021; Wenzel et al., 2022). As people and culture enablers, leaders build climates of trust and learning, ensuring that human capital remains adaptable amid constant technological change (Fernandes et al., 2022; Cortés & Herrmann, 2021).

Regarding execution and accountability, strategic leaders maintain operational alignment by translating strategic intent into coordinated actions and governance systems that sustain performance (Kurzahls et al., 2020). Adaptability and resilience further emerged as essential leadership attributes that enable long-term digital transformation success; leaders must manage paradoxes such as failures, efficiency versus innovation while maintaining coherence and agility (Giustiniano et al., 2020; Sjödin et al., 2020). Moreover, literature positions leaders as drivers of transformation because they use influence and character to inspire commitment and embed innovation in daily work (Cortés & Herrmann, 2021; Vera et al., 2022). Again, leaders act as facilitators of collaboration and innovation by bridging organisational boundaries and

external networks to create value across ecosystems (Collien, 2021; Jarrett & Vince, 2023).

Collectively, literature shows strategic leadership as an adaptive and integrative system that connects vision, people, and process to navigate complexity. Nonetheless, influence remains the unifying thread through which leaders drive innovation and transformation while sustaining ethical, cultural, and operational balance (Samimi et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023).

#### 6.2.3.3. Comparative analysis of findings and literature

This study's findings confirm literature's description of strategic leaders as adaptive, visionary, and people-centred agents who shape long-term organisational outcomes (Samimi et al., 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022). In addition, this study's participants understand leadership as providing vision and direction, which strongly corresponds with Porfírio et al. (2021) and Wenzel et al. (2022), who argue that strategic leaders integrate digital and business strategies while guiding organisations through uncertainty. Similarly, the emphasis on people and culture enablement reflects Fernandes et al. (2022) and Cortés and Herrmann (2021), who link leadership effectiveness to fostering trust, participation, and learning cultures that sustain innovation. Participants' focus on execution and accountability also resonates with Kurzhals et al. (2020) and Samimi et al. (2022), who highlight the need for strategic leaders to translate intent into consistent action and operational alignment.

Collectively, these findings confirm that the core leadership roles identified in literature remain valid but extend the theoretical understanding of how these roles manifest in practice. They reveal a shift from conceptual descriptions of leadership influence to lived, context-specific enactments characterised by endurance, cultural stewardship, and collaborative execution.

It emerged that in particular, in customer-centric organisations, execution emerged not merely as implementation but as a defining leadership role that requires a persistent and disciplined practice of turning strategy into measurable outcomes. This represents a practical extension of theory, revealing that in customer-centric sectors, leaders spend substantial efforts maintaining momentum and governance during transformation rather than only initiating change.

The participants' descriptions of leaders as drivers and facilitators of collaboration and innovation align with Collien (2021), and Jarrett and Vince (2023), who emphasise boundary-spanning and influence across ecosystems. Definitely, this study extends these perspectives by demonstrating how collaboration occurs not only externally but internally, through deliberate cross-functional integration and shared ownership of innovation processes.

Furthermore, participants' portrayal of adaptive and resilient leadership echoes Giustiniano et al. (2020) and Sjödin et al. (2020), who frame leadership as a balancing act between stability and change. This study's findings deepen this view by illustrating how resilience operates as an ongoing leadership behaviour, expressed through empathy, endurance, and iterative learning over multi-year transformation journeys.

#### 6.2.3.4. Conclusion

This study's findings are consistent with existing literature that positions strategic leaders as central to navigating complexity, aligning vision with execution, and fostering innovation (Samimi et al., 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022; Cortés & Herrmann, 2021). In addition, the findings extend the theory by illustrating how, within the TCA sectors, leadership roles are enacted in a highly pragmatic, people-focused, and execution-oriented manner.

In summary, below integrates insights from both literature and this study's findings, illustrating how theoretical strategic leadership constructs are extended in practice;

- Vision and Direction
- People and Culture Enabler
- Execution and Accountability Driver
- Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation
- Adaptive and Resilient Leader

#### 6.3. Research sub-question 2 - What strategic leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation?

##### **6.3.1. Research sub-question 2 - Theme 1: Competencies of strategic leaders**

##### 6.3.1.1. Recap of the findings on competencies of strategic leaders

The findings identified a broad set of competencies that enable strategic leaders to drive innovation and digital transformation. These competencies are described as both technical and human, combining analytical foresight, relational intelligence, resilience,

and ethical judgement. In the trade group, leaders highlight strategic foresight, analytical thinking, and the ability to manage people through complexity while remaining calm under pressure. They emphasised the importance of resilience and data interpretation as critical to guiding decision-making. Leaders in the accommodation group placed greater emphasis on human capital development, communication, and empathy, positioning people-centredness and adaptability as essential to sustaining innovation. The catering group focused on collaboration, empowerment, and agility, where leaders facilitated cross-functional teamwork and encouraged participation through inclusive innovation practices.

#### 6.3.1.2. Literature recap of strategic leader competencies

Scholars have yet to agree on a single set of strategic leadership competencies, but there is consensus that such competencies are multi-dimensional and context-dependent (Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022). Thus, literature highlights several key competency domains that collectively enable leaders to navigate digital and innovative environments:

- Cognitive and strategic competencies include sense-making under uncertainty, strategic foresight, and the ability to transform ambiguity into actionable strategies (Schaedler et al., 2021; Georgakakis et al., 2022).
- Digital and analytical competencies involve risk-taking, data-driven decision-making, and the capacity to convert complex data into insight while avoiding information overload (Kurzhals et al., 2020).
- Relational and influence competencies encompass stakeholder engagement, negotiation, and the ability to build trust across boundaries (Collien, 2021; Jarrett & Vince, 2023). These competencies also reflect leaders' ability to inspire confidence, secure commitment, and mobilise networks (Samimi et al., 2022; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).
- Ethical and sustainability competencies integrate moral reasoning and integrity into decision-making, ensuring that innovation occurs within legitimate and principled boundaries (Thomas et al., 2004; Singh et al., 2023; Gomes et al., 2024).
- Human capital and learning competencies refer to the ability to attract, develop, and retain talent while promoting organisational learning and adaptability (Ciarli et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2022).

- Finally, crisis and resilience competencies enable leaders to withstand shocks, simplify complex decisions during emergencies, and strengthen adaptive capacity (Kurzahls et al., 2020; Schaedler et al., 2021; Jarrett & Vince, 2023).

#### 6.3.1.3. Comparative analysis of findings and literature

The findings are consistent with the competency clusters described in literature. The emphasis on strategic foresight and sense-making across sectors confirms the cognitive and strategic competencies identified by Georgakakis et al. (2022) and Schaedler et al. (2021). The findings' account of using vision and analytical reasoning to guide digital projects directly reflect Kurzahls et al.'s (2020) view that data literacy and decision-making agility are central to innovation leadership.

The relational and influence orientation described by participants manifested through empathy, transparent communication, and collaboration, supports Collien (2021) and Jarrett and Vince (2023), who argue that influencing and negotiation across stakeholders underpin transformation success. The strategic leaders' focus on making technology work for people reinforces the ethical and sustainability dimensions articulated by Thomas et al. (2004) and Singh et al. (2023), confirming that responsible leadership practices are essential in technology-driven change.

Competencies related to human capital development and resilience are also evident. The accommodation leaders' efforts to foster innovation committees and support team learning directly mirror Ciarli et al. (2021) and Fernandes et al. (2022), who highlight talent development as a strategic competency. Similarly, the trade and catering leaders' reflections on endurance and adaptability under pressure support Jarrett and Vince (2023) and Kurzahls et al. (2020), who identify resilience as critical to sustaining transformation efforts.

Participants described resilience not as a static trait but as a daily discipline of communication, humility, and perseverance. Similarly, relational competence emerged as both influence and vulnerability, while leaders admit what they do not know, inviting team input, and using empathy to sustain morale. In addition, the findings highlight the fusion of "hard" and "soft" skills, reinforcing existing scholarship that positions strategic leaders as adaptive and balanced decision-makers who align operational rigour with human sensitivity (Van Doorn et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2020; Hannah et al., 2020).

#### 6.3.1.4. Conclusion

The findings are consistent with existing literature that positions strategic leadership competencies as multi-dimensional and interdependent across cognitive, digital, relational, ethical, and resilience domains (Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings make a contextual contribution by illustrating how these competencies are enacted in practice within the TCA sectors as listed below;

- People Management
- Relational and influence
- Crises and Resilience
- Digital and Analytical
- Human Capital Development
- Strategic and Cognitive Capability

6.4. Research sub-question 3: How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?

#### **6.4.1. Research sub-questions 3 - Theme 1: barriers and enablers of digital transformation**

6.4.1.1. Recap of the findings on barriers and enables of digital transformation

The findings reveal several barriers and enablers influencing digital transformation process across the trade, accommodation, and catering groups. Across all group, participants consistently identified bureaucratic inertia as a constraint. Therefore, within the trade group, organisational silos and slow decision-making cycles were reported to hinder adaptation and responsiveness. Participants in the accommodation and catering groups highlighted outdated infrastructure as a significant barrier, limiting both agility and system integration. Attempts to introduce artificial intelligence (AI) tools often resulted in system failures due to legacy constraints, while in other cases, the pressure to modernise outdated systems accelerated transformation but created additional operational strain.

A further barrier identified is strategic misalignment, where executive ambition and technological vision outpaced the organisation's operational readiness. Human and behavioural challenges are noted, particularly within the trade group. The findings show how employees' reluctance to change, coupled with fears of redundancy, slowed technology adoption. Some noted that automation was perceived as a threat to job security, while others reflected that resistance stemmed from cultural inertia and inadequate communication. Findings also show how transformation failure often resulted from leadership and cultural issues rather than technological ones.

