



Exploring the Effects of Digital Transformation From A Dual (Internal vs. External) Marketing Management Perspective

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Appendix

Table 1 - Sample quotas related to each discussed topic, grouped by the classification criteria (Internal Vs. External marketing management)

Criteria	Topic	Code	Gender	Age	Interview duration	Quotas
Internal marketing management	Organizational nature of digital transition, and diffusion of a new “digital culture”	R3	M	52	60 minutes	“... employees, used to carry out their duties in a certain way, had to upset most of their daily activities and seemed afraid of our proposal regarding a new tool to digitalize the processes”
		R2	M	48	80 minutes	“...however, there were some individuals who did not positively accept the change and tried to hinder the use of the new tools by absent or not participating in training sessions”
		R4	M	35	60 minutes	“... it has been an obligatory and necessary step to streamline processes within a single corporate vision and adapt to the changing needs of the market and competitors; however, it was necessary to convince everyone of the goodness of such change”
	New management skills and “e-leadership”	R3	M	52	60 minutes	“...it was necessary to promote a new corporate culture and make certain roles responsible [...]. The effort was positive also thanks to those individuals who immediately promoted this initiative and contributed to accelerating and stimulating with the other, the acceptance process of the new digital tools”
		R6	M	34	55 minutes	“...current efforts are directed at recruiting or training people with more managerial than technical skills, with strong leadership, capable of guiding the change required by top management and making it “digestible” to all our employees with the hope of gain new motivation from them, encouraging them to feel part of the change, rather than an obstacle”
		R8	F	54	70 minutes	“...Figures able to help spread a new vision are necessary, also able to recognize the best of each in the current organization in order to make the most of it in an integrated growth process”

Criteria	Topic	Code	Gender	Age	Interview duration	Quotas
		R8	F	54	70 minutes	“ [...] new operating methods should be experimented, also with the aim of enhancing the skills of each and the best results obtainable even with the risk of making mistakes and starting from scratch”
		R2	M	48	80 minutes	“The new involved figures should follow a holistic approach, able to explode the benefits brought outwards, thus managing to place the company in a more competitive position than in the past”
External marketing management	Digital transition as production and service delivery process accelerator	R2	M	48	80 minutes	“[...] it is necessary to propose a workflow different from the past ones, and thus also contribute positively to the guarantees regarding the quality of the service provided”
		R8	F	54	70 minutes	“...the integration of monitoring devices in the service delivery phases, have allowed a speeding up of activities and a higher quality of the final result”
		R1	M	49	50 minutes	“optimization of working times, reduced data entry and computerization of processes [...] and then, improved operations as in the interfacing between company functions and with third parties involved in the processes”
		R2	M	48	80 minutes	“the large amount of data collected with the introduction of the Business Intelligence system implemented, has allowed analyzes never carried out before, and has sparked the desire to analyze the business more deeply”
		R8	F	54	70 minutes	“...on addition to e-leadership skills, however, the recruiting campaigns are aimed at attracting young specialized talents interested in the world of digital and data who can “have fun” with them in proposing reports, manipulating, or “playing” with data even with a certain degree of imagination and creativity”
		R3	M	52	60 minutes	“...just during the pandemic, having started a digital transformation process allowed us on the one hand to speed up the process since being connected online was the only way to work and on the other, to reach goals faster than other companies”

Criteria	Topic	Code	Gender	Age	Interview duration	Quotas
		R2	M	48	80 minutes	"...paradoxically, the most hostile employees to our growth paths changed their minds during the pandemic, recognizing and touching the benefits of digital technology and welcoming it into their daily working life"
	Digital as competitive strategies accelerator	R3	M	52	60 minutes	"...it was possible to face the competition with new tools and new products, able to make us preferable again on the market"
		R5	M	61	50 minutes	"... we have been recognized as innovative and our customers have appreciated our new proposition, which however involved important efforts in the planning and design phases"

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper sheds light on the factors facilitating the Digital Transformation (DT) of companies, examining the empirical evidence according to a new and original dual lens: the internal and external marketing management perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – Through an explorative research design based on semi-structured interviews, we investigate the perceptions of some managers involved in managing the DT of their own companies.

Findings – Findings, organized from an internal and external marketing perspective, show how DT requires efforts in nurturing: (i) its organizational and cultural nature; (ii) new managerial skills and e-leadership. These factors activate DT as an accelerator of: (iii) production processes and service provision and (iv) competitive strategies.

Practical implications – Our findings underscore critical practical implications for organizations embarking on a DT journey. Firstly, managers should prioritize creating a culture that encourages employees to embrace change and technology. Secondly, recognizing the importance of new managerial skills and e-leadership, managers need to invest in developing the expertise to effectively lead DT efforts. The related skills encompass digital literacy, change management, and the ability to inspire and guide teams through the complexities of a DT.

Originality – This paper suggests that organizations should holistically approach DT, focusing on culture, leadership, and strategic deployment of digital tools. The proposed dual lens offers a valuable and simple answer for academics and practitioners to effectively frame the internal dynamics and external factors shaping DT.

Keywords

Digitalization; Digital transformation; Organizational Change; Resistance to Change; E-leadership; Competitiveness; internal marketing management; external marketing management

1. Introduction

The Digital Transformation (DT) has become an imperative in the contemporary hyper-competitive and hyper-technological landscape (Kraus et al., 2022; Verhoef et al., 2021). DT encompasses the thorough integration of digital technologies, processes, and strategies within an organizational framework, with the aim of enhancing efficiency, innovation, and performance, leading to a paradigm shift in the conception, pursuit, and achievement of organizational objectives (Gong and Ribiere, 2021).

Literature highlights that the DT should not be confined to the mere integration of new technologies (Sestino et al., 2020). Instead, it should embrace a cultural perspective to internalize the principles and prospects resulting from digitalization (Burchardt and Maisch, 2019), ensuring a successful and rooted transformation (Fors, 2010).

Moreover, DT cannot be limited solely to the examination of the internal organizational landscape (Felipe et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2022). A comprehensive understanding necessitates

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3 an exploration of the external environment and the intricate interplay of the enterprise with its
4 external stakeholders.

5 Recognizing that the dynamics of DT extend beyond internal processes (Cennamo et
6 al., 2020), it becomes imperative to scrutinize the broader business ecosystem, market forces,
7 and the evolving relationships between the organization and its external counterparts. This
8 holistic approach ensures a nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted influences shaping the
9 DT landscape, facilitating informed strategic decisions that align with both internal imperatives
10 and external exigencies, as highlighted in recent literature (e.g., Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021).

11 Coherently, the adoption of an internal and an external marketing management
12 perspectives (Bansal et al., 2001) provides a holistic approach to understand the complexities
13 of DT (Kotler et al., 2020; Wilson and Gilligan, 2012). As indicated by seminal literature (e.g.,
14 Kotler, 1986; Park & Tran, 2018; Varey, 1995), the internal marketing management perspective
15 involves the orchestration of internal resources and strategies to cultivate a cohesive brand
16 identity and align the organizational culture with strategic goals. This lens emphasizes the role
17 of employees as brand advocates and the importance of fostering a unified commitment to
18 delivering value within the organization (Park & Tran, 2018; Hwuang & Der-Jang, 2005). On
19 the other hand, the external marketing manager perspective is outward facing, focusing on
20 market analysis, segmentation, and positioning strategies to communicate effectively with
21 target audiences and navigate the competitive landscape (Lings, 1999; Tansuhaj et al., 1988).
22 The convergence of these perspectives may thus be crucial in comprehensively analyzing the
23 current impact of DT, since it may enable a holistic assessment of the organization's DT
24 journey, ensuring that both internal capabilities and external positioning align strategically in
25 the rapidly evolving digital landscape (Greene et al., 1994; Lings, 1999).

26 This research promotes the analysis of internal dynamics within an organization, such
27 as cultural alignment, employee engagement, and leadership commitment, influencing project
28 outcomes. Additionally, it takes into account external factors outside the company's boundaries
29 that influence the management of DT. These external factors necessitate changes and
30 adaptations to ensure survival in a fiercely competitive marketplace.

31 The convergence of these perspectives may thus be crucial in comprehensively
32 analyzing the current impact of DT. Based on above, this paper sets the following Research
33 Questions (RQs):

- 34
- 35 • *RQ1. How managers perceive DT endeavors, and which are the predominant themes*
36 *perceived as critical in navigating this transformative process?*
 - 37 • *RQ2. Which are the most pressing themes to be tackled during a DT and how can*
38 *these themes be effectively managed to synergistically harness the opportunities*
39 *facilitated by DT?*
- 40

41 To answer these research questions, an exploratory research design based on a
42 qualitative, interpretative methodology was used. A panel of managers involved in the DT of
43 companies operating in the service industry was interviewed. Findings are classified according
44 to an internal and external marketing management perspective, in order to shed lights on the
45 dynamics followed by firms in the middle of a DT. Specifically, from the perspective of internal
46 marketing management (Barnes and Morris, 2000), digitalization poses challenges in managing
47 the resistance to change of the internal resources directly involved, as well as in the
48 dissemination of digital culture to make this process positively perceptible and successful
49 (Hinterhuber, 2022; Gong and Ribiere, 2021). On the other hand, it necessarily requires new,
50 highly competent figures, especially those able to lead the DT and with e-leadership skills (Liu
51 et al., 2021; Li et al., 2017). Secondly, from the perspective of external marketing management
52 (Bansal et al., 2001), DT is perceived as an opportunity to both accelerate the transformation of
53 production processes, resulting in greater quality, efficiency, and effectiveness, and increase
54 the competitive strength of a firm in a hyper-competitive environment (Matzler et al., 2018).

