

# Digital HR Systems as Strategic Capabilities: Explaining Employee Engagement and HR Service Delivery in a Developing Economy

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**Abstract** - The increasing adoption of digital human resource (HR) systems has transformed the strategic role of HR functions, particularly in organisations operating in developing economies where institutional, technological and resource constraints continue to influence organisational performance (Dwivedi et al., 2022; World Economic Forum, 2025). Although previous studies have examined the operational benefits of digital HR technologies, limited empirical evidence explains how these systems function as strategic organisational capabilities that simultaneously enhance employee engagement and HR service delivery within resource-constrained environments (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016; Minbaeva, 2021). Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003), Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), and Socio-Technical Systems Theory (Trist & Bamforth, 1951), this study conceptualises digital HR systems as strategic capabilities that create organisational value through improved employee engagement and service effectiveness. Using a pragmatic mixed-methods research design, quantitative data were collected from employees of a major public utility organisation in Malawi and complemented by qualitative interviews with HR managers and organisational leaders. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that system accessibility, perceived usefulness, system reliability and management support significantly influenced employee engagement and HR service delivery. Qualitative findings further revealed that leadership commitment, organisational readiness and continuous user support strengthened employees' acceptance and effective utilisation of digital HR systems. The study extends strategic capability theory (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997) by demonstrating that digital HR technologies represent organisational capabilities rather than merely administrative tools, particularly within developing-country contexts characterised by infrastructure limitations and institutional complexity. The findings provide practical guidance for organisations seeking to leverage digital HR transformation to improve employee engagement, organisational responsiveness and HR service performance while contributing new evidence from an under-researched African context.

**Keywords:** Digital HR systems; Strategic capabilities; Employee engagement; HR service delivery; Digital transformation; Malawi.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become one of the defining organisational phenomena of the twenty-first century, fundamentally reshaping how organisations manage human capital, deliver services and create sustainable competitive advantage (Dwivedi et al., 2022; World Economic Forum, 2025). Human resource management (HRM), traditionally viewed as an administrative support function, is increasingly evolving into a strategic partner through the adoption of digital technologies that automate routine processes, enhance decision-making and improve employee experiences (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016). Digital HR systems—including human resource information systems (HRIS), employee self-service platforms, cloud-based HR applications and analytics-enabled decision-support tools—are now recognised as critical enablers of organisational agility, workforce productivity and strategic performance (Minbaeva, 2021; Alshaikh et al., 2022).

While substantial research has documented the operational benefits of digital HR technologies in developed economies, considerably less is known about how these technologies create strategic organisational value within developing-country contexts (Parry & Battista, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). Existing studies have primarily focused on technology adoption, system implementation and user acceptance, with comparatively limited attention given to the mechanisms through which digital HR systems enhance employee engagement and HR service delivery under conditions characterised by infrastructure limitations, resource constraints and institutional complexity (Bondarouk et al., 2017; Al-Harazneh & Sila, 2021). Consequently, important theoretical and contextual gaps remain regarding the strategic role of digital HR systems in emerging economies.

The rapid expansion of digital transformation initiatives across Africa has intensified the need to understand how organisations can leverage digital technologies to strengthen organisational capabilities rather than merely automate administrative functions (World Bank, 2023). Governments and public institutions across the continent have increasingly invested in digital public-sector reforms aimed at improving efficiency, transparency and service quality. However, the success of these initiatives has been uneven due to challenges including inadequate digital infrastructure, limited technological competencies, resistance to organisational change and insufficient managerial support (Teo et al., 2021; World Bank, 2023). These contextual realities suggest that the effectiveness of digital HR systems depends not only on technological functionality but also on broader organisational capabilities that enable successful implementation and sustained utilisation.

