LEADERSHIP AND THE ADOPTION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract
This study examines the role of leadership in the adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in organizations, focusing on leadership competencies that facilitate successful AI implementation and how leadership influences employees' readiness and attitudes toward AI technologies. The study adopts a qualitative, conceptual approach based on secondary data obtained from relevant scholarly literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes across studies. Findings reveal that leadership competencies such as digital literacy, strategic vision, communication skills, adaptability, and ethical awareness are critical for successful AI implementation. The study further shows that leadership significantly influences employees' readiness and attitudes toward AI through communication, training, and organizational support. Employees are more likely to accept AI when they perceive it as useful and when leaders actively guide the transformation process. The study concludes that leadership is a key determinant of successful AI adoption in organizations. It recommends leadership capacity development, structured change management, employee training, and ethical governance to enhance AI integration.

Key words: *Leadership; Artificial Intelligence; AI Adoption; Digital Transformation; Leadership Competencies; Employee Readiness.*

Introduction

The rapid advancement and implementation of AI technologies in organizational contexts have transformed traditional leadership paradigms, demanding leaders to rethink how AI and human intelligence work together. AI is no longer just a tool but an integral element that can augment human creativity, decision-making, and innovation, making leadership pivotal in bridging the gap between technological capabilities and strategic goals. Leaders now face the challenge of cultivating an AI-first mindset among their teams, encouraging experimentation, learning, and adaptation to unlock AI's full potential. Moreover, leadership significantly influences the interaction between human intelligence and AI by serving as an ethical and strategic mediator, ensuring AI-

powered systems include human judgment and ethical oversight in decision-making processes (). This interaction forms a hybrid space of cooperation where automated decisions are contextualized through human reasoning, establishing governance mechanisms that balance algorithmic efficiency with ethical imperatives.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is also rapidly transforming how organizations operate, make decisions, and deliver value. Beyond automation, AI provides powerful tools for data-driven strategy, prediction, and enhanced productivity (Parviainen et al., 2020). However, the successful adoption of AI technologies requires more than technical competence it demands visionary and adaptive leadership that can align people, processes, and technology (Northouse, 2022). Leadership bridges the gap between technological innovation and human adaptation. Effective leaders articulate a clear vision of how AI can improve performance, motivate teams to embrace new technologies, and ensure ethical implementation (Kaufman & Horton, 2023). Conversely, poor leadership can stall digital initiatives, generate employee resistance, and create organizational silos that impede innovation.

In today's digital economy, AI is not just a technological shift but a cultural one, redefining leadership itself. The emergence of AI challenges traditional command-and-control leadership models, replacing them with collaborative and learning-oriented approaches. Zhang and Berente (2022) emphasize that leaders must develop a "digital mindset" a capacity to see AI as an opportunity rather than a threat. This involves promoting experimentation, transparency, and continuous learning within teams. Despite global advances, many organizations especially in developing economies struggle to align leadership and AI adoption. Hassan (2024) notes that in the Nigerian business ecosystem, leadership awareness, digital literacy, and strategic communication are major determinants of AI implementation. Similarly, Ola-Oluwa (2024) finds that when leaders invest in digital competence and employee engagement, AI projects yield higher efficiency and organizational learning. This study therefore explores how leadership influences the adoption of AI in organizations. It examines the relationship between leadership behavior and the success of AI integration, focusing on competencies, readiness, and strategic alignment as key enablers of digital transformation.

Statement of the Problem

The growing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in organizations has been widely recognized as a critical driver of efficiency, innovation, and competitive advantage. Despite these potential benefits, many organizations continue to experience challenges in successfully implementing AI technologies. Evidence from existing studies suggests

that a significant number of AI initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes due to organizational and human-related factors rather than technological limitations (Bughin et al., 2018). One major challenge lies in the role of leadership in driving AI adoption. While leadership is acknowledged as a key factor in organizational transformation, there remains limited clarity on the specific competencies required for effective AI implementation. Many organizational leaders lack the necessary digital skills, strategic vision, and change management capabilities needed to guide AI integration successfully (Westerman, Bonnet, & McAfee, 2014). As a result, AI initiatives are often poorly aligned with organizational goals, leading to underutilization or outright failure. This gap raises concerns about the extent to which leadership competencies actually facilitate successful AI implementation. In addition to leadership challenges, employees' readiness and attitudes toward AI technologies present another significant problem.

Objectives

The general objective is to examine how leadership influences the adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in organizations in this digital transformation era. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the leadership competencies that facilitate successful AI implementation.
2. Assess how leadership influences employees' readiness and attitudes toward AI technologies.