In terms of enablers; the findings reveal a combination of organisational, human and technological factors. Organisational and human factors are thus characterised by teamwork, open communication, and iterative learning. In the catering group, experimentation and feedback are embedded into daily routines, while in the trade group, leaders describe releasing a “minimum viable product” and using client feedback to refine subsequent versions. This reflected a mindset of adaptation and resilience rather than perfection.

Technological enablers such as cloud migration, data integration, and analytics tools enhanced operational efficiency. The trade group highlights that “tech must work for people, not the other way around”. This view underscores the importance of human-centred design.

Finally, skills development emerges as a practical enabler of sustained change. Participants report learning digital skills informally through peer collaboration, exposure, and hands-on experience. The trade group notes that these competencies are acquired continuously, while others valued understanding analytics to engage more effectively with data teams.

#### 6.4.1.2. Literature recap

DT advances through two interacting mechanisms introducing new resources, processes, and capabilities and aligning these with the existing organisational system (Vial, 2020; Hanelt et al., 2021). Progress therefore depends not only on technology spend but on intangible assets competencies, expertise, and learning capacity to navigate uncertainty and sustain advantage (Gong & Ribiere, 2025).

Leadership remains pivotal. Although some scholars refer to this as digital transformational leadership (DTL), a closer examination suggests that it is not a new form of leadership. Rather, it represents an evolution of existing strategic leadership roles, reshaped to fit the demands of increasingly digital and technology-driven contexts (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Gyamerah et al., 2025; Carli, 2021). Strategic leaders mobilise purpose, resources, and coordination to overcome structural and managerial obstacles (Porfirio et al., 2021).

Successful DT typically rests on a blend of leadership, organisational, and technological enablers. Leaders integrate business and IT logics, articulate a transformative vision, and mobilise diverse teams to drive cultural change (Benitez et al., 2022; Porfirio et al.,

2021; Gong & Ribiere, 2021). Design thinking and supportive behavioural strategies reduce bias, institutionalise experimentation, and embed creativity into strategy, culture, and competencies (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). On the technology side, platform digitisation capability integrating IT infrastructure, processes, and data, standardises and automates workflows, freeing attention for opportunity sensing and innovation (Benitez et al., 2022). Organisational agility rapid sensing and resource reconfiguration often mediates the link between transformational leadership and measurable DT outcomes (AlNuaimi et al., 2022).

Further enablers include digital assets and big-data analytics, digital agility, and digital networking across ecosystems (Ciarli et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021). Structural adaptation (e.g. autonomous digital units, agile forms, and elevating IT into a value orchestrator) supports scale and coherence (Porfirio et al., 2021; Hanelt et al., 2021). Importantly, DT differs from traditional IT change by redefining the value proposition, not merely digitising existing offerings (Vial, 2020). Typical barriers arise from misalignment, weak vision/competencies, rigid hierarchies, and bureaucratic decision processes that blunt innovation (Porfirio et al., 2021; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).

#### 6.4.1.3. Comparative analysis of findings and literature

This study's findings are similar with what literature details. The evidence from research findings also supports Porfirio et al.'s (2021) argument that transformation success depends on strategic alignment and leadership that bridges vision and operational execution. Instances where executives pushed for accelerated technology adoption without readiness such as the pressure to "implement AI" on fragile infrastructure reflect the very misalignment these scholars identify as a key barrier. Similarly, the persistence of legacy systems and siloed processes across the accommodation and catering sectors, substantiates Hanelt et al.'s (2021) observations on the structural inertia that continues to impede DT integration.

Participants' accounts illustrate the centrality of leadership and communication as enabling mechanisms. The focus on empathy, endurance, and collaboration aligns with Benitez et al. (2022) and Gong and Ribiere (2025), who highlight that human-centred leadership, rather than technical mastery, drives sustainable transformation. In this sense, the participants' experiences reaffirm AlNuaimi et al. (2022) and Gyamerah et al. (2025), who propose that strategic leadership must evolve towards agility, digital literacy, and people-centred orientation to succeed in complex digital contexts.

The iterative and learning-driven approach reported in the catering group reflects AlNuaimi et al.'s (2022) notion of organisational agility as a mediator between leadership behaviour and DT outcomes. Participants' accounts of "learning by doing" and refining processes through feedback parallel with literatures on the experimentation and rapid iteration strengthen of digital capability over time.

Technological enablers discussed in the findings, particularly the integration of data platforms and cloud systems, correspond with Benitez et al. (2022) and Verhoef et al. (2021), who identify platform digitisation and networking capability as structural enablers that enhance adaptability. The creative use of limited resources observed in the findings also reflects Ciarli et al.'s (2021) perspective that capability reconfiguration and resource flexibility underpin long-term digital maturity.

Lastly, this study's findings confirm the enduring challenges of bureaucratic inertia and structural rigidity, echoing Porfirio et al. (2021) and Cortes and Herrmann (2021), who argue that inflexible hierarchies undermine leaders' ability to drive innovation. Participants' experiences of slow decision-making, fragmented accountability, and fear of redundancy illustrate how these cultural and structural barriers remain deeply embedded.

#### 6.4.1.4. Conclusion

The findings are consistent with literature, especially in framing digital transformation as a holistic process shaped by both human and technological conditions (Vial, 2020; Hanelt et al., 2021; Benitez et al., 2022). In summary the barriers and enablers of DT are noted as;

##### Barrier:

- Strategic misalignment
- Legacy systems and siloed processes
- Bureaucratic inertia and hierarchical rigidity
- Cultural resistance and fear of redundancy
- Slow decision-making and fragmented accountability

##### Enabler:

- Leadership and communication
- Organisational agility and iterative learning
- Technological integration and data infrastructure
- Resource flexibility and capability reconfiguration

#### **6.4.2. Research sub question 3 – Theme 2: Barriers and enablers of innovation**

##### **6.4.2.1. Recap of the findings**

The findings reveal similarities on how innovation across all three groups are shaped by the interaction of leadership, learning, technology, resources, and human behaviour. Leadership alignment emerged as a central factor influencing innovation outcomes. Across groups, participants agreed that innovation succeeds when it is clearly linked to business strategy and championed by leaders who communicate its purpose and relevance. Misalignment or lack of direction often slowed progress and created uncertainty. Dynamic and learning orientation is another shared enabler. Participants describe innovation as a continuous process of experimentation, feedback, and adaptation rather than a once-off achievement. Where teams are encouraged to test and learn, innovation becomes embedded in everyday practice. Technological and digital enablers are recognised as important but not sufficient on their own. Nevertheless, participants emphasise that digital tools only added value when aligned with people and processes.

Ambiguity is experienced differently across sectors. For some of the participants, it represents confusion between digital transformation and innovation; while for others, it reflected the fluid and experimental nature of innovation itself. Leaders who embraced uncertainty as part of learning were better able to sustain momentum. Resource limitation remained a practical constraint across all groups. Participants describe innovation as often taking place under financial, time, or capacity pressures. However, these limitations also encourage creative problem-solving and prioritisation, turning scarcity into a driver of focus and agility.

Finally, human and behavioural factors consistently shape both barriers and enablers. Resistance to change, entrenched routines, and fear of failure constrained innovation, while open communication, trust, and inclusion enabled it. Leaders who demonstrate empathy and invested in people's confidence and capability create cultural conditions for innovation to thrive.

##### **6.4.2.2. Recap on the Literature**

Scholars widely agree that innovation depends on how effectively leaders cultivate environments of creativity, collaboration, and continuous learning (Bracht et al., 2022). Earlier work emphasised the use of appropriate routines for different risk contexts, but

recent studies show that customer experience and willingness to pay have become central to innovation design (Cooper, 2025; Maier & Baccarella, 2025). Furthermore, Cooper (2025) positions digital transformation as a transformative enabler, improving how leaders understand and respond to customer needs.

Leadership alignment remains a consistent determinant of innovation success. Strategic leaders are viewed as both drivers and enablers who interpret context, exercise judgment, and connect digital and corporate strategies (Porfírio et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). When strategy and digital initiatives are integrated, innovation outcomes strengthen digital transformation (Ciarli et al., 2021). Even in the face of inertia and resistance, leaders often launch transformation to respond to technological disruption and emerging digital competitors (Browder et al., 2023).

Technological and digital enablers feature prominently in contemporary literature. De Paula et al. (2023) highlight how advanced technologies such as AI, the Internet of Things, and blockchain expand organisational capability. Melnychuk and Schultz (2025) and Zhu et al. (2006) emphasise that strong research and development (R&D) investment, digital skills, and interdisciplinary collaboration are critical to sustaining radical innovation, while Zhuo and Chen (2023) note that leadership must focus on building innovation systems rather than simply increasing budgets.

Innovation thrives within interconnected systems and ecosystems. Suchek et al. (2021) show that reconfiguring resources and managing stakeholder relationships drive adaptability. Qiu et al. (2020) add that supportive national policy, regulation, and social openness enhance innovation readiness. The human dimension remains vital: employee competence, digital literacy, and adaptive capacity determine how well firms convert technological potential into performance (Porfírio et al., 2021; Suchek et al., 2021).

Persistent barriers include conceptual confusion, resource shortages, organisational inertia, and bureaucratic rigidity (Varadarajan, 2024; Browder et al., 2023). Baxter et al. (2023) argue that such difficulties are integral to the innovation process, as experimentation and failure are essential to learning. Structural obstacles such as immature technologies, skills deficits, and rigid governance arrangements often reinforce these constraints (Stornelli et al., 2021; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).