Our findings highlights the importance of balancing internal and external marketing lenses while emphasizing the significance of new managerial skills and e-leadership in the digital era. Additionally, insights into the transformation of production processes, service provision, and competitive strategies enrich existing theoretical frameworks on DT, offering a nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape. Crucially, our study advocates for a holistic approach to lead DT initiatives. By presenting a comprehensive framework rooted in empirical evidence, our research provides actionable strategies for organizations navigating the complexities of DT.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Digital Transformation

DT represents the greatest challenges imposed by the current historical period and global competitive scenario (Li, 2020). It is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that several researchers are trying to address (Appio et al., 2021). The emphasis on this topic is also given by the strong practical relevance and by the beneficial implications for practitioners, who are required to manage the transformation and exploit the rapid diffusion of digital technologies in order to remain competitive on the market (Hanelt et al., 2021).

In an attempt of clarifying the boundaries of the phenomenon, Vial (2019) reviewed 282 papers and defined DT as “a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies”. The author also presented an inductive analysis framework that describes the main blocks of a DT process. In this model, Vial (2019) refers to the concept provided by Bharadwaj et al. (2013), stressing that technologies are increasingly embedded in services and products and permeate the company and generate disruption (Karimi and Walter, 2015), arousing the need for a strategic response from the organization. Furthermore, in order to be able to achieve competitive advantage by transforming their value proposition (Huang et al., 2017) or by changing their mechanisms of interaction with consumers (Hansen and Sia, 2015), organizations face structural changes and organizational barriers (Vial, 2019). Structural change impacts: (1) The entire organizational setup, identifying an isolated or cross-functional area or division (Wind, 2005); (2) The leadership roles, creating new positions to govern and lead the transformation underway (Singh and Hess, 2017); (3) The organizational culture, promoting a digital mindset capable of overturning the crystallized role of the IT function as far from business functions (Hartl and Hess, 2017); (4) The skills of the personnel, developing a skillset that makes them able to interact with the new working methods of the digital workforce (Colbert and George, 2016).

Understanding the possible sources of friction with digital initiatives is equally important for managing the DT. On this point, Vial (2019) identifies two main barriers to be tackled: inertia and resistance. The former acts as a constraining force based on existing resources and established procedures and is stronger when the procedures are consolidated (and optimized) and the structure crystallized (e.g., relationships with long-standing suppliers). Resistance, on the other hand, is related to the lack of awareness of the benefits of the new solutions, the time it takes to implement the change and the ways in which communication is managed. Fitzgerald et al. (2014) associate the term ‘innovation fatigue’ with this last construct, underlining how constant technological progress elicits in employees the desire to “stop technological innovation” in order to digest what has been already done through it.

Taking a step from the organizational barriers to DT, and in line with the dual marketing management perspective, the existing body of research on DT at the firm level offers diverse insights derived from various disciplines, summarized in Figure 1. While this endeavor does not aim to cover all the contributions related to the managerial perspective on DT, we believe it can be valuable as it lets understand how to categorize organizational evidence according to

the two distinct perspectives. This will establish a solid foundation for a clear understanding of the results of this work.

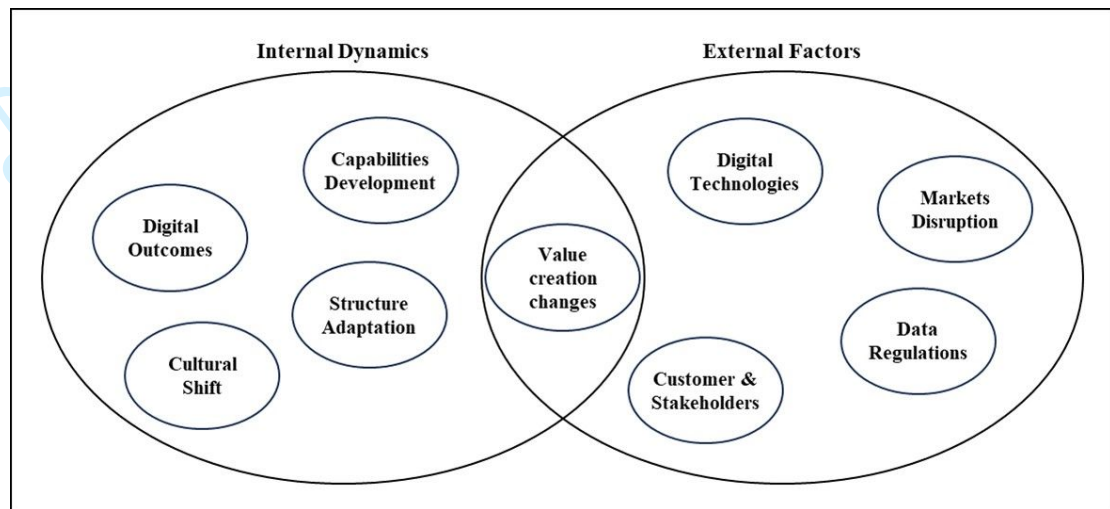


Figure 1. Internal Dynamics and External Factors concerning DT, according to Internal and External Marketing Management Perspectives

Concerning the internal dynamics, DT presents multiple challenges. It necessitates a collaborative endeavor from every part of the organization, as well as flexibility and the capacity to understand trends in the market, leveraging advances in technology to deliver innovative services and achieve a competitive advantage (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2021; Schwer and Hitz, 2018). Achieving a successful DT can yield numerous advantages. Vial (2019) states that DT is linked to various dimensions that can be influenced by improved organizational performance, including innovativeness, financial performance, business growth, and reputation. To attain these advantages, the organization should consider some internal aspects: cultural shift (Hartl and Hess, 2017), structural adaptation (Correani et al., 2020), and capabilities development (Warner and Wäger, 2019).

The primary emphasis is on the significance of leadership in driving DT. To successfully enable this transformation, leaders must possess a mindset of being visionary in technology and have the ability to carry transformative changes (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2021). This involves integrating roles that are valuable in managing the inherent complexity of the transformation, such as the Chief Digital Officer or the Chief Transformation Officer (Firk et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). Authors acknowledge the crucial role of top management teams in cultivating digital mindsets, while emphasizing the influence of these individuals in placing the foundation for DT (Wrede et al., 2020). It is imperative that these leaders possess a favorable disposition towards change and a willingness to embrace technology (Hanelt et al., 2020). Regarding cultural aspects, the implementation of DT necessitates a significant change, as all individuals within the organization must possess adaptable skills and digital expertise. DT requires the establishment of a data-driven corporate culture (Dremel et al., 2017), as well as a strong emphasis on operational transparency and a willingness to share data among employees (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2021).

As culture evolves, internal organizational structures must likewise be capable of accommodating increasing complexity and adapting to constant market changes. To achieve the flexibility required to cope with DT, literature has progressively proposed multiple strategies, which include implementing distinct business units (Venkatraman, 2017), establishing agile and boundaryless organizational forms such as holacracies (Schwer and Hitz,

2018; Verhoef et al., 2021), and implementing horizontal coordination mechanisms that promote informal networking practices (Singh et al., 2020). Individuals must undergo a radical transformation in order to deal with these changes (Hanelt et al., 2020). To drive organizational evolution, employees may be requested to assume different roles beyond their current organizational function, necessitating the acquisition of a diverse range of digitally-related skills, including decision-making, big data analysis, and digital platform management (Verhoef et al., 2021; Correani et al., 2020; Mustafa et al., 2022).

On the other hand, upon examining the external elements, it becomes apparent that an array of interrelated elements arises, which belong to the environment in which enterprises function and have an impact on their services and goods. This necessitates continuous adaptation and presents multiple prospects. All these factors influence how the end customer, who receives the service or product, perceives it from an external perspective (Bansal et al., 2001). This creates different scenarios in which the company must leverage technological opportunities in the market in order to establish an advantage over competitors.

As a result of continuous technological advancements, many companies incorporate digital technologies into their business processes in order to add value to activities through process revitalization (Dornberger et al., 2018; Sestino et al., 2020). These technological integrations show different invasiveness grades, beginning from the lowest level in the event of software tools useful for managing daily commercial activities, such as accounting, procurement, project management, risk management, compliance, and operations for the supply chain to digitalize processes and support traditional workflows (Shi and Halpin, 2003), to the online presence of companies in an attempt to expand the outlet markets also in an online context through the provision of e-commerce platforms (Hagberg et al., 2016). Further opportunities, which require high invasiveness and reengineering processes, are enabled by the deep integration of new technological devices.