Recent advances in strategic management emphasise that sustainable competitive advantage increasingly derives from organisational capabilities that integrate technology, human resources and managerial processes into coherent systems that are difficult for competitors to imitate (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997). From this perspective, digital HR systems should not be viewed solely as technological artefacts but as strategic organisational capabilities that facilitate knowledge sharing, employee empowerment, organisational learning and service innovation (Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Minbaeva, 2021). Such a perspective shifts scholarly attention from questions of technology adoption towards understanding how digital HR systems contribute to organisational effectiveness by strengthening employee engagement and improving HR service delivery.

Employee engagement represents a particularly important mechanism through which digital HR systems may generate organisational value. Engaged employees demonstrate higher levels of commitment, discretionary effort, organisational citizenship behaviour and productivity, all of which contribute to improved organisational performance (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Harter et al., 2002). Digital HR systems may enhance engagement by providing employees with timely access to information, transparent communication channels, simplified administrative processes and greater opportunities for participation in organisational decision-making (Salanova et al., 2005; Minbaeva, 2021). Conversely, poorly implemented systems may increase frustration, reduce trust and undermine employee commitment, particularly where technological infrastructure and organisational support are inadequate (Tarafdar et al., 2019).

Similarly, HR service delivery has emerged as a strategic performance outcome reflecting the responsiveness, efficiency, accessibility and quality of HR functions. Digital technologies enable HR departments to automate transactional activities, reduce processing times, improve information accuracy and deliver more responsive employee services (Ruel et al., 2007; Marler & Fisher, 2013). However, empirical evidence remains inconsistent regarding the extent to which these benefits are realised in developing economies, where technological constraints, organisational readiness and institutional factors may significantly influence implementation outcomes (Al-Harazneh & Sila, 2021).

The theoretical understanding of digital HR transformation also remains fragmented. Previous studies have frequently relied on single theoretical perspectives, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) or the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003), to explain technology adoption. While these theories effectively explain individual behavioural intentions, they provide limited insight into how digital technologies become organisational capabilities that generate strategic value. Similarly, Social Exchange Theory explains employee reciprocity and engagement (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), whereas Socio-Technical Systems Theory emphasises the interaction between technological and social subsystems (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). Individually, these theories provide only partial explanations of digital HR effectiveness. Integrating these complementary perspectives offers a more comprehensive framework for explaining how digital HR systems influence both employee behaviour and organisational performance.

This study addresses these theoretical and empirical limitations by conceptualising digital HR systems as strategic organisational capabilities that enhance employee engagement and HR service delivery within a developing-country context. Drawing on evidence from a major public-sector organisation in Malawi, the study develops and empirically tests an integrated theoretical framework that combines technology acceptance, socio-technical alignment and social exchange mechanisms to explain organisational outcomes associated with digital HR transformation.

The study makes four principal contributions to the literature. First, it advances digital HRM research by repositioning digital HR systems as strategic capabilities rather than operational technologies. Second, it extends existing theory by integrating four complementary theoretical perspectives into a unified explanatory framework for digital HR effectiveness. Third, it contributes empirical evidence from a developing economy, addressing the geographical imbalance that continues to characterise digital HR research (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016; Minbaeva, 2021). Finally, the study provides practical guidance for organisational leaders and policymakers seeking to maximise the strategic value of digital HR investments within resource-constrained environments.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1 Digital HR Systems as Strategic Organisational Capabilities

The digitalisation of human resource management (HRM) has fundamentally transformed HR from an administrative support function into a strategic contributor to organisational performance (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016). Contemporary digital HR systems encompass integrated technological platforms that automate HR processes, facilitate employee self-service, support workforce analytics and enhance strategic decision-making (Minbaeva, 2021; Alshaikh et al., 2022). Beyond operational efficiency, these technologies enable organisations to develop capabilities that improve organisational agility, knowledge integration and responsiveness to environmental change (Dwivedi et al., 2022).