In brief, literature underscores that innovation outcomes depend on the quality of relationships and governance. Open innovation, trust, and shared goals enable

collaboration (Köhler et al., 2022), while misaligned incentives, slow decision cycles, and resource asymmetries turn potential enablers into barriers. Collectively, these studies confirm that successful innovation is multifaceted. This means that it demands leadership alignment, digital capability, learning orientation, and human adaptability, while failure typically arises from ambiguity, resource and capability gaps, and governance constraints.

#### 6.4.2.3. Comparative analysis of findings and literature

This study's findings confirm existing scholarship, particularly in highlighting the interplay between leadership, learning, technology, and human behaviour as barriers and enablers of innovation.

Participants in all groups emphasised that innovation succeeds when guided by clear purpose and strategic coherence, consistent with Porfirio et al. (2021) and Samimi et al. (2022), who describe strategic leaders as both drivers and enablers of innovation. Participants' reflections that innovation must link with business strategy and value propositions, mirror the scholarly view that strategic alignment integrates digital and corporate strategy (Ciarli et al., 2021). A nuanced difference in the findings, however, is the emphasis on relational leadership, empathy and trust-building, rather than formal strategic control, suggesting that alignment is as much about human connection as strategic intent.

Moreover, this study's findings describe innovation as iterative, emphasising experimentation and adaptation. This view aligns with Bracht et al. (2022), who argue that creativity and continuous learning underpin innovative performance. Similarly, it aligns with Baxter et al. (2023), who see experimentation and occasional failure as essential for progress.

Findings on technological and digital enablers correspond closely with De Paula et al. (2023) and Melnychuk and Schultz (2025), who stress the value of integrating advanced technologies such as AI and data analytics. Participants' references to AI-enabled personalisation and customer-focused tools reflect this trend. However, the findings reveal a subtle difference; technology is not perceived as the main driver but as a servant of human-centred innovation. This echoes Cooper (2025) and Porfirio et al. (2021) who view digital tools as enablers that depend on leadership interpretation and user alignment.

Ambiguity emerged as both barrier and enabler, echoing Varadarajan's (2024) argument that conceptual confusion and definitional inconsistency remain obstacles in innovation research and practice. Participants experience uncertainty over whether digital transformation drove innovation or vice versa. Yet rather than seeing this as purely negative, some interpreted ambiguity as a normal condition that fosters learning and creativity. This nuance extends beyond literature by framing ambiguity as productive rather than purely constraining.

Participants consistently cited financial, technical, and capacity constraints as barriers. This finding is consistent with Browder et al. (2023) and Stornelli et al. (2021), who describe these as typical inhibitors of innovation in complex environments. Yet, the findings reveal that resource scarcity often encouraged ingenuity, which supports Bracht et al.'s (2022) view that constraints can drive focus and creative problem-solving.

Consequently, human and behavioural dimensions in the findings parallel the human-centred emphasis in Porfírio et al. (2021) and Suchek et al. (2021). Participants describe resistance, fear, and entrenched habits as barriers, while open communication and empathy emerged as key enablers. The findings further highlight the importance of trust and inclusion, aligning with Köhler et al. (2022) on relational quality and collaboration. Notwithstanding the fact that participants say emotional intelligence and humility are practical leadership tools in managing behavioural resistance.

#### 6.4.2.4. Conclusion

Overall, the comparison reveals that the study's findings broadly support scholarship. The nuance lies in how participants frame these issues; as they see constraints as opportunities for creativity, ambiguity as a space for exploration, and leadership not only as strategic alignment but as relational influence and empathy.

The findings are consistent with literature that portrays innovation as a socially and technologically embedded process influenced by leadership, culture, and resources (Porfírio et al., 2021; Bracht et al., 2022; Melnychuk & Schultz, 2025). Equally important, the findings make a contextual contribution by illustrating how leaders in customer-centric sectors translate theoretical enablers such as collaboration, learning, and alignment into concrete, iterative practices.

In summary the barriers and enablers of innovations are noted as;

Barrier;

- Resource Limitation
- Human and Behavioural
- Ambiguity

Enablers;

- Leadership Alignment
- Dynamic and Learning
- Technological and Digital Enablers
- Organisational and Cultural Context
- Ambiguity

#### **6.4.3. Research sub-question 3 – Theme 3: Strategic leadership as the linking mechanism**

##### **6.4.3.1. Recap of the findings on strategic leadership as the linking mechanism**

The findings similarities describe strategic leadership as the integrating force that connects digital transformation and innovation, translating technological potential into tangible organisational outcomes. In the trade group, the participants view themselves as the bridge between digital initiatives and innovation outcomes, ensuring that technology adoption is guided by business purpose and customer value. They see leadership as the difference between digital implementation and digital impact.

In the accommodation group, findings showed that strategic leadership acted as a cultural mediator, ensuring that technology serves people rather than replacing them. Thus, leadership becomes the mechanism through which digital efforts translate into service innovation and experience improvement.

In the catering group, findings show that leaders portray themselves as connectors and orchestrators, facilitating collaboration across teams, suppliers, and customers. Across groups, participants consistently describe leadership as the link that harmonises strategic intent, technology, and human creativity ensuring coherence between innovation and digital transformation.

##### **6.4.3.2. Literature recap on strategic leadership as linking mechanism**

The literature widely recognises strategic leadership as the integrative mechanism that aligns innovation and digital transformation. Porfírio et al. (2021) describe leaders as

pivotal agents who interpret context, mobilise resources, and communicate purpose, ensuring that digital transformation serves broader organisational strategy. Similarly, Samimi et al. (2022) frame strategic leaders as boundary-spanning orchestrators who connect people, technology, and strategic intent.

Vial (2020) and Hanelt et al. (2021) identify digital transformation and innovation as interdependent mechanisms innovation that drive change, while transformation embeds it, requiring leadership to mediate between exploration and execution. Cortes and Herrmann (2021) reinforce that leadership creates relational conditions for innovation, converting individual creativity into collective capability.

Bracht et al. (2022) and De Paula et al. (2023) further note that leaders must cultivate learning environments where experimentation, collaboration, and technology integration reinforce one another. In such environments, innovation provides direction (“the what”) and digital transformation provides infrastructure (“the how”). Warner and Wäger (2019) and AlNuaimi et al. (2022) add that leaders enable this interaction through vision, communication, and adaptive governance, ensuring that digital investments enhance not overshadow innovation goals.

#### 6.4.3.3. Comparative analysis of findings and literature

The findings confirmed existing scholarship. The findings align with Samimi et al. (2022) and Porfírio et al. (2021), who emphasise that strategic leaders act as orchestrators of alignment and coherence across strategic, technological, and human domains. Participants’ accounts similarly positioned leaders as sense-makers who provide strategic direction and cross-functional integration. This supports Vial’s (2020) and Hanelt et al.’s (2021) argument that digital transformation is both innovative and integrative, and thus, requires leadership capable of balancing exploration and exploitation.

The existing literature conceptualises leadership alignment largely at a strategic level. Yet, participants in this study describe a deeply human-centred and operational enactment of linkage facilitating collaboration, empathy, and participation to ensure transformation remains people-focused. This insight complements Cortés and Herrmann (2020) and Bracht et al. (2022), who associate leadership success with cultural inclusivity, but extends their view by demonstrating that such inclusivity is not peripheral; it is the mechanism that binds digital transformation and innovation together.

The findings suggest that strategic leadership operates as a dynamic integrator between technological capability and organisational culture. This relational interpretation expands the boundaries of De Paula et al. (2023), who frame innovation as cognitive and behavioural alignment, by showing that leadership acts as the living bridge where strategic intent, digital capability, and innovation outcomes converge.

#### 6.4.3.4. Conclusion

The findings confirm and extend existing theory by demonstrating that strategic leadership functions as the core mechanism linking digital transformation and innovation through both structural and behavioural integration. In this capacity, leadership creates coherence between vision, people, and process, ensuring that innovation outcomes are realised through transformation initiatives and that transformation remains innovation-led rather than technology-driven.

The comparative synthesis identifies the following linking mechanisms evident across the groups. The summary is shown in the below;

- Boundary-Spanning & Stakeholder Orchestration
- Direction & Strategic Coherence
- Ethical Leading
- Information Integration
- Risk balancing
- Sense-Making & Decision Under Uncertainty

### 6.5. Research findings to central research questions

The central research question for this study was:

#### ***How do strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation?***

Which was supported by 3 sub-questions and were discussed in chapter 6 and the integration to central question is provided. The study shows that strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation by acting as the central integrating force that connects people, culture, technology, and strategic intent. Across the TCA sectors, leaders begin by shaping how innovation and digital transformation are understood. Innovation is framed as a continuous, execution-oriented, and collaborative practice, while digital transformation is seen as an ongoing socio-technical journey that balances

technology with human capability. Leaders translate these understandings into action by providing vision, direction, and disciplined follow-through, ensuring that digital initiatives remain tied to customer value, operational relevance, and long-term strategic priorities.

They enable innovation by creating environments where experimentation, learning, and cross-functional collaboration can take place despite organisational constraints such as legacy systems, bureaucratic inertia, and resource limitations. This is done through relational influence, empathy, communication, and the ability to mobilise teams across boundaries. Their competencies particularly strategic foresight, analytical judgement, resilience, and people-centred leadership help them manage ambiguity, reduce resistance, and sustain transformation momentum over time.