The set of these technologies, useful for actively supporting DT processes and the massive amount of manageable data, creates innovative business opportunities while also opening up the competitive scenario to new operators who offer innovative products and services and also a high-quality experience, raising end consumers' expectations (see Sestino et al., 2020 for a review). Specifically, the influence of digital technologies on behavior is significant (e.g., Hong and Lee, 2017). The widespread use of digital technologies has raised expectations regarding products and services. Customers now have greater visibility and the ability to compare options, and they expect straightforward access to virtual resources (Benlian et al., 2018). As a result, companies face increased pressure to adapt to the digital landscape.

2.2 An Internal and External Marketing Management Perspectives to Study Digital Transformation

Embarking upon our investigation, the significance of such a dual lens approach lies in its intrinsic capacity to facilitate a holistic examination of the multifaceted aspects surrounding DT. Recognizing the evolving nature of contemporary business landscape, a comprehensive analysis becomes imperative for organizations seeking to not only survive but thrive leveraging on technological evolution. By integrating both internal and external dimensions into the scrutiny, an exploration of the intricacies that underlie effective digital transformation strategies is pursued. This opening paragraph sets the stage for our subsequent exploration into the internal and external marketing management perspective that together constitute a robust framework for studying DT.

This dual lens, represented in Figure 2, ensures a comprehensive analysis, considering both internal dynamics, such as organizational culture and employee engagement, and external factors, including market dynamics and customer expectations, thereby fostering a strategic alignment that is crucial in navigating the intricacies of the digital landscape.

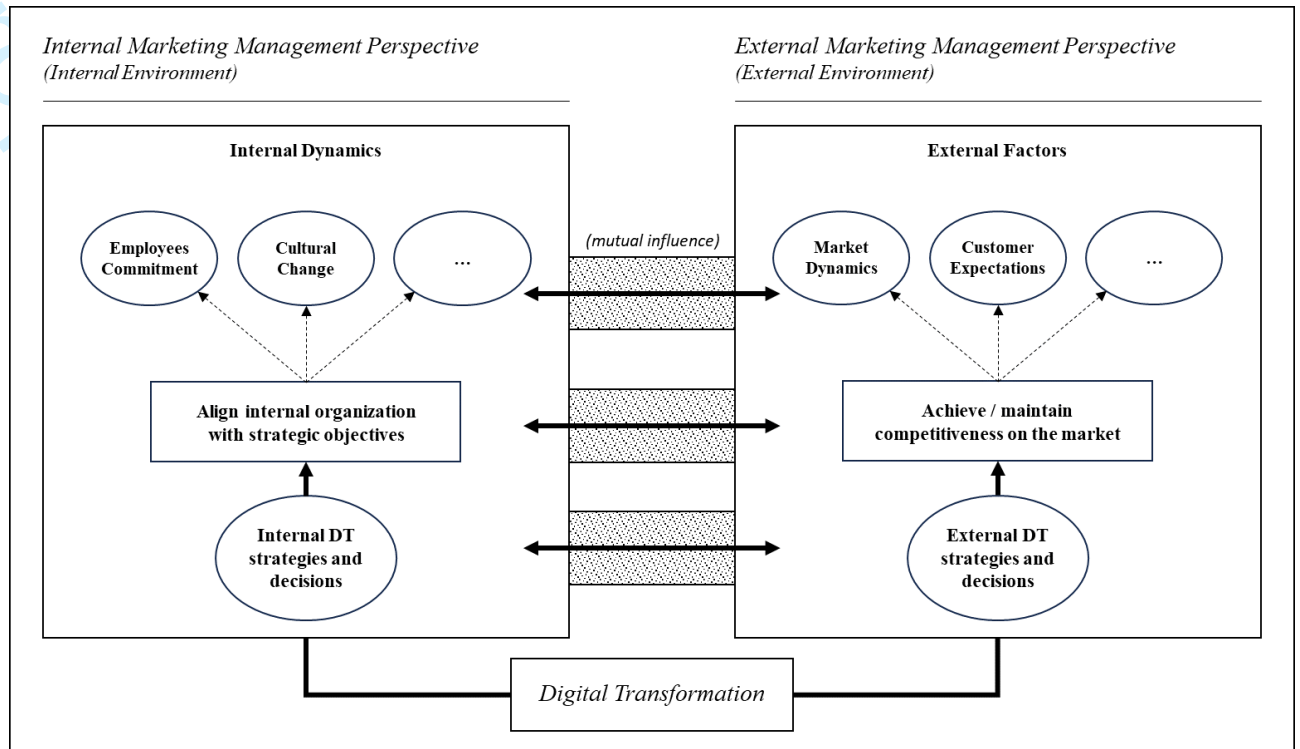


Figure 2. Internal and External Marketing Management Perspectives applied to DT (adaptation from Bansal et al., 2001)

Theoretically, the internal marketing management perspective involves the orchestration of internal resources and strategies to cultivate a cohesive brand identity and align the organizational culture with strategic goals (Bansal et al., 2001): this lens emphasizes the role of employees as brand advocates and the importance of fostering a unified commitment to delivering value within the organization. On the other hand, the external marketing management perspective is outward facing, focusing on market analysis, segmentation, and positioning strategies to communicate effectively with target audiences and navigate the competitive landscape (Tansuhaj et al., 1988).

This classification sheds light on emerging issues and opportunities in managing internal (e.g., employee and organizational activities) and external (e.g., facing competition strategies) when applied to DT processes. Thus, we classified the emerging topics from the perspective of “internal marketing management” and “external marketing management”, as each is capable of positively impacting the other (Bansal et al., 2001). The internal marketing management approach is functional to analyze the ability of the DT to positively impact employees through reinvigorated empowerment, dissemination of a new organizational culture, and skills incentive/training policies. Conversely, the external marketing management approach makes it possible to analyze the opportunities deriving from the DT with an eye towards the market and the competition, with the goal of investigating the role of the transformation of production and service delivery processes and leveraging digital as a tool to support competitive strategies.

This analysis approach has long been proposed in seminal literature (Kotler and Keller, 2016), also taking into account the peculiarity of the analyzed sector - that of services - which by nature requires additional efforts in the design of value in terms of internal marketing because the perceived quality of service is largely dependent on the quality of the interaction between buyer and seller (Gronroos, 1988). Thus, the fundamental role of internal staff in the service delivery process cannot be overlooked. Indeed, companies must focus their efforts on

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3 the development and support of organizational culture and human capital orientation (internal
4 marketing management) in order to ensure a sustainable competitive advantage, since efforts
5 solely aimed at strengthening production structures (for example, through the integration of
6 new technologies aimed at satisfying consumer demand) would be unsuccessful if not
7 supported by an equally designed organizational structure (Greene et al., 1994).

8
9 Moreover, given the peculiarity of the analyzed industry, whose offer is primarily
10 expressed in the process of providing a service to consumers (rather than a product), internal
11 staff interaction is by nature fundamental, since competitive strategies would unfold their
12 effects less than proportionally if not assimilated and accompanied by a synergistic approach
13 (Bansal et al., 2001). Indeed, such strategies have been recognized as really effective in reaching
14 consumer satisfaction.

15
16 Existing literature underscores the manifold advantages of Digital Transformation (DT),
17 elucidating its role in simplifying traditional business activities and yielding significant
18 outcomes in terms of efficiency, efficacy, and the quality of results (Legner et al., 2017;
19 Rachinger et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the process of digitalization necessitates the abandonment
20 of traditional *modus operandi*, aiming to streamline workflows and automate activities across
21 various domains, including the production and distribution of products and services, marketing
22 and sales, consumer care, as well as administrative, accounting, and tax material document
23 management (Urbach et al., 2019). This paradigm shift towards digitalization not only
24 introduces novel opportunities for coordination and collaboration but also transcends
25 geographical constraints, enabling remote sharing of information. This collaborative
26 environment spans from videoconferencing meetings to interactions on social networking
27 platforms tailored for employees, external collaborators, and consumers (Rachinger et al.,
28 2019). Given these premises, it appears that the DT goes beyond a simplistic dimension linked
29 to the integration of new technological contents into companies but rather culminates in a global
30 shift, underlying a radical cultural change (Goncalves et al., 2020; Burchardt and Maisch, 2019;
31 Rieple and Pisano, 2015), which involves a shift in mentality at both managerial and operative
32 levels.