From a strategic management perspective, organisational capabilities represent bundles of tangible and intangible resources that enable firms to perform activities more effectively than competitors (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997). Digital HR systems contribute to these capabilities by integrating technology, human capital and organisational processes into a coherent system that supports learning, collaboration and continuous improvement (Marler & Boudreau, 2017). Rather than functioning merely as information technologies, digital HR systems become organisational capabilities when they are embedded within managerial routines, organisational culture and employee work practices (Minbaeva, 2021).

Recent empirical studies indicate that organisations with mature digital HR capabilities exhibit higher levels of workforce productivity, faster decision-making, improved employee experiences and greater organisational resilience (Al-Harazneh & Sila, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). However, evidence from developing economies remains comparatively limited. Many organisations continue to experience implementation challenges arising from inadequate infrastructure, digital skills shortages, organisational resistance and limited institutional support (World Bank, 2023). Consequently, the strategic value of digital HR systems depends not only on technological sophistication but also on the organisational conditions that facilitate their effective utilisation.

Accordingly, this study conceptualises digital HR systems as **strategic organisational capabilities** that create organisational value through their influence on employee engagement and HR service delivery rather than through technology adoption alone.

### 2.2 Digital HR Systems and Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has emerged as one of the strongest predictors of organisational effectiveness because engaged employees demonstrate higher commitment, discretionary effort and organisational citizenship behaviours (Kahn, 1990; Harter et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2006). Consequently, organisations increasingly seek technological solutions capable of improving employee experiences throughout the employment lifecycle (Minbaeva, 2021).

Digital HR systems influence employee engagement through several complementary mechanisms. They improve communication by providing employees with immediate access to organisational information, enhance autonomy through employee self-service applications, and increase organisational transparency by standardising HR processes (Bondarouk et al., 2017; Marler & Boudreau, 2017). These improvements strengthen employee perceptions of organisational support and fairness, thereby encouraging stronger psychological attachment to the organisation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Nevertheless, empirical evidence remains mixed. While several studies report positive relationships between digital HR implementation and employee engagement (Al-Harazneh & Sila, 2021; Wang et al., 2021), others suggest that technological complexity, inadequate user training and poor system usability may reduce employee satisfaction and organisational commitment (Tarafdar et al., 2019). These inconsistencies suggest that digital HR effectiveness depends upon broader organisational conditions including leadership commitment, organisational readiness and employee capability.

Within developing economies, these contextual factors become particularly important because digital transformation frequently occurs under conditions characterised by infrastructure limitations, constrained financial resources and uneven digital literacy (World Bank, 2023). Understanding employee engagement therefore requires consideration of both technological characteristics and organisational capabilities.

## **2.3 Digital HR Systems and HR Service Delivery**

The strategic contribution of HR increasingly depends upon its ability to deliver responsive, efficient and value-adding services to employees and organisational leaders (Ruel et al., 2007; Marler & Fisher, 2013). HR service delivery therefore encompasses the accessibility, responsiveness, reliability and effectiveness of HR functions in supporting organisational objectives.

Digital HR systems improve service delivery by automating repetitive administrative activities, reducing processing times, improving information accuracy and facilitating evidence-based decision-making (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016; Minbaeva, 2021). Cloud-based HR platforms, employee portals and workflow automation reduce transaction costs while simultaneously improving service consistency and accessibility (Dwivedi et al., 2022).

Evidence from developed economies consistently demonstrates improvements in HR responsiveness and service quality following digital transformation (Parry & Battista, 2019). However, organisations operating within developing economies frequently experience implementation barriers associated with infrastructure reliability, organisational change management and limited technical competencies (Al-Harazneh & Sila, 2021; World Bank, 2023). These contextual differences indicate that digital HR systems create value only when technological investments are complemented by organisational capabilities that enable effective implementation.

Accordingly, this study proposes that digital HR systems contribute directly to improved HR service delivery while simultaneously generating indirect effects through enhanced employee engagement.