Importantly, the findings reveal that leaders drive innovation through DT not only by initiating change, but by continuously aligning and realigning digital tools, human behaviour, and organisational processes. This linking role ensures that technological efforts generate innovation outcomes, and that innovation ambitions are enabled by appropriate digital capabilities. In practice, strategic leaders operate as orchestrators who balance exploration with execution, manage tensions between stability and change, and maintain coherence across the organisation. Ultimately, innovation emerges where digital transformation is strategically guided, culturally grounded, and supported by leaders who integrate vision, people, and technology into a unified change process.

## **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter compared the empirical findings from Chapter 5 with the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2 to interpret how the results align with or extend existing scholarship. Overall, the research findings are consistent with the extant literature. **Table 9** provides the table of summaries of outcomes and **figure 10** presents the revised conceptual framework.

### **6.6.1. Summary of outcomes**

Table 9 consolidates the outcomes of the discussion by drawing together the major similarities and differences that emerged across the themes, while also identifying the specific areas where conceptual refinement was necessary. In doing so the table links each insight back to the relevant research sub-questions and underlying constructs showing how the discussion clarifies, extends or sharpens the study's explanatory logic.

This alignment provides a clearer view of how the evidence supports the evolving interpretation and strengthens the coherence of the overall argument.

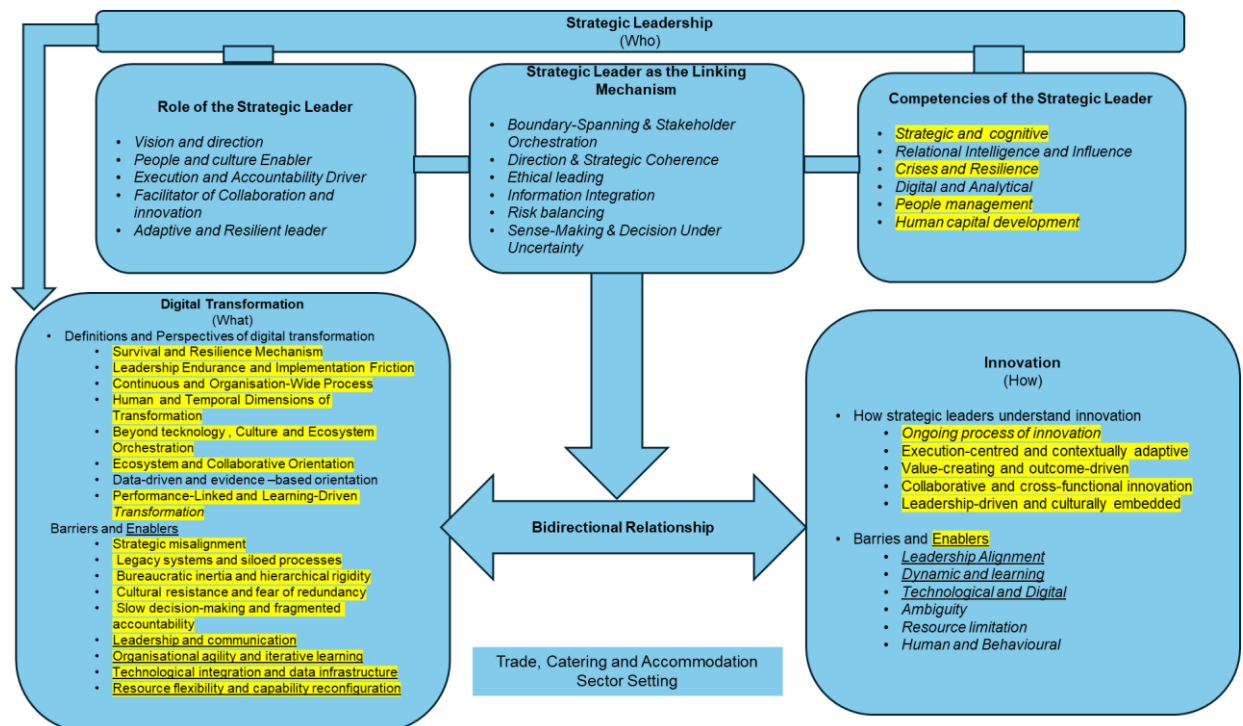
**Table 9: Summary of research findings**

| Research Question                                                                                                          | Construct              | Theme                                                                                         | Subthemes                                      | Similarities / Differences | Contribution                               | Theme / Sub theme change                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-question 1: What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?                 | Innovation             | Theme 1 - How strategic leaders understand innovation                                         | Evolving views of innovation                   | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Ongoing process of innovation                         |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Contextual Drivers and Pressures               | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Execution-centred and contextually adaptive           |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Innovation as a Multistage Process             | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Collaborative and cross-functional innovation         |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Performance and return of investment           | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Value-creating and outcome-driven                     |
|                                                                                                                            | Digital Transformation | Theme 2 - How strategic leaders understand of digital transformation                          | Ecosystem                                      | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Innovation                                            |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Context Dependent                              | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Survival and Resilience Mechanism                     |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Leadership Driven and Vision Dependent         | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Leadership Endurance and Implementation Friction      |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Organisational and Strategic Change            | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Continuous and Organisation-Wide Process              |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Customer and Experimental                      | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Performance-Linked and Learning-Driven Transformation |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Purpose, Process and Technology Orientation    | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Beyond technology, Culture and Ecosystem Orientation  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Cross-functional Integration                   | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Human and Temporal Dimensions of Transformation       |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Continuous and ongoing                         | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Ecosystem and Collaborative Orientation               |
|                                                                                                                            | Strategic Leadership   | Theme 3 - Evolving roles of strategic leaders                                                 | Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Orientation     | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Vision and Direction                           | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | People and Culture Enabler                     | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Execution and Accountability Driver            | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Facilitator of Collaboration and Innovation    | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Adaptive and Resilient Leader                  | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Strategic and Systems Thinking                 | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
| Sub-question 2: What strategic leadership competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation? | Strategic Leadership   | Theme 1 - Leadership Competencies Required to drive innovation through digital transformation | Relational Intelligence and Influence          | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Resilience                                     | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Fluency and Analytical Capability      | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | People and Human Capital                       | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | Human Capital Development (Competency)                |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               |                                                | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | People Management (Competency)                        |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               |                                                | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
| Sub-question 3: How does digital transformation influence the way strategic leaders enable innovation?                     | Digital Transformation | Theme 1 - Barriers and enablers of digital transformation                                     | Digital Transformation: Bureaucratic Inertia   | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Human and Behavioural  | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Leadership & Strategic | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Legacy systems         | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Organisational and     | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Resource Limitations   | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Strategic misalignment | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Technological enablers | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Digital Transformation: Fear of redundancy     | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            | Innovation             | Theme 2 - Barriers and enablers of innovation                                                 | Digital Transformation: Skills                 | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Leadership alignment                           | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Dynamic and Learning                           | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Technological and Digital enablers             | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Ambiguity                                      | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Resource Limitation                            | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            | Strategic Leadership   | Theme 3 - Strategic leadership as the linking mechanism                                       | Human and behavioural                          | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Boundary-Spanning & Stakeholder Orchestration  |                            |                                            | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               |                                                | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Direction & Strategic Coherence                | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Ethical leading                                | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Information Integration                        | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Risk balancing                                 | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |
|                                                                                                                            |                        |                                                                                               | Sense-Making & Decision Under Uncertainty      | Similarities               | Addition to the existing body of knowledge | None                                                  |

### 6.6.2. Revised conceptual framework

Taking into account the conclusion of Chapter 6, the conceptual framework is now revised to depict the outcomes of this chapter. Sub-themes are refined as discussed, and the theme identified as new in Chapter 5, “strategic leadership as the linking mechanism,” was reassessed following three steps. It was found that supporting literature already exists; therefore, it is not retained as a new theme. All refinements and name changes are highlighted in yellow in **Figure 10's** revised conceptual framework.

**Figure 10: Revised conceptual framework**



## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

### 7.1. Introduction

This study set out to explore the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation within South Africa's Trade, Catering, and Accommodation (TCA) sectors; which are customer-centric industries that remains particularly sensitive to digital disruption, evolving customer preferences, and broader shifts in the global business environment. The primary aim was to investigate how strategic leaders enable business to align digital transformation initiatives with innovation imperatives in order to create and sustain value. More specifically, the study sought to examine how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation, what competencies are required to enable this process, and how the fostering of innovation is influenced by the dynamics of digital transformation.

The study approached this aim by framing a central research question supported by three sub-questions that together unpacked the broader inquiry. Beyond answering these questions, the study additionally set out to make a potential contribution to the field of strategic leadership by developing a conceptual framework, linking the key theoretical constructs explored. The research was therefore guided by one central question and three related sub-questions, outlined as follows:

The central research question asked:

**How do strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation?**

This was supported by the following sub-questions:

***What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?*** (Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Ciarli et al., 2021; Georgakakis et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022)

***What strategic-leader competencies are critical for driving innovation through digital transformation?*** (Singh et al., 2023; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Johns, 2023; Samimi et al., 2022)

***How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?*** (Singh et al., 2023; AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Ciarli et al., 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2022)

A total of seventeen (17) participants were interviewed across the three (3) sub-groups: eleven (11) from the trade group, three (3) from the accommodation group, and three (3) from the catering group. All participants occupied senior leadership positions primarily from JSE-listed organisations, and were directly involved in strategic decision-making, innovation initiatives, digital transformation programmes within their organisations.