33
34 Despite scholarly interest in this research field, to the best of the authors' knowledge,
35 few studies have focused on managers' perceptions of business DT opportunities and issues as
36 the primary stakeholders involved in leading such radical business transformation.
37 Furthermore, the analysis of managers' perceptions of DT has been conducted using the dual
38 marketing management perspectives, which sheds light on the effective strategies for
39 implementing DT. This analysis provides evidence on both the internal dynamics of the
40 company, such as the most significant aspects within its boundaries, and the external factors
41 that management deems essential for a successful transition. This paper intends to provide
42 original empirical evidence by qualitatively analyzing practitioners' perception through an
43 explorative research design. The assessment is based on a qualitative research approach (Belk,
44 2007) and is framed within a conceptual framework.

3. Methodology

45
46 As a part of our exploratory research design, we adopted semi-structured one-to-one interviews,
47 aimed at collecting opinions, meanings, and suggestions from the involved respondents
48 (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). The research has been conducted by following the approach of
49 the case study (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), which allowed us to deepen a specific and limited
50 phenomenon in its context, with the aim of identifying current issues and opportunities, and
51 specifically asking managers about their business digital transformation as a case study. Finally,
52 this method contributed to obtain a theoretical framework applicable to other situations while
53 also exposing the case to further investigation.

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3 Consistent with the phenomenological approach, purposive sampling was used to recruit
4 the respondents following prior research (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Respondents were chosen
5 based on their experience relating to the phenomenon being researched (Groenewald, 2004).
6 Indeed, the study participants had a background closely related to the topic under consideration.
7 More specifically, we employed in-depth qualitative analysis, investigating managers'
8 perceptions of DT to shed light on current issues and opportunities deriving from such a
9 transformative process. Based on qualitative research principles, we found the in-depth
10 interview approach valuable since it allowed us to explore a contemporary phenomenon in
11 depth (Belk et al., 2012) and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries
12 between phenomenon and context may not be evident (Yin, 2014). In particular, the method
13 based on semi-structured interviews was adopted because it is useful to focus on questions,
14 themes, and lines of investigation to follow, in which the questions follow a random order that
15 depends on the answers of the participants, revealing itself to be highly flexible and capable of
16 generating previously unconsidered insights (Daymon and Holloway, 2010; Wright et al.,
17 2000).

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21 According to Martin and Eisenhardt (2010), data was collected through eight semi-
22 structured face-to-face interviews with eight Italian managers operating in 8 different SMEs.
23 All companies provide services in a variety of industry sectors (security, safety, and healthcare
24 sectors). More specifically, after the first round of interviews, the other respondents were
25 contacted through a snowball technique (Patton, 2002) until additional interviews failed to
26 unearth discrepancies in the categories or relationships that had already been identified or to
27 reveal any new ones (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The interviews were designed according to a
28 standard protocol that evolved systematically during the research. Each interview lasted
29 approximately one hour, was transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

30
31 Potential informant bias was ensured in several ways: the involved interviewers
32 collected longitudinal data in real time and retrospectively in several waves (Leonard-Barton,
33 1990; Ozcan and Eisenhardt, 2009); additionally, anonymity was granted to the involved
34 managers to encourage them to speak openly and candidly (Eisenhardt, 1989a, 1989b);
35 subsequently, the respondents were complemented with wide-ranging archival and
36 observational data (Bingham and Eisenhardt, 2011). Finally, the questions were left open-ended
37 (Koriat et al., 2000), in accordance with the methodological approach chosen (Belk et al., 2012).

38
39 After collecting the answers from all the selected respondents, the interviews have been
40 transcribed and analyzed through a coding process by three different researchers involved in
41 the study (Daymon and Holloway, 2011), in order to shed light on the most relevant emerging
42 topics. For each statement we indicate a progressive code to indicate the respondent (from 1 to
43 8), together with a letter to signal the gender ("M" = Male; "F" = Female), and their age. The
44 emerging findings have been classified in a coherent and integrated manner (Bal and Nijkamp,
45 2001) and specifically according to their "internal marketing management" and "external
46 marketing management" perspectives (Bansal et al., 2001).

47 48 49 **4. Findings**

50 The in-depth interview analysis revealed interesting findings by shedding light on four main
51 topics considered relevant since they are able to guide future managerial choices on the adoption
52 of technological tools underlying the DT processes. More specifically, during the analysis, four
53 topics mainly emerged in terms of: (1) Organizational nature of DT and diffusion of a new
54 "digital culture", and (2) New management skills and e-leadership, from an internal marketing
55 management perspective; and (3) Digital as an accelerator of production processes and service
56 provision and (4) Digital as an accelerator of competitive strategies, from an external marketing
57 management perspective.
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59
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We found the classification of emerging topics and associated insights in a coherent and integrated manner to be extremely beneficial, in accordance with the proposed methodology and research perspectives (Belk et al., 2012; Bal and Nijkam, 2001).

Internal marketing management perspective

4.1 Organizational nature of digital transformation and diffusion of a new “digital culture”

The first major finding revealed by the in-depth analysis of the interviews refers to a much-debated topic in the literature concerning the management of problems resulting from the change of an old “modus operandi”, or more specifically, the organizational change due to the introduction of technological tools (see Hanelt et al., 2021 for a debate). Indeed, most of the respondents admitted concern about the “new” creeping into businesses. This is because the integration of new technologies, which enables the DT of companies, implies a transformation of production processes, new roles, responsibilities, and variations of traditional business activities.

As a consequence, a breaking point has been reached in comparison to past operating methods, as well as the emergence of job uncertainty as a result of change (Frank et al., 2019). Some authors (Crittenden et al., 2019; Sanchez-Riofrio, et al., 2022) have been using the concept of “organizational inertia” to explain the obstacles of adapting to new technological paradigms, explaining how established routines, processes, and policies may generate high costs associated with organizational change. Additionally, DT, according to some academics, is not always well-received by all stakeholders (Huang, 2015; Rafferty and Jimmieson, 2017), for instance, some employees may claim that the company's transformation strategy is unclear because they feel they do not have enough time to put decisions into action due to the fast-changing environment and the need for multiple rapid modifications (Qin, 2023). This implies that many employees are reluctant to innovate, posing a significant obstacle to change, because they are psychologically unwilling to accept a shift in their duties and work behaviors, whether positive or negative (Amarantou et al., 2018). On this basis, they prefer to remain anchored to their old habits, as reported in the following statement:

“... employees, used to carry out their duties in a certain way, had to upset most of their daily activities and seemed afraid of our proposal regarding a new tool to digitalize the processes”.
(R3, M, 52).

In this scenario, companies should inform all participants on the potential benefits of these changes as a first step toward better adapting to the digital process, enabling the growth of the so-called “digital culture” (Miller, 2020). Indeed, the literature has amply confirmed that there cannot be a complete and successful DT unless it is accompanied by a profound diffusion of the digital culture underlying this process of change (Hemerling et al., 2018).

Digital culture refers to the entire strategic process of definition, implementation, and assimilation of technologies in order for companies and society to appreciate the benefits of DT and better adapt to technological changes in recent years (Hemerling et al., 2018). Indeed, digital culture is becoming increasingly vital for companies today and is expressed in a set of knowledge and skills gained through the use of technologies (Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2014). With this respect, the usage of digital tools could affect the emergent culture and is significantly influenced by the approach selected to support the DT.

To obtain the advantages from the technological innovations of company's operations, the organizational resources must be aligned in such a way that organizational structures, methods for managing and controlling workflows, and the allocation of time and resources, fit with the implemented technology (Chen et al., 2011). The literature has shown that

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3 psychological needs of workers and their attitudes toward these changes in organizational
4 processes are critical in the assimilation of technological innovation (Burge, 2014). Thus, the
5 organizational culture can change when an element of company's external environment shifts,
6 or when one of its internal variables changes due to new operating methods, such as those based
7 on digital technologies. Indeed, workers usually resist change and are inclined to prefer known
8 organizational culture and old habits over new ones. Therefore, the integration of technological
9 innovation can generate feelings of uncertainty and can result in the addition of new or different
10 assignments, which many workers prefer to avoid.
11
12

13
14 “however, there were some individuals who did not positively accept the change
15 and tried to hinder the use of the new tools by absent or not participating in training
16 sessions”
17 (R2, M, 48)
18

19
20 In this regard, internal barriers to change within the organization can be of various kinds
21 (Weber and Weber, 2001). Individual workers impacted by a change dictated by the DT may
22 experience resistance both individually and collectively, including: a lack of trust in the
23 proponents of change; fear of not being able to pursue the expected results (Oreg, 2003);
24 aversion to uncertainty (Liu et al., 2021); fear of seeing their organizational status downsized
25 (Agboola and Salawu, 2011); and a poor understanding of the reasons for the change (Dent and
26 Goldberg, 1999). On the other hand, at the collective level, there is little or no interest in
27 initiating the change process, as well as a low propensity to communicate with other
28 organizational units, with which divergences frequently occur (Bateh et al., 2013). Also, from
29 an organizational point of view, practices that might impact the DT arise. A highly centralized
30 and top-down decision-making system, for example, an organizational structure designed from
31 a purely functional perspective, or a non-optimal personnel management that is perceived as a
32 reluctance to invest in people's growth. Finally, when the information system reflects structural
33 dimensions (built with vertical and purely functional logic), it hinders the progress of change
34 projects (Appelbaum et al., 2015).
35