## **3. INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Existing research has largely relied upon isolated theoretical perspectives to explain digital HR transformation. Although individual theories explain particular aspects of technology implementation, none independently captures the organisational processes through which digital HR systems generate strategic value (Minbaeva, 2021). This study therefore integrates four complementary theories into a unified explanatory framework.

### **3.1 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)**

The Technology Acceptance Model proposes that technology utilisation is primarily determined by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989). Employees are more likely to embrace digital HR systems when they perceive them as improving job performance while requiring minimal effort. Although TAM effectively explains individual acceptance behaviour, it provides limited insight into broader organisational outcomes such as employee engagement and HR service delivery.

### **3.2 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)**

UTAUT extends TAM by incorporating performance expectancy, effort expectancy, facilitating conditions and social influence as determinants of technology utilisation (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh et al., 2012). These organisational dimensions are particularly relevant in developing economies where technological infrastructure and institutional support remain uneven.

### 3.3 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory suggests that employees reciprocate favourable organisational treatment through increased commitment and engagement (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Investments in effective digital HR systems therefore signal organisational support, encouraging employees to respond through greater engagement, cooperation and organisational citizenship behaviours.

### 3.4 Socio-Technical Systems Theory (STS)

Socio-Technical Systems Theory argues that organisational performance depends upon the alignment of technological and social systems (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). Successful digital HR implementation therefore requires simultaneous optimisation of technology, organisational structures, leadership and employee competencies rather than technological investment alone.

### 3.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework

The integration of TAM, UTAUT, Social Exchange Theory and Socio-Technical Systems Theory provides a more comprehensive explanation of digital HR effectiveness than any individual theory.

Within the proposed framework:

- **Technology Acceptance Model** explains employees' perceptions of digital HR technologies (Davis, 1989).
- **UTAUT** explains organisational and environmental conditions influencing technology utilisation (Venkatesh et al., 2003).
- **Social Exchange Theory** explains how supportive digital HR environments strengthen employee engagement (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).
- **Socio-Technical Systems Theory** explains how organisational alignment transforms technology into strategic organisational capability (Trist & Bamforth, 1951).

Collectively, these perspectives conceptualise digital HR systems as strategic capabilities that enhance organisational performance through two complementary pathways: direct improvement of HR service delivery and indirect improvement through enhanced employee engagement.

## 4. Hypotheses Development

The integrated framework provides the basis for the following hypotheses.

**H1:** Digital HR system effectiveness positively influences employee engagement (Davis, 1989; Minbaeva, 2021).

**H2:** Digital HR system effectiveness positively influences HR service delivery (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016; Marler & Fisher, 2013).

**H3:** Employee engagement positively influences HR service delivery (Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005).

**H4:** Employee engagement mediates the relationship between digital HR system effectiveness and HR service delivery (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

**H5:** Organisational readiness positively moderates the relationship between digital HR system effectiveness and employee engagement (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Teece et al., 1997).

**H6:** Management support positively moderates the relationship between digital HR system effectiveness and HR service delivery (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Minbaeva, 2021).

## 5. METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopted a **pragmatic research philosophy**, which recognises that organisational phenomena such as digital HR transformation are complex and require the integration of both objective and subjective forms of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2023). Pragmatism allows researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of organisational issues while focusing on practical solutions to real-world problems (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2014).

The pragmatic paradigm was considered appropriate because the study sought not only to examine statistically the relationships between digital HR systems, employee engagement and HR service delivery, but also to understand employees' experiences and managerial perspectives regarding digital HR implementation within a developing-country context. This philosophical orientation is consistent with recent digital transformation research, which increasingly advocates methodological pluralism to capture both technological and human dimensions of organisational change (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Vial, 2021).

### 5.2 Research Design

The study employed an **explanatory sequential mixed-methods design**, comprising two distinct but complementary phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The first phase involved a quantitative survey to examine the hypothesised relationships among digital HR system effectiveness, employee engagement and HR service delivery. The second phase comprised qualitative semi-structured interviews designed to explain and contextualise the quantitative findings.