Research Questions

The following research questions are derived from the objectives of the study:

1. What leadership competencies facilitate the successful implementation of Artificial Intelligence in organizations?
2. How does leadership influence employees' readiness and attitudes toward the adoption of Artificial Intelligence technologies?

Literature Review

Leadership

Leadership, within the context of artificial intelligence (AI) adoption, refers to the ability of organizational leaders to influence, guide, and direct employees and organizational processes toward the successful integration and utilization of AI technologies. It goes beyond traditional notions of supervision and control to include strategic visioning, change facilitation, and the management of technological transformation. In this regard, leadership is not only about achieving organizational goals but also about shaping how employees perceive, accept, and engage with emerging technologies. Scholars have long defined leadership as a process of influence through which an individual guides others toward the attainment of shared goals (Northouse, 2019).

However, in the era of AI and digital transformation, leadership takes on a more dynamic and adaptive role. Leaders are required to interpret technological trends, align them with organizational objectives, and prepare employees for the resulting changes. This aligns with the view of leadership as a transformative process that enables organizations to respond effectively to environmental uncertainties and innovations (Yukl, 2013). Effective leadership ensures that AI is not perceived as a threat but as an opportunity for organizational growth and individual development (Vial, 2019). This is particularly important given that AI technologies often disrupt established workflows and raise concerns about job security and role changes.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the capability of machines to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, and problem-solving. AI technologies including machine learning, natural language processing, and robotics are transforming organizational processes and decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2021). The adoption of AI represents a fundamental shift in how organizations operate. According to Erik Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2017), AI enables organizations to enhance productivity, improve service delivery, and gain competitive advantage. However, successful adoption depends not only on technology but also on leadership and organizational readiness.

Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Organizations

AI adoption involves integrating intelligent technologies into decision-making, production, and service delivery. Successful adoption depends on the alignment

between technological goals and leadership strategy (Parviainen et al., 2020). Kaufman and Horton (2023) observe that leaders with strong digital vision guide organizations through data-driven transformation by aligning AI initiatives with corporate objectives. Empirical research in developing contexts has reinforced this relationship. Hassan (2024) found that leadership support, communication, and awareness significantly influence AI integration outcomes. Likewise, Ola-Oluwa (2024) reported that organizations with proactive and participatory leaders demonstrate higher AI readiness and innovation capacity. Leadership thus functions not only as a strategic enabler but also as a psychological catalyst for digital transformation.

Leadership Competencies for AI Implementation

Leadership competence for AI implementation encompasses the skills, knowledge, and attributes leaders need to effectively guide their organizations through AI adoption and integration. This competence ensures that leaders can navigate the technological, human, and strategic complexities of AI implementation The AI era demands new leadership competencies that combine strategic thinking with digital intelligence. Zhang and Berente (2022) identify three key competencies: technological foresight, emotional intelligence, and ethical judgment. Leaders must anticipate how AI reshapes organizational dynamics, manage human-machine collaboration, and maintain ethical integrity.

According to Kaufman and Horton (2023), leaders with a digital mindset promote experimentation, data literacy, and resilience in their teams. Transformational and servant leadership styles encourage open communication and trust, helping employees adapt to AI systems more positively. These competencies differentiate leaders who thrive in the digital era from those who resist or misunderstand technological change. Some of the Core Competences for AI Leadership Technological Understanding are: Leaders must have a foundational knowledge of AI technologies, capabilities, and limitations. This understanding helps in making informed decisions, setting realistic expectations, and aligning AI solutions with business needs.

Employee Readiness and Attitude Towards AI.

Employee readiness and attitude towards AI adoption in organizations are critical factors that determine the success of AI integration. Employee Readiness for AI refers to how prepared employees are to accept, use, and benefit from AI technologies. This readiness depends on several factors:

AI Literacy and Training: Employees need training to understand AI tools and interpret AI-generated insights correctly. upskilling efforts, certification programs, and

hands-on projects enhance confidence and competence in AI use.

Data-Driven Culture: Organizations fostering data-driven decision-making encourage employees to trust AI outputs and incorporate them in their work processes.

According to Choi (2021), He stated that higher-level employees have been found to have a better understanding of the merits and functionalities of AI- which automatically enhances their degree of acceptance of the same. Conversely, lower-level employees lack acceptance of AI-, as they are more likely to face uncertainties in decision-making, which increases their resistance to AI. Velanganni and Bhuvaneswari (2024) noted that higher-level employees, particularly managerial staff, are more likely to prefer and accept AI-driven employee management systems because these systems reduce their workload and simplify workforce management. Conversely, employees at lower levels may require additional training and reassurance regarding the implications of AI on their roles, which can influence their overall acceptance. Madan and Ashok (2023) highlighted that higher-level employees associate the use of AI-driven performance evaluations with transparency and fairness, while lower-level employees perceive AI-based target setting as rigid and impersonal. Engaging employees at all levels in AI implementation increases acceptance and ownership.: Leaders who provide vision, motivation, and personalized support help employees adjust positively.