36
37 Numerous interventions can be activated in order to tackle these barriers, including:
38 making the objectives and expected results more visible and shared; promoting training and
39 communication actions aimed at encouraging greater participation and enhancement of
40 personnel with respect to change paths; facilitating horizontal coordination practices both
41 within the organization and in relationships between organizations; overcoming rigid
42 organizational boundaries that are no longer aligned with the current working context.
43 Therefore, according to some scholars (Peppard and Ward, 2005), the company's inability to
44 “dominate” change can trigger a process of involution capable of determining a premature
45 “aging” or even its extinction. Under these conditions, the business transform from an organized
46 system to a disorganized system, generating inefficiencies and inefficiencies which represent
47 the prerequisite for its failure.
48

49
50 As previously noted, a key “obligatory” step for top management figures is to persuade
51 their difficult-to-change employees. Some authors have investigated which approaches can
52 support the adoption of digital technologies, arguing that a gradual approach focusing on the
53 shift-mindset (at the employee, leadership, and organizational levels) represents a promising
54 method for implementing a successful cultural change (Garzoni, et al., 2020; Kane, 2019). In
55 this sense, many companies are taking actions to instill a new organizational culture inspired
56 by digital, in order to ensure that the change is accepted willingly and without any adversity.
57 From this perspective, it appears that change is the first major obstacle that a company has to
58 overcome in its DT process. This significant challenge could be proven to be successful if
59 digital culture is properly disseminated and assimilated, which has become imperative for
60

1
2
3 companies today operating in a highly technological and hyper-competitive market
4 (Alexandrova, 2019), as highlighted below:
5

6 “... it has been an obligatory and necessary step to streamline processes within a
7 single corporate vision and adapt to the changing needs of the market and
8 competitors; however, it was necessary to convince everyone of the goodness of
9 such change”
10
11 (R4, M, 35)
12

13
14 As a result of this last statement, there is a strong desire to tackle the digitization process,
15 attempting to solve all of the problems that arise along this path. However, before starting a
16 new DT process, companies must first “strengthen” human capital towards digital awareness.
17 In companies in which a digital revolution is underway, a negative or circumspect attitude of
18 employees towards change is on the agenda and can cause many critical issues (e.g., the
19 frustration of efforts to innovate, with all the related consequences, such as loss of
20 competitiveness and market share, reduction in turnover, and so on). As a direct consequence,
21 creating the prerequisite for all employees to positively accept the introduction of new
22 technologies, tools, flows, and work for the organization, understanding their real potential,
23 first for themselves and for their professional life, is a necessary condition for initiating and
24 carrying out innovation in the company.
25

26 Summarizing, to counter the detrimental effects emerging from the barriers to change,
27 it is first necessary to instill and disseminate a solid digital culture, which can take place through
28 various strategies aimed at involving people in company activities, encouraging their
29 continuing education, or “melting” their emotional negative load. At the same time, top
30 management can undertake initiatives aimed at emphasizing a sense of belonging to the
31 corporate reality and transmitting the need for everyone’s collaboration to achieve the
32 transformation objectives, potentially resulting in greater productivity and renewed competitive
33 leverage due to the incorporation of digital as part of one’s business strategies.
34

35 Thus, by considering these insights, we may affirm that:
36

37
38 **P1.** *The promotion of an effective DT requires a new digital culture through which*
39 *communicating, diffusing and making perceivable the benefits associated to*
40 *digitalization.*
41

42 **4.2. New management skills and “e-leadership”**

43 In businesses, new professional figures are emerging to handle the significant changes that
44 digitalization has introduced. These professionals can spread the aforementioned digital culture,
45 serving as a catalyst for change and leveraging both hard and soft skills, which range from the
46 ability to use digital technologies and basic tools (e.g., internet browsing, email management,
47 personal data protection in social media, information search, and digital content creation) to
48 more relational and behavioural skills that allow people to effectively use these new digital
49 tools (Murawski and Bick, 2017). The combination of these attributes and skills allows the
50 establishment of new leadership profile defined as “e-leader” (Avolio et al., 2014). This role
51 becomes increasingly central and required for companies that need to change their way of
52 working, accelerating their transformation via digital tools. In fact, one of the respondents
53 claimed that:
54
55

56
57 “...it was necessary to promote a new digital culture and make certain roles
58 responsible [...]. The effort was positive also thanks to those individuals who
59
60

1
2
3 immediately promoted this initiative and contributed to accelerating and stimulating
4 with the other the acceptance process of the new digital tools”.
5 (R3, M, 52)
6

7
8 This statement is in line with the increasingly urgent e-leadership skill set required. e-
9 Leadership is defined as the ability to know how to use computerized systems in any
10 organizational structure and to facilitate the introduction of new systems within individual
11 companies, private or public (Avolio et al., 2014). For those who best represent the figure of
12 the e-leader, as a figure with outstanding qualities in terms of digital and relational knowledge,
13 whose primary goal is to allow all participants in a company to accept and promote the renewed
14 “corporate vision”, digitalization opens new scenarios and work horizons (Avolio et al., 2000).
15 Indeed, e-leadership skills (sometimes also known as e-business skills), are the ability to make
16 the best use of digital technologies within any type of organization and to introduce digital
17 innovation in the specific market sector in which it operates, which should be closely integrated
18 with the leader’s transversal skills and the sector’s specific skills.
19 Accordingly, one of the respondents interviewed clearly stated that:
20
21

22
23 “...current efforts are directed at recruiting or training people with more managerial
24 than technical skills, with strong leadership, capable of guiding the change required
25 by top management and making it “digestible” to all our employees with the hope
26 of gain new motivation from them, encouraging them to feel part of the change,
27 rather than an obstacle”.
28 (R6, M, 34)
29

30
31 In this context, where technology plays a primary role and digital awareness is expressed above
32 all in the understanding of how technologies change and shape the environment (Wokurka et
33 al., 2017), the role of managers called to lead the DT becomes preminent since they have the
34 responsibility for the correct setting of this approach and must ensure that technology does not
35 pass only from a mere integration of digital content, but becomes assimilated, appreciated and
36 widespread for all users (Schwaferts and Baldi, 2018). These e-leadership skills must be widely
37 distributed, nurtured, and recognized in workgroups, involving people from all levels of the
38 organization, until they lead to a new digital organizational culture (Kulshreshtha and Sharma,
39 2021).
40

41 Indeed, today’s managers acknowledge the importance of empowering new roles or recruiting
42 additional figures with e-leadership skills (Contreras et al., 2020). Therefore, these skills are
43 crucial to exploit the opportunities offered by new digital technologies (ensuring more efficient
44 performance and effectiveness) and to explore the possibilities of new ways of conducting
45 business (Van Wart et al., 2019).
46

47 The importance placed on new figures with e-leadership skills fully reflects the
48 criticalities mentioned in the preceding paragraph, in terms of the propagation of a renewed
49 culture infused by digital, since this is the driving force for the company in its cycle of
50 technological innovation (Kulshreshtha and Sharma, 2021). As a result, e-leadership has
51 become increasingly important as a new internal dimension assessed in employees and
52 candidates, leading to a radical reconsideration of the leadership skills required of managerial
53 figures.
54

55 Those endowed with such abilities, also known as “e-leaders”, must possess two distinct
56 abilities: “doing”, defined as the ability to introduce, use, and maximize digital innovation and
57 technologies in order to define and implement digital innovation projects, and “managing”,
58 recognized as the capacity to influence a social context using technology in order to modify
59 people’, groups’, and organizations’ attitudes, feelings, behaviors, and/or performance (Avolio
60

1
2
3 et al., 2014). In this regard, the ultimate objective of the leader must be the renewal and continual
4 evolution of corporate operations. To achieve this goal, the e-leader must also be familiar with
5 the appropriate tools and technological partners to assist with implementation, as well as
6 improve the individual dispositions by exhibiting a comprehension of the barriers they
7 encounter and putting strategies in place to overcome them (Avolio et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018;
8 Schwaferts and Baldi, 2018).
9

10
11 “...Figures able to help spread a new vision are necessary, also able to recognize
12 the best of each in the current organization in order to make the most of it in an
13 integrated growth process”
14 (R8, F, 54)
15