The research outcomes are organised according to these sub-questions. The conclusions presented in this chapter are drawn from the comparative analysis of findings and literature as discussed in Chapter 6. The outcomes either represent potential additions to the existing body of knowledge or refinements to established theory. These conclusions inform the updated conceptual framework first introduced in Chapter 6 and finalised in this chapter, together with this study's overall contributions and recommendations for management and stakeholders. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the research and suggestions for future study.

## 7.2. Principal theoretical conclusion

### 7.2.1. Research sub-question 1: Role of strategic leaders

For the first research sub-question which examined the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation, the research outcomes were presented into three themes; how strategic leaders understand innovation, how strategic leaders understand digital transformation, and the evolving role of strategic leaders.

#### 7.2.1.1. Similarities with extant literature for research sub-question 1

With regards to how strategic leaders understand innovation, which is the first theme of sub-question 1, research outcomes are consistent with existing literature. The findings confirmed that innovation is an ongoing, value-oriented, and collaborative process, which is consistent with Varadarajan (2024), Granstrand and Holgersson (2020), and Cortes and Herrmann (2021), who describe innovation as the implementation of new ideas that generate stakeholder value. Leaders viewed innovation not as novelty for its own sake but as execution-centred and contextually adaptive, confirming Marion and Fixson (2021), who argue that "newness" is context dependent and may simply represent purposeful improvement within the organisation. The strong emphasis on collaboration and measurable impact align with Cortes and Herrmann's (2021) view of innovation as an iterative process moving from idea generation to implementation. Moreover, leaders frame innovation as culturally embedded and leadership-driven, aligning with De Paula

et al. (2023) and Mariani et al. (2023), who associate innovation with behavioural and cognitive change in digital contexts. Finally, their customer-centred orientation reinforces Maier and Baccarella's (2025) argument that innovation effectiveness depends on empowering users and creating value through engagement.

With regards to how strategic leaders understand digital transformation, which formed the second theme under sub-question 1, the research outcomes confirm the descriptions offered by Verhoef et al. (2021), Vial (2020), and Porfírio et al. (2021) of DT as a socio-technical and organisation-wide process that integrates people, culture, and technology for long-term competitiveness. This view is consistent with Wessel et al. (2021), who conceptualise DT as an enterprise-wide renewal effort. The dual framing of DT as both defensive (catch-up) and offensive (value creation) aligns with Vial's (2020) notion that transformation simultaneously protects and creates value. Participants' emphasis on customer experience and data-driven improvement corresponds with Compagnucci et al. (2025), who identify customer personalisation as central to DT, and with Hanelt et al. (2021), who highlight agility and collaboration as key success factors. Similarly, the focus on leadership alignment and cultural change mirrors Porfírio et al. (2021) and Dąbrowska et al. (2022), confirming the view of DT as a socio-technical and people-centred process.

With regards to the evolving role of strategic leaders, which formed the third theme under sub-question 1, research outcomes confirm alignment with Samimi et al. (2022) and Fernandes et al. (2022), who describe leaders as visionaries, enablers, and integrators that align strategic intent with operational execution and foster innovation through influence, collaboration, and cultural stewardship. The research outcome confirms the role of strategic leaders as providing vision and direction, consistent with Porfírio et al. (2021) and Wenzel et al. (2022), who emphasise sense-making and strategic judgement under uncertainty. Leaders are also recognised in the research outcome as people and culture enablers, creating trust-based, participatory environments that embed innovation into organisational culture, in line with Fernandes et al. (2022) and Cortés and Herrmann (2021). Research outcome further confirms execution and accountability as defining leadership functions. Strategic leaders are seen as ensuring disciplined follow-through and measurable progress, supporting Kurzahls et al. (2020) and Samimi et al. (2022), who associate execution with operational alignment. In addition, the role of leaders as facilitators of collaboration and innovation is evident in their ability to integrate teams and promote shared ownership, affirming Collien (2021) and Jarrett and Vince (2023). Finally,

the study affirms adaptive and resilient leadership as central to long-term transformation success. Leaders were described as maintaining balance between stability and change through empathy, endurance, and iterative learning consistent with Giustiniano et al. (2020) and Sjödin et al. (2020).

#### 7.2.1.2. Differences or nuances with extant literature for research question 1

There are no differences or additions to the themes. However, the research outcomes provide an extension to the body of knowledge on how strategic leaders understand innovation, how they understand digital transformation, and their role in driving innovation through digital transformation within the South African TCA sector. Strategic leaders operate with an execution-centred, resilience-driven, and customer-focused orientation. Regarding innovation, the consideration of formal structural dimensions such as committees to foster innovation has emerged as an enabler of innovation that strategic leaders need to drive. Within the South African context, digital transformation is viewed as a survival mechanism that demands leadership endurance, highlighting the critical focus areas businesses should prioritise.

### 7.2.2. Research sub-question 2: Competency

For the second research question, which explored what competencies are critical for strategic leaders to drive innovation through digital transformation, the research conclusions are consistencies with several sub themes.

#### 7.2.2.1. Similarities with extant literature for research sub-question 2

The research outcomes confirmed that strategic foresight and sense-making are essential cognitive and strategic competencies, aligning with Georgakakis et al. (2022) and Schaedler et al. (2021), who emphasise leaders' ability to translate ambiguity into clear strategic direction. The research outcomes further show consistency with Kurzhals et al. (2020), as participants demonstrated strong digital and analytical competencies, using data interpretation and analytical reasoning to guide innovation and informed decision-making.

Similarly, the emphasis on relational and influence competencies including empathy, transparent communication, and collaboration is consistent with Collien (2021) and Jarrett and Vince (2023), who describe effective strategic leaders as boundary-spanners

who build trust and collective commitment. The research outcomes align with Thomas et al. (2004) and Singh et al. (2023), as participants reinforce ethical judgement and people-centredness as foundations of responsible leadership during transformation. Finally, the study confirms the importance of resilience and adaptability, consistent with Kurzahls et al. (2020) and Fernandes et al. (2022), demonstrating that enduring leadership and the ability to sustain learning cultures are vital for driving innovation and digital transformation.

#### 7.2.2.2. Nuances with extant literature for research sub-question 2

While the research outcomes are consistent with the extant literature, the research outcomes offer few minor contextual extensions. Research outcomes describe resilience not as an inherent trait but as a daily behavioural discipline manifested through communication, humility, and perseverance. This adds to the contextual dimension to the broader definition offered by Kurzahls et al. (2020). Similarly, the research outcomes show that relational competence involved elements of openness and shared vulnerability, illustrating how influence is exercised collaboratively rather than hierarchically. These outcome does not offer difference; instead, provides a practical extension, showing how established competencies are enacted in the South African TCA context.

#### 7.2.3. Research sub-question 3: DT

For the third research question which explored what competencies are critical for strategic leaders to drive innovation through digital transformation, the research conclusions are consistent with one overarching theme and several sub-themes.

#### 7.2.4. Similarities with extant literature for research sub-question 3

With regards to the barriers and enablers of digital transformation, which formed theme 1 under sub-question 3, research outcomes confirm that barriers and enablers of DT. The findings of this study are consistent with the extant literature on the barriers and enablers of digital transformation. The research outcome supports Porfirio et al.'s (2021) argument that transformation success depends on strategic alignment and leadership that bridges vision and operational execution. The persistence of legacy systems and siloed processes within the accommodation and catering sectors substantiates Hanelt et al.'s (2021) observations on structural inertia that continues to impede digital

transformation integration. The emphasis on empathy, endurance, and collaboration aligns with Benitez et al. (2022) and Gong and Ribiere (2025), who argue that human-centred leadership, rather than technical mastery, drives sustainable transformation. Moreover, research outcomes reaffirm AlNuaimi et al. (2022) and Gyamerah et al. (2025), who propose that strategic leadership must evolve towards agility, digital literacy, and people-centred orientation to succeed in complex digital contexts. The iterative and learning-driven approach described in research outcomes, aligns with AlNuaimi et al.'s (2022) notion of organisational agility as a mediator between leadership behaviour and digital transformation outcomes. The technological enablers described in the research outcome correspond with Benitez et al. (2022) and Verhoef et al. (2021), who identify platform digitisation and networking capability as structural enablers that enhance adaptability. The creative use of limited resources observed across sectors further reflects Ciarli et al.'s (2021) perspective that capability reconfiguration and resource flexibility underpin long-term digital maturity. The research confirmed the enduring challenges of bureaucratic inertia and structural rigidity, echoing Porfírio et al. (2021) and Cortes and Herrmann (2021), who argue that inflexible hierarchies undermine leaders' ability to drive innovation. Research findings show participants' experiences of slow decision-making, fragmented accountability, and fear of redundancy, demonstrating how cultural and structural barriers remain deeply embedded, consistent with patterns observed in prior scholarship.

With regards to barriers and enablers of innovation, which formed theme 2 under sub-question 3, the research outcomes align with existing literature. The findings emphasise that innovation succeeds when guided by clear purpose and strategic coherence, consistent with Porfírio et al. (2021) and Samimi et al. (2022), who describe strategic leaders as both drivers and enablers of innovation. The research further shows that innovation must be linked to business strategy and value creation, mirroring Ciarli et al. (2021), who argue that strategic alignment integrates digital and corporate strategy. The findings also reinforce the view of innovation as an iterative process, characterised by experimentation and adaptation. This perspective is consistent with Bracht et al. (2022), who contend that creativity and continuous learning underpin innovative performance, and Baxter et al. (2023), who emphasise that experimentation and occasional failure are essential to progress. Research outcome on technological and digital enablers correspond closely with De Paula et al. (2023) and Melnychuk and Schultz (2025), who highlight the importance of integrating advanced technologies such as AI and data analytics. Moreover, research outcomes conformed this interpretation of digital tools that

aligns with Cooper (2025) and Porfírio et al. (2021), who position digital tools as enablers that depend on leadership interpretation and user alignment. Research outcomes show that ambiguity emerge as a barrier, supporting Varadarajan's (2024) argument that conceptual confusion and definitional inconsistency continue to challenge innovation research and practice. The human and behavioural dimensions observed in this study closely parallel the human-centred perspectives advanced by Porfírio et al. (2021) and Suchek et al. (2021). Participants describe resistance, fear, and entrenched habits as barriers, while open communication and empathy are seen as powerful enablers. The emphasis on trust and inclusion aligns with Köhler et al. (2022), who associate relational quality and collaboration with improved innovation outcomes.