Leadership Influence on Employees Readiness

Leadership influence on employees' readiness is a critical construct in understanding how organizations successfully adopt innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). It refers to the extent to which leadership behaviours, styles, and actions shape employees' psychological and behavioural preparedness to accept and implement organizational change. Employees' readiness encompasses their beliefs, attitudes, and intentions toward change, which are significantly influenced by leadership practices within the organization (Armenakis et al., 1993; Holt et al., 2007). Employees' readiness for change is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components. Cognitively, employees must perceive the change as necessary and beneficial; emotionally, they must feel confident and less anxious about the change; and behaviourally, they must demonstrate willingness to support and engage with the new system (Weiner, 2009).

In the context of AI adoption, readiness includes employees' acceptance of AI-driven tools, willingness to acquire new digital skills, and confidence in interacting with intelligent systems, alongside reduced fears related to job insecurity and technological complexity. Leadership fosters readiness by shaping how employees interpret and

respond to change initiatives as well as through trust-building and social exchange processes.). Trust in leadership reduces employees' fear of the unknown, particularly in the adoption of disruptive technologies such as AI, where concerns about job displacement and role ambiguity are prevalent (Rafferty et al., 2013).

Theoretical underpinning

The study is anchored on Transformational Leadership theory which highlights the role of leaders in inspiring change. Transformational leadership theory is central to understanding leadership's role in AI adoption in organizations. Transformational Leadership Theory was developed by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard M. Bass (1985). The theory explains how leaders inspire and motivate followers to achieve exceptional performance by transforming their attitudes, beliefs, and values toward organizational goals. The theory emphasizes that effective leaders go beyond transactional exchanges and instead focus on inspiring change, fostering innovation, and developing employees.

Application of Theory to the Study

Transformational Leadership Theory is highly relevant in explaining how leadership behavior influences the successful adoption of AI. It facilitates AI adoption by creating a compelling vision that highlights the benefits of AI for improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Through inspirational motivation, leaders communicate the importance of AI and align it with organizational goals, thereby encouraging employees to embrace technological change. Idealized influence helps to build trust and confidence among employees, reducing resistance and uncertainty associated with AI implementation.

Furthermore, through intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders encourage employees to explore innovative ways of utilizing AI systems and to develop problem-solving skills necessary for adapting to new technologies. This fosters a culture of continuous learning and innovation, which is essential for effective AI integration. Individualized consideration ensures that employees receive adequate support, training, and mentoring, enabling them to overcome skill gaps and adjust to the demands of AI-driven work environments. Therefore, Transformational Leadership Theory provides a strong foundation for this study, as it explains how leadership behaviors can enhance employees' willingness to accept and effectively utilize artificial intelligence. By promoting trust, innovation, and employee development, transformational leaders significantly contribute to the successful implementation of AI in organizations.

Empirical Review

A more recent study by Jöhnk et al. (2021) revealed that leadership support and communication significantly enhance employees' readiness for AI adoption. The study concluded that when leaders clearly communicate the benefits and provide training, employees develop more positive attitudes toward AI. Despite the growing body of literature, several gaps remain: Most studies are conducted in developed countries, with limited focus on developing contexts such as Nigeria. Few studies integrate leadership competencies and employee readiness within a single framework. Therefore, the study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the role of leadership competencies in AI adoption in the area of Assessing how leadership influences employees' readiness and attitudes.

Ransbotham et al. (2020), in a study by MIT Sloan Management Review, found that organizations deriving value from AI are those where leaders actively promote AI strategies and invest in employee development. This suggests that leadership is not just supportive but instrumental in AI success.

In a related study, Tarafdar et al. (2019) examined the impact of leadership on employees' response to technological change and found that supportive leadership reduces technostress and increases technology acceptance. Employees were more willing to adopt new systems when leaders provided guidance and reassurance.

A study by Bughin et al. (2018) found that organizations with digitally competent leaders are more likely to achieve successful AI integration. The study revealed that leaders who possess technological awareness and strategic vision are better positioned to align AI initiatives with organizational goals.