16
17 As reported by the statement above, e-leadership skills must not only refer to the ability to
18 manage change, but also involve higher-level skills, including relational ones (Avolio et al.,
19 2020; Van Wart et al., 2019). This statement is consistent with the characteristics that literature
20 ascribes to e-leaders in terms of vision, curiosity, collaboration, experimentation, and
21 networking skills (e.g., as in Avolio et al., 2014; DasGupta et al., 2011): Indeed, to produce
22 useful results, innovation must be oriented towards long-term objectives and put in place
23 ambitious scenarios and goals which, once identified and transmitted, are clearly perceptible
24 and shareable by leveraging on a vision declared throughout the organization. The e-leader must
25 also exhibit traits of marked curiosity, as this is the foundation of knowledge and innovation.
26 In this sense, the ability to get out of one’s “comfort zone” must be framed, starting to explore
27 new approaches, new realities, and new operational modalities, and opening up to the possibility
28 of confrontation with paths and choices different from those undertaken (Liu et al., 2018). The
29 ability to collaborate is also fundamental, since, consistent with leadership skills, decisions
30 should not be given with a top-down approach, but rather made digestible according to
31 participatory management styles oriented towards sharing and awareness (Yilmaz et al., 2020).
32 This concept is strongly related to digital culture, since the possibility of success of a vision
33 always depends on the ability to “enable” and build a network that is aware, enthusiastic, and
34 full of collaborations that make it possible to achieve what is defined (Li et al., 2017). An
35 experimental approach is also necessary, as this is essential to trigger innovation processes,
36 which proceed on unconsolidated strategies and therefore need to explore new ways to
37 understand the ones in which to invest and choose (Garcia, 2020).
38

39
40 This intuition is also particularly consistent with the following statement:
41

42
43 “ [...] new operating methods should be experimented, also with the aim of
44 enhancing the skills of each and the best results obtainable even with the risk of
45 making mistakes and starting from scratch”
46 (R8, F, 54)
47
48
49

50
51 Finally, the networking capacity is confirmed, based on a holistic approach that consider the
52 company as a living organization (Gorod et al., 2018) capable of influencing and being
53 influenced by the external environment, favouring or hindering DT strategy and the pursuit of
54 market competitive advantage (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Iacono, 2020).
55

56
57 Indeed, one respondent clearly stated that:

58
59 “The new involved figures should follow a holistic approach, able to explode the
60 benefits brought outwards, thus managing to place the company in a more
competitive position than in the past”

(R2, M, 48)

To summarize, the key points for effective digital leadership must be identified in the ability to impact all stakeholders, especially the internal ones, through the digital tools available, creating conditions for experimenting, stimulating, empowering, and providing a vision of final goals to be achieved.

In this sense, the e-leader may guide the DT process by altering not only the underlying organizational culture, but also the individual operational activities of all resources involved, promoting an acceleration in the transformation of companies' production processes, and ultimately impacting the market through a renewed value proposition (digitally enabled) capable of positioning the company more competitively than in the past. Therefore, the e-leader must "think and act digitally", interpreting and managing the current context (market, positioning) in light of a changing cultural and technological situation, becoming a promoter and guide in the DT process, and finally enabling those accelerating pressures in production/service provision processes. Based on the above, we may affirm that:

P2. *The promotion of an effective DT requires e-leadership skills from pivotal change agents in order to diffuse the digital culture conducive to the transformation.*

External marketing management perspective

4.3 Digital transformation as a booster for business value proposition

Despite the change barriers mentioned in the previous sections, digital has shown its greatest benefits as an accelerator of production and service delivery processes through its contribution to process redesign (Safiullin and Akhmetshin, 2019; Jeske et al., 2018). Indeed, the DT should be framed as a path of radical transformation that affects business processes and models, organizational structures, and human resources, and is expressed in a reinvigorated production activity (Sestino et al., 2020).

"[...] it is necessary to propose a workflow different from the past ones, and thus also contribute positively to the guarantees regarding the quality of the service provided"

(R2, M, 48)

"...the integration of monitoring devices in the service delivery phases, have allowed a speeding up of activities and a higher quality of the final result"

(R8, F, 54)

Therefore, once the obstacles of change have been overcome, the DT can bring advantages to companies, effectively improving their approach to work with more streamlined procedures and being able to provide immense support to the operational side by improving functionalities and optimizing production times (Sestino et al., 2020). This intuition is in line with the significant benefits of digitization in terms of restructuring traditional business activities.

Indeed, managers stated that:

"optimization of working times, reduced data entry and computerization of processes [...] and then, improved operations as in the interfacing between company functions and with third parties involved in the processes"

(R1, M, 49)

1
2
3 “the large amount of data collected with the introduction of the Business
4 Intelligence system implemented, has allowed analyzes never carried out before,
5 and has sparked the desire to analyze the business more deeply”
6 (R2, M, 48)
7
8

9 Beyond the DT, the 4.0 revolution has emphasized a joint relationship between business process
10 digitalization and IT to create more flexible, group-oriented, coordinated, and real-time
11 communication skills (Bhaskar, 2016). As a part of IT applications, new technologies are today
12 employed in redesigning the production process of products and services, bringing new vitality
13 to the traditional business while also providing new products and services with more advanced
14 or efficient technologies (see Sestino et al., 2020 for a review). Moreover, the large amount of
15 data generated by integrating ERP, IoT technologies, and generally by digital interactions,
16 enables the acquisition of massive amounts of information useful for activating predictive
17 analysis and sustaining managers' decision-making processes and strategic planning (De Mauro
18 et al., 2018; McAfee et al., 2012). On these bases, digitalization is transforming the focus of
19 business processes from physical products to data-driven digital business (Ahmed et al., 2020).
20 However, as stated in the section below, new responsibilities, skills, and figures are necessary
21 not only to manage the change but also to tackle new job challenges and tasks required by
22 increasingly data-driven companies from a technical standpoint (see De Mauro et al., 2018 for
23 a review). Indeed, the rapid expansion of data management practices (for example, analytics)
24 has compelled businesses to reconsider their human resource (HR) requirements, which are
25 characterized by a heterogeneous nature of skills. Indeed, a manager stated that:
26
27
28

29 “...on addition to e-leadership skills, however, the recruiting campaigns are aimed
30 at attracting young specialized talents interested in the world of digital and data who
31 can “have fun” with them in proposing reports, manipulating, or “playing” with
32 data even with a certain degree of imagination and creativity”
33 (R8, F, 54)
34
35

36 Moreover, the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has resulted in a significant step
37 forward by all companies in every sector, representing a new thrust, as a driving force for
38 the DT, despite the serious social and economic damage (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021;
39 Sestino et al., 2021; Skulmowski and Rey, 2020). Indeed:
40
41

42 “...just during the pandemic, having started a digital transformation process
43 allowed us, on the one hand, to speed up the process since being connected online
44 was the only way to work and, on the other hand, to reach goals faster than other
45 companies”
46 (R3, M, 52)
47
48

49 A renewed need to strengthen corporate technological capabilities became evident, particularly
50 during the lockdown period, when new remote working processes (Bolisani et al., 2020)
51 primarily relied on digital collaboration tools to keep the enterprises' operations intact. In this
52 context, the pandemic has also led to a decrease in resistance to technology and a more positive
53 perception of digital changes.
54
55

56 “...paradoxically, the most hostile employees to our growth paths changed their
57 minds during the pandemic, recognizing and touching the benefits of digital
58 technology and welcoming it into their daily working life”
59 (R2, M, 48)
60

1
2
3
4 However, it should be highlighted that the pandemic scenario has divided company managerial
5 orientations into two groups: on the one hand, those who have simply adapted to the DT process
6 without understanding and thus receiving the resulting benefits; and on the other hand, all those
7 who have “ridden the wave” of forced change and implemented DT initiatives with a long and
8 well-defined path of technological evolution. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this
9 contingency has largely accelerated the adoption of digital tools, even for those companies most
10 reluctant to change, allowing companies to partially maintain their value propositions and
11 competitive environments.

12
13 Those findings are consistent with those of Verhoef and colleagues (2021), who frame
14 digitalization as an intermediate step on the journey to full DT, reporting that during this stage,
15 firms use digital technologies to enhance existing business processes, achieving more efficient
16 coordination and improving customer experience.

17
18 Based on the above, we may affirm that:

19
20
21 **P3.** *The lead of an effective DT requires to continuously take advantage from*
22 *digitally-based process integration and acceleration.*

23 24 25 **4.4 Digital as competitive strategies accelerator**

26 The new digital technologies are the pivotal point and the catalyst for a successful and
27 synergistic DT of business. This transformation, in order to be successful, necessarily requires
28 the integration of technologies into production and service processes, as well as the diffusion
29 of digital culture and the ability to manage change (e-leadership). Paying attention to these
30 elements not only benefits the company’s value proposition, but it also increases the company’s
31 competitiveness.

32
33 Indeed, according to the literature, riding the wave of digitalization has no direct influence on
34 competitive advantage, but has substantial indirect effects on product and service advantages
35 (Lee and Falahat, 2019). Therefore, in this scenario, it is necessary to define a meticulous digital
36 strategy, aware that obtaining the final competitive advantage is the result of a mix of winning
37 factors, such as the integration of new technologies, reinvigorated products and services, digital
38 culture, and correct DT management.

39
40 Technology, in addition to shaping the company's static infrastructure, enables the
41 innovation initiatives that fuel the life of enterprises over time. The technological policies
42 pursued through the DT are essential assets to sustain competitive advantage and place
43 technology at the center of value creation.