With regards to the theme of strategic leadership as a linking mechanism, which formed the third theme under sub-question 3, the research outcomes are consistent with the extant literature. The research outcome confirms existing literature and aligns with Samimi et al. (2022) and Porfírio et al. (2021), who emphasise that strategic leaders act as orchestrators of alignment and coherence across strategic, technological, and human domains. Research outcome position leaders as sense-makers who provide strategic direction and facilitate cross-functional integration. This supports Vial (2020) and Hanelt et al. (2021), who argue that digital transformation is both innovative and integrative, and requires leadership capable of balancing exploration and exploitation. While existing literature often conceptualises leadership alignment at the strategic level, research outcome describes a more human-centred and operational enactment of linkage facilitating collaboration, empathy, and participation to ensure that transformation remains people-focused. This observation confirms Cortés and Herrmann (2020), and Bracht et al. (2022), who associate leadership success with cultural inclusivity, but extends their view by adding that such inclusivity is not peripheral; rather, it is the mechanism that binds digital transformation and innovation together.

#### 7.2.5. Nuances of differences with extant literature for research sub-question 3

The study contributes to existing knowledge by demonstrating that the human dimension of trust, empathy, and contextual learning, constitutes true infrastructure of digital transformation in complex and resource-constrained environments. A nuanced difference emerged in the findings, as participants placed stronger emphasis on

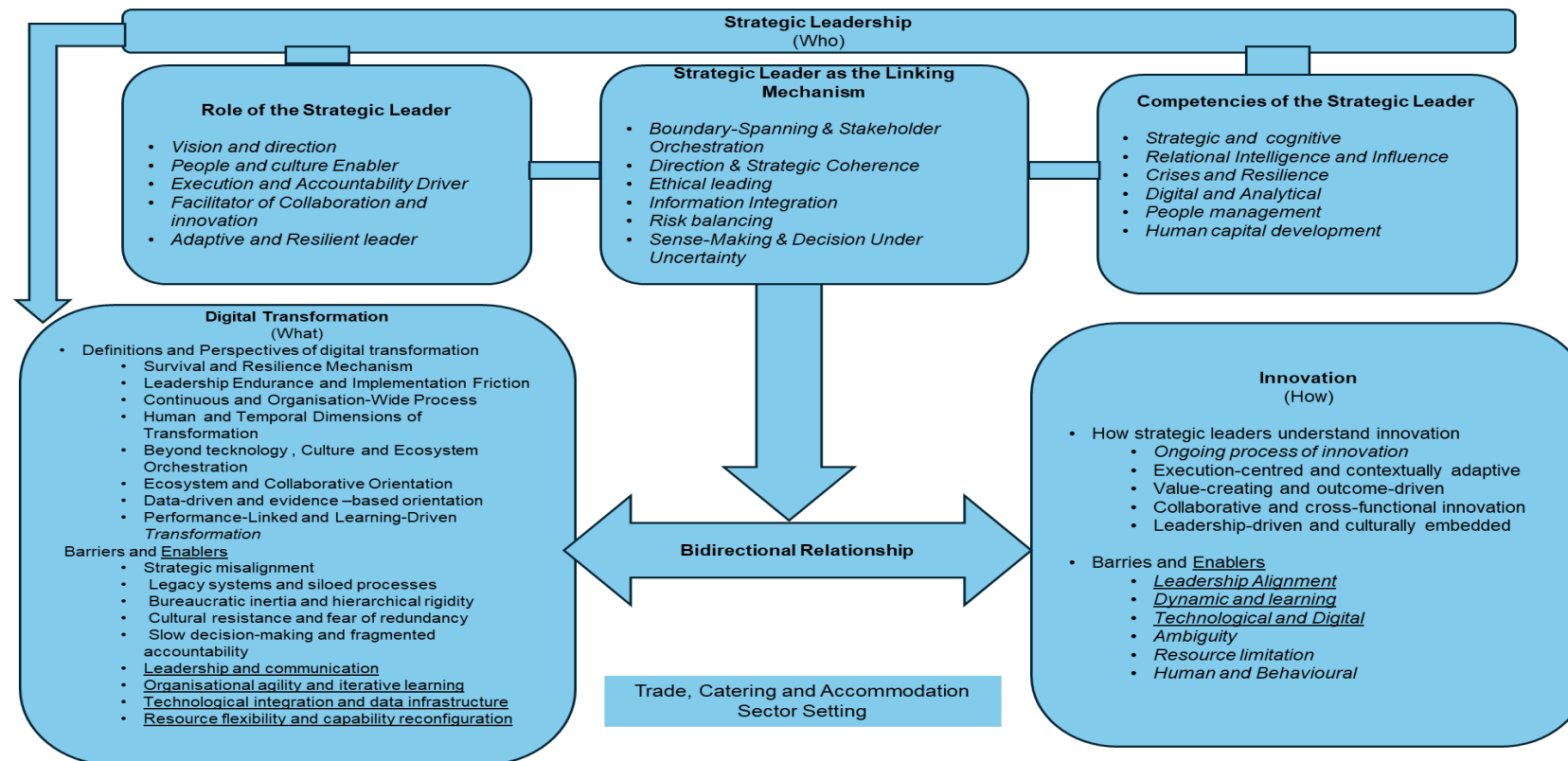
relational leadership, empathy, and trust-building rather than formal strategic control, suggesting that alignment depends as much on human connection as on strategic intent.

Participants acknowledge uncertainty over whether digital transformation drives innovation or vice versa, yet some viewed this ambiguity as a natural and productive condition that fosters learning and creativity. This insight extends the existing literature by reframing ambiguity as potentially generative rather than exclusively constraining. Furthermore, the findings deepen current understanding by illustrating that emotional intelligence and humility are not abstract leadership traits but practical tools for managing behavioural resistance and sustaining engagement throughout innovation processes.

### 7.2.6. Final Conceptual Framework

In conclusion, the final conceptual framework is presented below (**Figure 11**), capturing the constructs, themes, and subthemes developed throughout the study.

**Figure 11: Final conceptual framework**



### 7.3. Research contribution

The aim of this research was to explore the role of strategic leaders in driving innovation through digital transformation within South Africa's TCA sector. As a customer-centric industry facing rapid technological change and post-pandemic disruption, the TCA sector provides a distinct lens through which to understand how leaders drive innovation in emerging market conditions. The research directly responds to the opportunity identified by Singh et al. (2023), who called for empirical studies that examine how strategic leaders operationalise innovation through digital transformation in context-specific and developing economy settings.

Over and above addressing this opportunity and contributing by providing the South African TCA context to these insights, the study extends the body of knowledge by demonstrating that the human dimension trust, empathy, and contextual learning constitute the true infrastructure of digital transformation in complex and resource-constrained environments. The research outcomes confirm that successful transformation and innovation are not driven solely by technology or strategy but by relational leadership that connects people, culture, and purpose.

The research further contributes to theory by showing that alignment depends as much on human connection as on strategic intent. Strategic leaders achieve integration through empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence rather than formal control, positioning relational capability as the key mechanism that links digital transformation and innovation.

A further contribution lies in reframing ambiguity traditionally viewed as a barrier to productive and generative condition that fosters learning, creativity, and adaptability. This challenges conventional linear views of transformation and innovation, highlighting ambiguity as an essential context for discovery and reflection.

Finally, the study deepens understanding of leadership behaviour by illustrating that emotional intelligence and humility are not abstract ideals but essential tools for managing behavioural resistance, sustaining engagement, and embedding transformation into organisational culture. Collectively, these insights advance theory and practice by revealing that in the South African TCA context, strategic leadership's true leverage lies in its human-centred capacity to integrate innovation, digital transformation, and organisational learning to ensure long-term relevance and resilience.

#### 7.4. Recommendation for management and other stakeholders

Recommendations for management and other stakeholders are drawn directly from the theoretical conclusions, particularly where contextual nuances were identified. These recommendations are intended to guide management and relevant stakeholders in strengthening strategic leadership, with a specific focus on the role it plays in driving innovation through digital transformation. As the central research question is supported by three sub-questions, the recommendations are organised according to the structure of these sub-questions to ensure alignment and coherence.

##### **7.4.1. Recommendations for research sub-question 1: The role of strategic leaders**

Management should introduce innovation committees or cross-functional forums that allow employees at different levels to contribute ideas and take part in implementation. Such structures support collaboration, reduce fear, and encourage idea sharing across the organisation (Soto-Setzke et al., 2025; Ortner et al., 2025; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Benitez et al., 2022). Keeping these structures accessible to all levels within the organisation's structure and openness to all ideas is essential. Strategic leaders should sponsor these committees, but not use them as hierarchical or controlling spaces, as hierarchy was identified as one of the barriers to innovation and digital transition alongside of cultural resistance and fear of redundancy (Benitez et al., 2022)

##### **7.4.2. Recommendations for research sub-question 2: Competencies needed by strategic leaders**

Management should provide developmental programmes for leaders in sense-making, scenario thinking, and balancing stability with change. These capabilities assist leaders in guiding digital transformation in complex and unpredictable conditions (Van Doorn et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022).