Similarly, Westerman, Bonnet, and McAfee (2014) examined digital transformation across global firms and found that leadership capability is a key determinant of technological success. Their findings indicate that organizations with strong digital leadership outperform others in adopting emerging technologies, including AI. In another study, Kane et al. (2019) reported that leadership readiness, particularly in terms of innovation orientation and adaptability, significantly predicts the success of digital transformation initiatives. The study emphasized that leaders who encourage experimentation and learning create an enabling environment for AI adoption.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically a systematic literature review design, to examine the role of leadership in the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in organizations. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how leadership influences AI adoption, rather than to establish statistical relationships. The systematic literature review design ensures a structured, transparent, and replicable process of identifying, selecting, and analyzing relevant scholarly works, thereby enhancing the rigor and credibility of the study. Data for the study were derived from secondary sources obtained from reputable academic databases; The study followed a systematic process of literature selection. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Overall, this methodology provides a robust and systematic framework for examining the role of transformational leadership in the adoption of artificial intelligence in organizations, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the study.

Results

Theme 1: Leadership Competencies Facilitating Successful AI Implementation

The thematic analysis identified six core leadership competencies that recur prominently across the reviewed literature as critical for successful AI implementation. These are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Leadership Competencies for AI Implementation

Leadership Competency	Role in AI Adoption	Key Sources
Digital Literacy	Foundational AI knowledge enabling sound decision-making, realistic goal-setting, and technology-strategy alignment.	Bughin et al. (2018); Parviainen et al. (2020); Hassan (2024)
Strategic Vision	Aligning AI initiatives with organizational goals; communicating a clear roadmap and sustaining momentum.	Kaufman & Horton (2023); Westerman et al. (2014)
Communication Skills	Articulating AI benefits to employees; sustaining motivation; enabling two-way feedback throughout adoption.	Hassan (2024); Jöhnk et al. (2021)
Adaptability / Change Management	Managing resistance, restructuring workflows, and guiding iterative AI deployments without destabilising operations.	Kane et al. (2019); Zhang & Berente (2022)

Leadership Competency	Role in AI Adoption	Key Sources
Ethical Awareness	Establishing governance, ensuring transparency, and balancing algorithmic efficiency with human values.	Zhang & Berente (2022); Northouse (2022)
Collaborative Capacity	Fostering cross-functional teams and human-machine collaboration to optimise AI outcomes.	Ola-Oluwa (2024); Ransbotham et al. (2020)

Source: Compiled by the authors from reviewed literature (2018–2024)

Digital literacy emerged as the most foundational competency. Bughin et al. (2018) and Parviainen et al. (2020) consistently found that organizations with digitally literate leaders are significantly more likely to achieve successful AI integration. In the Nigerian context, Hassan (2024) similarly found leadership awareness and digital literacy to be primary determinants of AI implementation success. Strategic vision was equally prominent: Kaufman and Horton (2023) established that leaders with strong digital vision effectively guide organizations by aligning AI initiatives with corporate objectives, while Westerman et al. (2014) found that strong digital leadership is associated with superior technology adoption outcomes. Communication skills were identified as a critical bridge between AI strategy and employee understanding leaders who communicate benefits openly and maintain transparency significantly enhance employee readiness (Jöhnk et al., 2021). Adaptability and change management were also consistently cited, with Kane et al. (2019) reporting that leaders who encourage experimentation create an enabling environment for AI adoption. Ethical awareness was identified as increasingly critical, with Zhang and Berente (2022) identifying ethical judgment as one of three key leadership competencies for the AI era, alongside technological foresight and emotional intelligence.

Theme 2: Employee Readiness and Attitudes Toward AI Technologies

Employee readiness is multidimensional, shaped by cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components, each significantly mediated by leadership behaviour. Table 2 summarizes the readiness dimensions identified from the literature.

Table 2: Employee Readiness Dimensions and Leadership Implications

Readiness Dimension	Influencing Factor	Implication for AI Adoption
Cognitive	Perceived usefulness; AI literacy	Employees who understand AI's utility are significantly more likely to accept it (Davis, 1989; Choi, 2021).
Emotional	Job security fears; technostress; leadership reassurance	Leaders who proactively address anxieties and provide emotional support reduce resistance substantially (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Brougham & Haar, 2020).
Behavioural	Training participation; data-driven culture	Structured AI training and data-driven cultures foster higher adoption rates and lower withdrawal intentions (Jöhnk et al., 2021; Ola-Oluwa, 2024).
Hierarchical	Managerial acceptance vs. frontline resistance	Senior staff exhibit greater acceptance due to strategic awareness; frontline employees require additional training and involvement (Choi, 2021; Velanganni & Bhuvaneswari, 2024).