44
45 Therefore, the impacts of the DT, together with the redesign of internal processes and the
46 provision of services to consumers, allow companies to position themselves more solidly in the
47 market under a renewed “value proposition”, useful for better facing their competition. In this
48 sense, digital contributes positively to accelerating traditional competitive strategies
49 (Björkdahl, 2020).

50 This is consistent with the following statement:

51
52
53 “...it was possible to face the competition with new tools and new products, able
54 to make us preferable again on the market”
55 (R3, M, 52)

56
57 Digital innovation has therefore become a real need for companies that want to outperform the
58 competition or adapt to it. This digital path, however, must be accompanied by a solid business
59 strategy and supported by the emerging figure of the e-leader, who will be prepared to guide
60

1
2
3 the company towards the definitive transformation to digital. It is therefore necessary to adopt
4 a new “digital strategy” (Linkov et al., 2018).

5
6 “... we have been recognized as innovative and our customers have appreciated our
7 new proposition, which however involved important efforts in the planning and
8 design phases”

9
10 (R5, M, 61)

11
12 Thus, companies are facing a period of greater complexity that poses new challenges
13 but also new competitive opportunities. The DT is therefore, on the one hand, a challenge for
14 companies, but on the other hand, an opportunity to implement a new competitive strategy
15 thanks to the massive use of technological innovations available on the market. This is first
16 because new technologies enable the creation of new products, new processes, and new
17 business models, and therefore it could be possible to promptly respond to consumer requests
18 and to stand out from the competition, giving innovative answers to emerging needs. In this
19 context, the transformation of companies from traditional to digital is both a priority and an
20 urgent necessity, as they must consider current contingent factors such as the sudden change in
21 consumer behaviors and values, the unpredictable dynamics of the socio-economic context, and
22 the removal of barriers to entry into consolidated markets thanks to innovative models enabled
23 by rapidly spreading technologies. In this sense, while the exploitation of the DT may enable
24 new competitive strategies for companies, the non-exploitation of new digital technologies,
25 accompanied by a process of assimilation of the benefits, could also lead to expulsion from the
26 market. As a result, every corporate strategy should consider a series of DT initiatives capable
27 of producing competitive advantage and distinguishing the company’s value proposition from
28 what is already on the market.

29
30
31
32 Thus, by considering these final insights, we may affirm that:

33
34 **P4.** *The lead of an effective DT requires to frame digital solutions as an*
35 *accelerator for strategies development and implementation.*

36 37 38 **5. General discussion and implications**

39
40 In addressing the first research question, the findings underscore the multifaceted nature of
41 managers' perceptions toward DT endeavors. The study reveals that managers predominantly
42 view DT as encompassing the organizational realm, emphasizing the diffusion of a novel
43 “digital culture”.

44
45 Scholars argue that a pervasive digital culture is imperative for fostering an
46 organizational environment that is receptive to change and innovation. In this sense, the
47 proposition prompts a deeper examination of the components of this digital culture, shedding
48 lights on the communicative processes, diffusion mechanisms, and perceptual aspects that
49 underpin successful digitalization initiatives. This insight not only sheds light on the
50 conceptualization of DT but also establishes a foundational understanding for subsequent
51 inquiry. The second proposition introduces the concept of e-leadership, which enhances our
52 understanding of leadership in the digital era. It encourages scholars to explore the specific
53 competencies and characteristics that define the role of e-leaders in shaping and spreading
54 digital culture. The third proposition intersects with the broader literature on digital process
55 optimization and emphasizes the continuous nature of integration, addressing questions for
56 scalability, adaptability, and sustainability of digitally integrated processes within
57 organizational contexts. Finally, the latter prompts an examination of the strategic role of digital
58 solutions, supporting the alignment between digital technologies and organizational strategies,
59
60

while offering insights into how digital tools can be strategically leveraged to achieve competitive advantage.

Furthermore, the second research question delves into the identification and effective management of pivotal themes integral to harnessing opportunities spawned by DT. The propositions collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how organizations can holistically navigate the opportunities presented by DT. In particular, the first proposition advocates for the cultivation of new digital culture as a foundational element, laying the foundation for understanding the cultural underpinnings for necessary effective communication and diffusion of benefits. Building on this groundwork, the second proposition introduced the pivotal role of e-leadership skills in diffusing the digital culture, suggesting the exploration of how e-leadership acts as a catalyst for shaping and permeating the digital culture. Additionally, the study highlights the catalytic role of DT in accelerating both production processes and service provision. In this sense, the link between principle three and four rests in the coordination of digitally-integrated processes and strategic framing of digital solutions. Digitally based process integration becomes the operational backbone that supports the realization of the strategic vision. These theoretical contributions can emphasize the interconnectedness among the identified themes, proposing integrated models that guide the organizations in orchestrating a harmonious interplay between digital culture, e-leadership, process integration and strategic framing. Those aspects underscore the need for an integrative approach to DT management, where each dimension not only contributes individually but also collaborates in a mutually reinforcing manner for maximum impact on organizational success in the digital age.

Based on our findings, in Figure 3 we resume the emerging and suggesting actions to lead DT, in which we label such synergistic relationships emerging from internal and external factors.

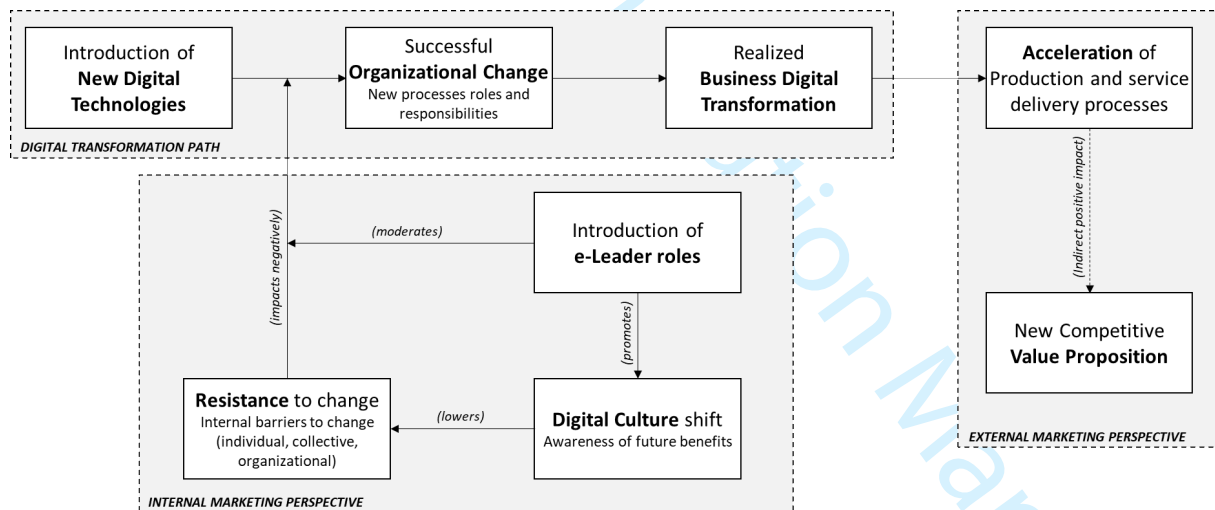


Figure 3. The Dual Marketing Management Perspective applied to DT

According to the findings, our initial point emphasizes the significance of establishing the necessary conditions to directly initiate the implementation of DT with employees. Top management and authority figures are expected to take proactive steps to promote the acceptance of change. This viewpoint is supported by multiple contributions that have enriched the body of knowledge on organizational change (e.g. Bolman and Deal, 2017; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995) and that stress the significance of initiatives targeting resistance and disseminating change among technologically oriented employees who are receptive to evolution. These employees could then act as change ambassadors and persuade more conservative colleagues

(Manzoni and Angehrn, 1997). The focal point of the transformation is the nurturing of a digital mindset and the refreshing of traditional culture across the company as a whole (Warner and Wäger, 2019). It is possible to prevent or restrict the emergence of forms of resistance to change (Weber and Weber, 2001) by addressing the experiences of anxiety and uncertainty that induce fears of incompetence and disempowerment in individuals (Bolman and Deal, 2017); this can be achieved by focusing on the future benefits that the transformation will deliver and by encouraging participation, communication, and psychological support.

In order to effectively tackle resistance and promote the adoption of a revitalized digital culture, it is also crucial to introduce specific dedicated roles possessing adequate leadership skills (Firk et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020) and support the development of dynamic digital capabilities (Karimi and Walter, 2015). These roles must be capable of implementing significant changes (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2021) by utilizing both technical expertise (knowledge of digital technologies to facilitate the spread of information) and interpersonal skills (behavioral skills to foster inclusion and commitment, making the change straightforward for all employees). E-leaders possess the ability to optimize digital innovation by initiating forward-thinking projects, leveraging personal curiosity, and experimenting with new operating methods (Garcia, 2000). Simultaneously, they exert influence on their social environment in terms of attitudes, feelings, actions, and, ultimately, performance (Avolio et al., 2014).