These development programmes Management should prioritise skills required for digital transformation and innovation, including digital fluency, strategic thinking, cross-boundary collaboration, and the ability to coordinate diverse groups (Appio et al., 2021; Bresciani et al., 2021; Ortner et al., 2025).

Further, management should offer training that supports resilience through ongoing habits such as reflection, communication, and adaptive learning. These behaviours help leaders sustain transformation over time (Kurzhals et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022).

#### **7.4.3. Recommendations for research sub-question 3: Digital transformation**

Outdated systems and siloed processes should be addressed through phased modernisation supported by clear responsibility structures. Management should drive a phased strategy that helps organisations manage readiness and align technology decisions with organisational capacity (Soto-Setzke et al., 2021; Kiss et al., 2022; Lanzolla et al., 2021). Management should create environments where experimentation is encouraged, and failure is used for learning. Structured processes, such as cross-functional planning, shared scorecards, and participatory decision-making help align people, technology, and strategic objectives (Petzolt & Seckler, 2025). Productive use of ambiguity can support creativity and reflection in early transformation phases (Bresciani et al., 2021; Ortner et al., 2025).

#### **7.5. Limitation of the research**

This section acknowledges the limitations of the study as a whole, in addition to the methodological limitations discussed in Chapter 4.

Firstly, the study exclusively focused on the trade, catering and accommodation (TCA) sector and did not include small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs). While this allowed for a deep, context-specific analysis, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other sectors.

Secondly, the study centred on strategic leaders occupying roles at a particular organisational level. This focus restricts insight into how other leaders or followers across different organisational layers experience and enable innovation through digital transformation.

Thirdly, contextual nuances presented a wide range of factors within the South African environment that could not be fully explored. These contextual elements may influence how strategic leaders operate yet fell outside the study's immediate scope.

Lastly, the study did not examine the outcomes of innovation. The research focused on the mechanisms and roles of strategic leaders but did not assess how these practices translate into measurable innovation results.

## 7.6. Suggestion for future research

Several opportunities for future research emerge from the insights and even the limitations of this study.

Firstly, future studies could extend the inquiry to other sectors to determine whether similar or contrasting patterns exist in how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation. Further given the significance of SMMEs in the South African economy, examining how strategic leaders in these firms navigate innovation and digital transformation would provide valuable insight, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

Secondly, future studies should include employees at varying organisational levels, beyond strategic leaders, to explore how diverse roles contribute to innovation and digital transformation.

Thirdly, future research should explore the contextual nuances of South African strategic leadership, specifically relational, humanistic, and people-centred qualities and how these shape innovation and digital transformation practices.

Lastly, future research could investigate the outcomes of innovation by examining how the practices identified in this study translate into measurable results over time. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable, as they would allow researchers to track how innovation outcomes emerge and evolve across different stages of digital transformation.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix one: interview protocols

#### Interview protocol

##### [House Keeping Matters]

- Introduction; [Researcher and the study purpose and processes]
- Reminder confidential statement, data collection (either using Microsoft Teams or Zoom) and storage.
- Offer a definition of Innovation and Digital Transformation constructs.

“Before we begin, I’ll share the definitions of ‘innovation’ and ‘digital transformation’ as we’re using them in this study”

- Duration of the interview [between 60 and 90 minutes]

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Introduction</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please outline your current position and duties with your organisation.</li> <li>2. Have you been involved in any digital-enabled innovation initiative(s) within the Trade, Catering and Accommodation sector (Sector), and if so, in what capacity?</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                   |
| <p><i>Link to the study focus - Research Question 1: What roles do strategic leaders play in driving innovation through digital transformation?</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>3. Could you share an example of your involvement in driving innovation through digital transformation?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <p><b>*Prompts*</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Which digital transformation initiative did you lead, and how would you classify its type?</li> <li>3.2 When and why (challenges or opportunities) was this initiative undertaken?</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. My next question has two parts. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1 Firstly, how would you describe your leadership role (responsibilities and decision-making) before, during and after the initiative?”</li> <li>4.2 Secondly, Looking back, was there a key moment when things didn’t go as planned? What leadership-related factors contributed, and what lessons did you take away?</li> </ol> </li> </ol> |
| <p>5. How did you manage key decisions and critical actions during the transformation process?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p><i>Link to the study focus - Research Question 2: What strategic leader competencies are critical for digital transformation?</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6. From your experience, what competencies were essential for ensuring the success of digital transformation initiatives?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 7. How did these competencies differentiate you from other less involved or effective leaders in digital transformation?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>8. My next question is twofold.</p> <p>8.1 Were these competencies something you already possessed, or did you have to develop or adapt them specifically for digital transformation initiatives?</p> <p>8.2 Based on that, how did you engage and coordinate with internal and external stakeholders (such as partners, regulators or key customers) to bolster those competencies during the transformation?"</p> |
| <i>Link to the study focus - Research Question 3: How does digital transformation impact the way strategic leaders foster innovation?</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 9. How has digital transformation influenced your perspective or approach toward fostering innovation?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 10. Can you provide examples of innovation objectives that directly shaped digital transformation initiatives in your organisation?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 11. Based on your experience, what is the relationship between digital transformation and innovation? And what would be the strategic leader's role be in this relationship?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| End                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 12. In conclusion, how do you foresee the role of strategic leaders evolving in response to ongoing digital disruptions?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 13. Lastly, based on your experience, what advice would you offer emerging leaders to lead innovation in a digitally transformative environment effectively?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

## **Appendix two: proforma informed consent form**

### Proforma consent statement

I am conducting research on strategic leader's role in driving innovation through digital transformation. Our interview is expected to last a maximum 90 minutes and will help us understand how strategic leaders drive innovation through digital transformation. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. I would like to also inform you that any information shared in the interview will be kept confidential.

By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

1. The interview to be recorded;
2. The recording to be transcribed using online transcription;
3. Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation;
4. The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
5. All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name: xxx  
Waugh Email: 24124682@mygibs.co.za  
Phone: xxx

Research Supervisor name: Dr Bev  
Email: bev.waugh1@gmail.com  
Phone: xxx

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_

### Appendix three: code book from ATLAS.ti

| No. | Code                                                                                                                                           |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Accountability                                                                                                                                 |
| 2   | Adaptive and Influential Leadership Competence                                                                                                 |
| 3   | Adaptive correction after failure                                                                                                              |
| 4   | Advanced tech as catalyst                                                                                                                      |
| 5   | agile digital execution                                                                                                                        |
| 6   | Agile restructuring                                                                                                                            |
| 7   | AI tools                                                                                                                                       |
| 8   | Aligning funding, risk, and stakeholders                                                                                                       |
| 9   | Aligning investment priorities, change appetite, and capability development while engaging executives on investments, uplift, and productivity |
| 10  | aligning people, technology and investment                                                                                                     |
| 11  | Anchoring technology decisions in customer value and agility                                                                                   |
| 12  | Anticipatory leadership                                                                                                                        |
| 13  | Avoiding solution-driven innovation                                                                                                            |
| 14  | balanced leadership approach                                                                                                                   |
| 15  | balancing business needs with digital                                                                                                          |
| 16  | balancing investment with limitation                                                                                                           |
| 17  | Balancing regulatory compliance with customer experience                                                                                       |
| 18  | Balancing Technical and Human Capabilities                                                                                                     |
| 19  | Balancing transformation pace with organisational capacity                                                                                     |
| 20  | Boundary-spanning leadership                                                                                                                   |
| 21  | bridging digital and physical ecosystems                                                                                                       |
| 22  | Bridging technology and strategy                                                                                                               |
| 23  | Building momentum through consensus                                                                                                            |
| 24  | Building trust                                                                                                                                 |
| 25  | Challenges along the way                                                                                                                       |
| 26  | Challenging outdated practices                                                                                                                 |
| 27  | Change management and people skills, processes support                                                                                         |
| 28  | Change management proficiency                                                                                                                  |
| 29  | Commitment to lifelong learning                                                                                                                |
| 30  | Communication and Composure under pressure                                                                                                     |
| 31  | Communication the change                                                                                                                       |
| 32  | Competencies shaped by experience over time                                                                                                    |
| 33  | Competitive imitation and innovation response                                                                                                  |
| 34  | Conceptual ambiguity                                                                                                                           |
| 35  | Context leadership                                                                                                                             |
| 36  | Continuous learning and relevance                                                                                                              |
| 37  | Courageous decision-making                                                                                                                     |
| 38  | Creating value out of innovation                                                                                                               |
| 39  | Creative Team culture                                                                                                                          |
| 40  | Cross functional coordination and governance                                                                                                   |
| 41  | Cross-functional digital innovation hubs                                                                                                       |