Source: Compiled by the authors from reviewed literature

Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model established that perceived usefulness is the primary driver of cognitive readiness. Choi (2021) extended this in the AI context, finding that higher-level employees exhibit greater acceptance due to better comprehension of AI functionalities. Emotional readiness is challenged by job security fears and technostress: Brougham and Haar (2020) found technological disruption is associated with increased job insecurity and turnover intentions, while Madan and Ashok (2023) found that lower-level employees perceive AI-based evaluations as rigid and impersonal. Behavioural readiness is most directly addressed through structured training. Jöhnk et al. (2021) found that targeted training significantly increases confidence and competence, while Ola-Oluwa (2024) found that participatory leaders generate notably higher AI readiness and innovation capacity. Hierarchical differences in acceptance were also significant — Velanganni and Bhuvaneswari (2024) found managerial staff more receptive, while frontline employees require additional training and direct leadership engagement.

Theme 3: Leadership Influence on Employees' Readiness

The literature consistently demonstrates that leadership behaviors translate into heightened employee readiness through four key mechanisms. First, communication is the most potent mechanism: Jöhnk et al. (2021) found that clear leadership communication about AI benefits produces markedly more positive employee attitudes,

while Hassan (2024) corroborated that strategic communication is a significant predictor of AI adoption outcomes in the Nigerian context. Second, leadership-sponsored training is the most direct pathway to behavioural readiness. Ransbotham et al. (2020) found that organizations deriving maximum value from AI actively invest in employee development, and Tarafdar et al. (2019) found that supportive leadership reduces technostress and increases acceptance. Third, organizational support through trust-building significantly reduces employees' fear of disruption: Vial (2019) found that transformational leaders who foster trust and openness make employees markedly more receptive to AI, while Rafferty et al. (2013) identified trust in leadership as key to reducing fear of role ambiguity. Fourth, participatory leadership fosters employee ownership of the adoption process — Ola-Oluwa (2024) reported that organizations with participatory leaders achieve higher AI readiness and reduce resistance substantially.

Theme 4: Transformational Leadership as an Enabler of AI Adoption

Transformational leadership emerged across the reviewed literature as the most effective approach for facilitating AI adoption. Its four dimensions each play distinct roles: idealized influence builds trust and reduces resistance; inspirational motivation enables leaders to articulate a compelling AI vision and align it with organizational purpose, which Bass and Riggio (2021) affirm is central to mobilizing commitment; intellectual stimulation encourages employees to explore innovative AI applications and fosters a culture of continuous learning; and individualized consideration provides employees with tailored support to overcome AI-specific competency gaps. Northouse (2022) confirms that transformational leaders reshape employees' beliefs and organizational identity, embedding AI as integral to the organization's future rather than merely incentivizing technology use.

Theme 5: Barriers and Facilitators of AI Adoption

Key barriers identified included: poor digital literacy among leaders (Bughin et al., 2018); employee resistance driven by job security fears and technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2019); absence of structured change management strategies (Kane et al., 2019); lack of ethical governance frameworks (Zhang & Berente, 2022); and inadequate training investments for frontline staff (Jöhnk et al., 2021). **Key facilitators** included: leadership digital literacy and strategic goal alignment (Kaufman & Horton, 2023); clear and consistent communication about AI benefits (Hassan, 2024); structured role-specific employee training (Ransbotham et al., 2020); a data-driven organizational culture (Ola-Oluwa, 2024); and ethical governance frameworks that build trust across organizational levels (Zhang & Berente, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Leadership is the cornerstone of successful AI adoption. While technology provides the tools, leadership provides the vision, culture, and ethical direction necessary to harness AI effectively. Successful AI adoption in organizations hinges on the dynamic interplay between leadership competence and employee readiness. Leaders equipped with relevant AI-related competencies such as technological understanding, strategic vision, change management skills, ethical responsibility, and collaborative capacity are essential to guiding organizations through AI integration. They set the vision, ease transitions, foster trust, and create an environment conducive to innovation and ethical AI use. Simultaneously, employee readiness and positive attitudes towards AI are critical determinants of adoption success. Employees need adequate training, clear communication, and reassurance to overcome fears related to job security, privacy, and complexity. Cultivating a data-driven culture and involving employees in the AI journey enhance acceptance and reduce resistance

Leadership competence directly influences employee readiness by shaping organizational culture, providing motivational support, managing change effectively, and embedding ethical standards in AI utilization. Conversely, employee readiness reinforces leadership efforts by turning AI initiatives into actionable outcomes through engagement and adaptive learning. Therefore, the integration of strong leadership competence and heightened employee readiness creates a synergistic effect that maximizes the potential benefits of AI adoption. The study recommends that leadership capacity development, structured change management, employee training and ethical governance will help to enhance AI integration.

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