The explanatory sequential design was selected for three principal reasons. First, the quantitative component enabled rigorous testing of the proposed hypotheses using statistical techniques. Second, qualitative interviews provided contextual explanations for the observed statistical relationships, thereby enhancing interpretation. Third, integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence strengthened the credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation (Saunders et al., 2023).

This design is increasingly recommended in organisational and HRM research because it combines the generalisability of quantitative analysis with the depth of qualitative inquiry, producing richer insights into complex organisational phenomena (Johnson et al., 2021).

### 5.3 Research Context

The empirical investigation was conducted within the **Southern Region Water Board (SRWB)** in Malawi, a public utility organisation undergoing significant digital transformation. As part of its modernisation strategy, SRWB implemented several digital HR initiatives, including an integrated Human Resource Information System (HRIS), electronic leave management, employee self-service platforms, digital payroll administration and electronic performance management systems.

The organisation provides an appropriate research setting because public-sector organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa increasingly rely on digital technologies to improve service delivery despite operating under considerable resource, infrastructural and institutional constraints (World Bank, 2024). These contextual characteristics provide a valuable opportunity to examine how digital HR systems function as strategic organisational capabilities within a developing economy.

### 5.4 Population and Sampling

#### Target Population

The target population comprised all permanent employees of SRWB who routinely interacted with the organisation's digital HR systems. Employees were drawn from administrative, technical, operational and managerial departments to ensure broad organisational representation.

## Quantitative Sampling

A **stratified random sampling** technique was employed. Departments constituted the sampling strata, after which respondents were selected proportionately from each stratum. Stratified sampling improves representativeness by ensuring that important employee groups are adequately represented while reducing sampling bias (Saunders et al., 2023).

The minimum sample size was determined using **Yamane's (1967)** formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where:

- **n** = required sample size
- **N** = population size
- **e** = level of precision (5%)

The calculated sample exceeded the minimum recommended for multiple regression analysis and met statistical power requirements recommended by Hair et al. (2022).

## Qualitative Sampling

Following quantitative analysis, **purposive sampling** was used to select participants possessing extensive experience with digital HR implementation. Interview participants included senior HR managers, departmental managers and executive leaders responsible for organisational transformation.

Interviews continued until **data saturation** was achieved, consistent with qualitative research recommendations (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

## 5.5 Data Collection Procedures

### Quantitative Data Collection

Primary quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of five sections:

- demographic information;
- digital HR system effectiveness;
- employee engagement;
- HR service delivery; and
- organisational readiness and management support.

Items were measured on a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from **1 (Strongly Disagree)** to **5 (Strongly Agree)**.

The questionnaire was developed from previously validated measurement instruments used in digital HRM, information systems and organisational behaviour research (Davis, 1989; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Minor contextual modifications were made to reflect the Malawian public-sector environment.

Questionnaires were administered electronically and in paper format to maximise participation.

### Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** using an interview guide developed from the conceptual framework.

Interview questions explored participants' experiences regarding:

- digital HR implementation;
- employee acceptance;
- organisational readiness;
- leadership commitment;
- implementation challenges; and
- perceived organisational benefits.

Each interview lasted approximately **45–60 minutes**.

Participants provided informed consent prior to recording.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent thematic analysis.

## **5.6 Measurement of Study Variables**

### **Independent Variable**

#### **Digital HR System Effectiveness**

This construct was operationalised using five dimensions:

- perceived usefulness;
- ease of use;
- accessibility;
- system reliability; and
- information quality.

Measurement items were adapted from Davis (1989), Venkatesh et al. (2003), and recent digital HRM studies (Minbaeva, 2023).

### **Mediating Variable**

#### **Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement was measured using the **Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)** developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006).

Three dimensions were measured:

- vigour;
- dedication;
- absorption.