DT involves integrating technology into a complex system, which may require the firm to review its day-to-day activities and existing business models (Correani et al., 2020). This process often includes redesigning key operations (Safiullin and Akhmetshin, 2019) and can occur at various levels, such as the product level, process level, or the whole company's model, as described by Matzler and colleagues (2018). From an external marketing management perspective, successful implementation of these changes will result in a gradual increase in the speed and efficiency of product and service delivery practices (e.g. optimization of production times, as illustrated in Sestino et al., 2020). This will aim to meet the various needs of customers (Benlian et al., 2018), by offering a wider range and higher quality of services and products. This viewpoint appears to support the body of literature that explores the beneficial implications of DT perceived as external opportunities enabled by new digital technology (Parviainen et al., 2017). By adopting a more strategic perspective, the organization may indirectly improve its competitiveness by focusing on the internal dynamics and external factors emphasized in the framework. The progressive reconfiguration of internal organizational components following a specific digital strategy (Linkov et al., 2018) enables organizations to cultivate a novel value proposition that distinguishes them from their competitors in the market and ensures a competitive advantage (Björkdahl, 2020).

When considering the balancing of internal and external marketing orientations in designing effective business strategies, this study offers theoretical contributions to field of innovation management, and managerial studies (Greene et al., 1994; Lings, 1999; Park & Tran, 2018). Shedding light on the organizational and cultural dimensions affected by DT, our research firstly underscores the need for an integrated approach to marketing strategies. The identification of new managerial skills and the emergence of e-leadership in the digital era further enriches existing theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, insights into the transformation of production processes, service provision, and competitive strategies provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape, fostering a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the dual perspective of marketing management.

From a managerial perspective, the findings emphasize the necessity for managers to cultivate a conducive organizational culture supportive of change and technological adoption. Such an approach implies fostering an environment where employees are encouraged and empowered to embrace new technologies and adapt to evolving paradigms. Secondly, the study underscores the significance of investing in the development of new managerial competencies

1
2
3 tailored for the digital era, particularly in the realm of e-leadership. Thus, managers need to
4 acquire skills in digital literacy, change management, and the ability to effectively guide teams
5 through the complexities of DT initiatives.

6
7 Thirdly, findings shed light on the importance of integrating DT efforts into overarching
8 competitive strategies, emphasizing its role as a catalyst for enhancing production processes,
9 service provision, and overall competitiveness. Thus, managers should prioritize cultural
10 transformation, skill development, and strategic alignment to successfully navigate the
11 challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented by DT.
12
13

14 **6. Conclusions**

15 In this paper we explained how an holistic approach that contemplates both an internal and
16 external marketing perspective (Greene et al., 1994; Ling, 1999) is fundamental to understand
17 individuals' and "business" behavior in an attempt to manage the business DT. Indeed, the mere
18 and simple technological integration in production processes cannot ignore the emerging
19 culture inspired by digitization, which underlies the strategic planning of managers. The same
20 managers are required to enrich their skills and play a leading role in leading such
21 transformation processes. Specifically, companies would benefit from a synergistic and
22 integrated approach capable of spreading the corporate culture and guiding change with
23 appropriate figures characterized by strong e-leadership skills. Certainly, given that businesses
24 are made up of individuals, renewed leadership skills capable of guiding them through change
25 and inspiring them to achieve goals are critical, particularly when it comes to the leadership of
26 digital-based organizational changes (e-leadership). This means understanding and involving
27 the human variable, promoting a new approach both on the collective and individual levels, and
28 limiting attitudes, such as the sense of inadequacy, that lead people to reject change. The
29 combination of digital culture to be promoted and pursued by figures invested in the role of e-
30 leader (with both technical and soft skills, Avolio and Kahai, 2003), may allow the exploitation
31 of digital technologies to develop and implement projects of digital innovation. Only in this
32 way may the opportunities deriving from digital be maximized, resulting in an acceleration of
33 production and service delivery processes, indirectly contributing to business competitive
34 strategies.
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38 Importantly, by analyzing the dual marketing management perspective (internal vs.
39 external), we suggested an holistic approach in leading the DT. Indeed, by investigating the
40 internal dynamics and external factors influencing DT, our research offers valuable insights
41 into the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. In doing so, findings provide a comprehensive
42 framework that enhances academic discourse and provides actionable strategies for
43 organizations navigating the complexities of DT, as well as, the critical role of culture,
44 leadership, and strategic use of digital tools in driving successful DT initiatives.
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47 Despite the interesting findings, we acknowledge that our research may have some
48 limitations. Firstly, the research only focused on European companies and respondents: Future
49 studies may expand our insights to other countries, by shedding light on an international
50 perspective. Moreover, despite the powerfulness of a qualitative research design able to shed
51 light on a complex market phenomenon by bringing out the related latent variables, future
52 studies could adopt a quantitative approach in testing empirically the propositions presented in
53 the paper, together with the emerging variables. Finally, our research has been conducted during
54 the pandemic period, which, despite its macroeconomic negative effects, impressed a strong
55 acceleration to digital processes as the only way to maintain unaltered daily habits and activities
56 (Bresciani et al., 2021; Sestino et al., 2021); However, results may be influenced in part by such
57 exogenous phenomena.
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March, 18th 2024
 To Professor Vincenzo Corvello
 Editor of *European Journal of
 Innovation Management*

Dear Professor Corvello,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to revise again our paper ID EJIM-09-2023-0794, entitled “Exploring the Effects of Digital Transformation From A Dual (Internal vs. External) Marketing Management Perspective” which we submitted to the *European Journal of Innovation Management*.

We thank the reviewers for their valuable suggestions and comments: We now have revised our paper by following both yours, and the reviewers’ comments and suggestions, and we are now ready to resubmit it to your attention for possible publication in the *European Journal of Innovation Management*.

Below we provide a detailed report with reviewers’ comments on the left column and our responses on the right column.

The Authors

Reviewer 1

Reviewer 1’s Comment	Authors’ response
Recommendation: Accept	We thank the reviewer for appreciating our efforts and for suggesting “acceptance”
Additional Questions: 1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: Absolutely	We thank the reviewer.
2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: Yes, but they could have added a reference to the paper "How digital tools align with organizational agility and strengthen digital innovation in automotive startups" given the link between agile/digital innovation culture, leadership and digital tools. Choosing digital tools for an agile/digital innovation culture fit can accelerate digital innovation growth.	We thank the reviewer.
3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods	We thank the reviewer.

employed appropriate?: Absolutely, no remarks	
4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: Yes	We thank the reviewer.
5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: This research is in particular valid for old incumbents and maybe if ref to the PhH thesis "Organizational agility and digital innovation capability: the case of automotive startups" it would get some strength the results since the thesis spans from leadership, org culture, and digital tools. Internal and external.	We thank the reviewer.
6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the fields and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: Absolutely	We thank the reviewer.

Reviewer 2

Reviewer 2's Comment	Authors' response
Congratulations to the authors, the article is timely and interesting, but it could still be improved if they take into account the observations mentioned above.	We thank the reviewer for appreciating our efforts and for the opportunity to revise our paper again. In this R2, we now consider the new comments and suggestions provided.
1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: This is an article with a contemporary and interesting theme. However, it does not contain new and significant	We thank the reviewer for this suggestion; We now rewrote part of the Introduction/Theoretical Background section to welcome these suggestions.

<p>information and does not make a major theoretical contribution. It is a well-organised, well-structured article with an extensive literature review.</p> <p>Although the subject of marketing and human resource management is sometimes mixed up, which leads to some disenchantment.</p>	
<p>2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: See above.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer; we now improved the introduction and the positioning of our paper.</p>
<p>3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: In methodological terms, the article is well conceived and I have nothing to add.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for appreciating our methodological approach.</p>
<p>4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: The results were clearly presented and supported by theory. I found this procedure interesting and it enhanced the article.</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for appreciating our findings presentation.</p>
<p>5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?:</p> <p>The conclusions should be more related to the title of the work, namely to marketing issues and not just management, particularly leadership.</p> <p>The conclusions include limitations and future research.</p> <p>Practical and theoretical implications could also be emphasised.</p> <p>What is the article's key contribution(s)? To theory, to practice?</p>	<p>We thank the reviewer for this important comment.</p> <p>Firstly, as for the linkage between the conclusion and the “title” of our work, we now explain how we contribute in the aforementioned stream of research.</p> <p>Secondly, we thank the reviewer for appreciating and agreeing the limitations.</p> <p>Thirdly, we now propose fresher theoretical implications (also because the modifies related to the linkage between title and corpus of the document), and managerial ones.</p>

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6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the fields and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: The references should be uniform in the text and at the end.

We thank the reviewer for this comment; We now revised the entire paper to increase its readability, but also by focusing on possible typos, accidental mistakes and so on.

Moreover, we now double checked the references.

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