|    |                                                                            |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 42 | Cultural impact                                                            |
| 43 | Curiosity as innovation enabler                                            |
| 44 | curious mindset                                                            |
| 45 | Customer facing focus                                                      |
| 46 | Cybersecurity and resilience focus                                         |
| 47 | Data fluency and agility in business model adaptation                      |
| 48 | Data governance and ethical AI use                                         |
| 49 | Data informed decision frameworks                                          |
| 50 | Decentralisation an ego drive silo                                         |
| 51 | Delivery leader                                                            |
| 52 | Design thinking                                                            |
| 53 | Digitalisation application                                                 |
| 54 | Digital transformation                                                     |
| 55 | digital as enabler of collaborative innovation                             |
| 56 | digital fluency and agility in business model. adaptation                  |
| 57 | Digital influenced innovation                                              |
| 58 | Digital Innovation as a Subset of Broader Innovation                       |
| 59 | Digital interaction replacing physical engagement                          |
| 60 | Digital investment to business value creation                              |
| 61 | Digital literacy and fluency                                               |
| 62 | Digital maturity and innovation readiness                                  |
| 63 | Digital relevance in traditional sectors                                   |
| 64 | digital tools                                                              |
| 65 | Digital transformation                                                     |
| 66 | Digital Transformation as a Catalyst for Innovation                        |
| 67 | Digital transformation as the cornerstone of modern business               |
| 68 | Digital transformation drives innovation                                   |
| 69 | Digital transformation is responding:                                      |
| 70 | Digitalisation applications                                                |
| 71 | Digitisation factors                                                       |
| 72 | Digitisation driven by necessity, not innovation                           |
| 73 | disruption of customer experience as innovation accelerator                |
| 74 | Digital enabled decision making                                            |
| 75 | Digital investment to business value creation                              |
| 76 | Digital Transformation leadership                                          |
| 77 | Drawing on pre-existing competencies                                       |
| 78 | Drive the business                                                         |
| 79 | DT across organisational boundaries                                        |
| 80 | DT as an ongoing journey                                                   |
| 81 | Dynamic digital responsiveness                                             |
| 82 | Empathy in leadership                                                      |
| 83 | Emphasises human oversight and authenticity in digital systems             |
| 84 | Enabling others' strengths                                                 |
| 85 | Ensuring inventory visibility, loyalty personalisation, and AI integration |
| 86 | Ethical and responsible leadership                                         |
| 87 | Exercising judgment to balance quality and speed of delivery               |
| 88 | Experimentation mindset                                                    |

|     |                                                                                                      |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 89  | External crisis as catalyst for digital acceleration                                                 |
| 90  | Facilitative leadership                                                                              |
| 91  | Fear of redundancy                                                                                   |
| 92  | Focus over frenzy                                                                                    |
| 93  | Fostering curiosity and learning                                                                     |
| 94  | Fostering psychological safety                                                                       |
| 95  | Getting entire organisation onboard                                                                  |
| 96  | Human and cultural transformation                                                                    |
| 97  | Human centred digitalisation                                                                         |
| 98  | Human centred leadership in digitalisation                                                           |
| 99  | Humility in leadership                                                                               |
| 100 | Implementation vs creation                                                                           |
| 101 | Influence both directions                                                                            |
| 102 | Influencing and persuasive strategic communication                                                   |
| 103 | Infrastructure supported success                                                                     |
| 104 | Innovation through automation                                                                        |
| 105 | Innovation ahead of organisational systems                                                           |
| 106 | Innovation as adaptive response                                                                      |
| 107 | Innovation beyond digital transformation                                                             |
| 108 | Innovation capability maturity                                                                       |
| 109 | Innovation diffusion & adoption                                                                      |
| 110 | Innovation drives digital transformation but also exists independently in product and service design |
| 111 | Innovation drives digital transformation                                                             |
| 112 | Innovation ecosystem                                                                                 |
| 113 | Innovation failures and learning                                                                     |
| 114 | Innovation imbalance                                                                                 |
| 115 | Innovation is not a once off or novels                                                               |
| 116 | Innovation not necessary digital                                                                     |
| 117 | Innovation through participation                                                                     |
| 118 | Innovation-driven digital adoption                                                                   |
| 119 | Integration of AI and data analytics                                                                 |
| 120 | integration online and physical                                                                      |
| 121 | Internal and External customer focus                                                                 |
| 122 | Internet of things                                                                                   |
| 123 | Intertwine Digital transformation and Innovation                                                     |
| 124 | Investment limitation to innovate                                                                    |
| 125 | Iterative and learning-oriented leadership                                                           |
| 126 | Iterative innovation approach                                                                        |
| 127 | Keeping humans in the loop to preserve authenticity during digitalisation                            |
| 128 | Knowing when to act                                                                                  |
| 129 | Knowing when to innovate and adapt to emerging trends                                                |
| 130 | Lack of right skills                                                                                 |
| 131 | Lead Negotiation                                                                                     |
| 132 | Leaders must remain relevant by staying at the cutting edge of digital, mobile, and AI               |
| 133 | Leadership driving innovation                                                                        |

|     |                                                                                                                            |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 134 | Leadership effectiveness learned through lived experience                                                                  |
| 135 | Leadership learned through experience, not formal education                                                                |
| 136 | Leadership mindset over technology                                                                                         |
| 137 | Leading and legitimising digital change                                                                                    |
| 138 | Leading from the front or back as context demands                                                                          |
| 139 | Leading through influence                                                                                                  |
| 140 | Leading without a title                                                                                                    |
| 141 | Lean implementation mindset                                                                                                |
| 142 | Lean teams                                                                                                                 |
| 143 | Learn as your competencies                                                                                                 |
| 144 | learning from adversity                                                                                                    |
| 145 | Legacy technology limitation                                                                                               |
| 146 | Limited financial resources for transformation                                                                             |
| 147 | Listening and finding common ground in collaboration                                                                       |
| 148 | Managing complexity in legacy systems                                                                                      |
| 149 | Managing stakeholder alignment                                                                                             |
| 150 | measurement of outcomes                                                                                                    |
| 151 | mentorship and coaching for innovation                                                                                     |
| 152 | Mismatch goal and innovation                                                                                               |
| 153 | Mismatch strategy, opportunities and risk                                                                                  |
| 154 | multipurpose innovation response                                                                                           |
| 155 | Multi-portfolio strategic coordination                                                                                     |
| 156 | Navigating complexity while providing direction                                                                            |
| 157 | Negotiation and influence                                                                                                  |
| 158 | Operational environment                                                                                                    |
| 159 | Orchestration of cross-functional teams                                                                                    |
| 160 | Overlapping transformation challenges                                                                                      |
| 161 | Pandemic as catalyst                                                                                                       |
| 162 | Performance efficiency                                                                                                     |
| 163 | Performing organisational redesign                                                                                         |
| 164 | personal traits                                                                                                            |
| 165 | Political acumen / navigating power dynamics                                                                               |
| 166 | Pre deductive tools                                                                                                        |
| 167 | Project Manager                                                                                                            |
| 168 | re-engineering with digital transformation                                                                                 |
| 169 | Redefining Innovation in Everyday Practice                                                                                 |
| 170 | Reflective course correction                                                                                               |
| 171 | Reframing organisational purpose                                                                                           |
| 172 | Relationship centred leadership                                                                                            |
| 173 | Releasing functional but imperfect solutions to maintain delivery momentum                                                 |
| 174 | relevance drives resistance                                                                                                |
| 175 | Remote coordination under time pressure                                                                                    |
| 176 | Reorganising teams into agile sprints and high-velocity builds requiring changes to people, structures, and infrastructure |
| 177 | Research and development                                                                                                   |
| 178 | Research focus                                                                                                             |

|     |                                                                       |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 179 | Resilience                                                            |
| 180 | Resilience and adaptability in digital leadership                     |
| 181 | resilience, self-belief, capable teams, and stakeholder management    |
| 182 | Resilient and composed leadership                                     |
| 183 | Resilient and self-believing leadership                               |
| 184 | resistance to change                                                  |
| 185 | Resource brokerage                                                    |
| 186 | Resource constraints                                                  |
| 187 | Restructuring teams into scaled Agile cross-functional product squads |
| 188 | Results focused leadership                                            |
| 189 | Rethinking and reframing digital transformation strategies            |
| 190 | Rethinking digital transformation strategies                          |
| 191 | Return on investment                                                  |
| 192 | Risk Management                                                       |
| 193 | ROI assessment for DT-innovation interplay                            |
| 194 | Role modelling learning behaviour                                     |
| 195 | setbacks                                                              |
| 196 | Situational leadership                                                |
| 197 | speed responses and deliverable                                       |
| 198 | Stakeholder management                                                |
| 199 | Strategic alignment through dialogue                                  |
| 200 | Strategic and technical leadership role                               |
| 201 | Strategic Direction                                                   |
| 202 | Strategic foresights                                                  |
| 203 | Strategic integration of digital technologies                         |
| 204 | Strategic purpose                                                     |
| 205 | Structured problem-solving approach                                   |
| 206 | Sustained leadership agility                                          |
| 207 | systemically thinking                                                 |
| 208 | Technology as customer value enabler                                  |
| 209 | Technology-induced change in decision-making                          |
| 210 | Technology–people–process alignment                                   |
| 211 | think differently                                                     |
| 212 | Transformation that is not just a tool                                |
| 213 | Translating technology into strategy                                  |
| 214 | Transparent error culture                                             |
| 215 | Trust and adaptability in stakeholder engagement                      |
| 216 | Types of innovation                                                   |
| 217 | Unclear definition of Innovation                                      |
| 218 | Understanding business context before innovating                      |
| 219 | Understanding data analytics                                          |
| 220 | Unified customer data ecosystems                                      |
| 221 | Unintended innovation outcomes                                        |
| 222 | Updating legacy ERP systems to support modern architecture            |
| 223 | Value-Based Leadership                                                |
| 224 | Values-driven and execution-focused leadership                        |
| 225 | Vision coherence                                                      |

|     |                            |
|-----|----------------------------|
| 226 | vision focus               |
| 227 | Visioning and sense-making |
| 228 | What makes innovation      |

## Appendix four: ethical clearance approval