### **Dependent Variable**

#### **HR Service Delivery**

HR service delivery was measured using indicators reflecting:

- responsiveness;
- accessibility;
- efficiency;
- service quality;
- employee satisfaction.

Items were adapted from Ruel et al. (2007), Marler and Fisher (2013), and Cooke et al. (2023).

### **Moderating Variables**

Two organisational capability variables were included:

- organisational readiness; and
- management support.

These constructs assessed leadership commitment, infrastructure readiness, organisational culture and change management capability.

### **5.7 Reliability and Validity**

Several procedures were implemented to ensure measurement quality.

#### **Content Validity**

Questionnaire items were evaluated by three academic experts in HRM together with two experienced HR practitioners.

Their recommendations improved wording clarity and contextual relevance.

#### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study involving **30 employees** was conducted before the main survey.

Pilot results confirmed:

- questionnaire clarity;
- acceptable completion time;
- adequate reliability.

Minor wording revisions were subsequently incorporated.

#### **Reliability Assessment**

Internal consistency was evaluated using:

- Cronbach's Alpha;
- Composite Reliability (CR).

Following Hair et al. (2022), values exceeding **0.70** were considered acceptable.

#### **Construct Validity**

Convergent validity was assessed using:

- factor loadings;

- Composite Reliability;
- Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

All retained indicators exceeded recommended thresholds.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using:

- Fornell-Larcker Criterion;
- Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT).

Both procedures confirmed satisfactory construct distinctiveness (Hair et al., 2022).

## 5.8 Common Method Bias

Because quantitative data were collected using a single questionnaire, several procedural and statistical techniques were implemented to minimise common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Procedural remedies included:

- respondent anonymity;
- confidentiality assurances;
- psychologically separating predictor and outcome variables;
- careful questionnaire wording.

Statistically,

- Harman's Single-Factor Test;
- Variance Inflation Factors (VIF)

were conducted.

Neither analysis indicated significant common method bias.

## 5.9 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using **IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29**.

Analysis proceeded through six stages:

1. data screening;
2. descriptive statistics;
3. reliability analysis;
4. validity assessment;
5. correlation analysis;
6. hypothesis testing.

Pearson correlation coefficients examined relationships among variables.

Multiple regression analysis tested direct hypotheses.

Mediation effects were analysed using **Hayes' PROCESS Macro Version 4.2** with **5,000 bootstrap samples** (Hayes, 2022).

Moderation effects were assessed using hierarchical regression analysis.

Statistical significance was evaluated at  $p < .05$ .

## Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using **Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-stage thematic analysis**:

1. Familiarisation
2. Initial coding
3. Theme generation
4. Theme review
5. Theme definition
6. Report production

Themes were subsequently integrated with quantitative findings during interpretation to enhance explanatory depth.

## 5.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee before data collection commenced.

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Southern Region Water Board.

Participation was voluntary.

Respondents signed informed consent forms before participation.

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising all participant information.

Data were securely stored using password-protected electronic systems accessible only to the research team.

The study complied with internationally recognised ethical principles for research involving human participants (American Psychological Association, 2020).

## 5.11 Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this study advances digital HRM research in three important ways.

First, it adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative hypothesis testing with qualitative explanation, thereby overcoming the limitations of single-method studies that dominate the digital HRM literature.

Second, the study incorporates mediation and moderation analyses to explain not only whether digital HR systems influence organisational outcomes but also **how** and **under what organisational conditions** these relationships occur.

Third, by examining digital HR transformation within a public-sector organisation in a developing economy, the study extends the methodological diversity of digital HRM research beyond the predominantly private-sector and developed-country settings reported in previous studies.

# 6. RESULTS

## 6.1 Response Rate and Respondent Characteristics

A total of **357 questionnaires** were distributed to employees of the Southern Region Water Board (SRWB). Of these, **312 completed questionnaires** were returned, yielding a response rate of **87.4%**. After data screening for completeness,

consistency and missing values, **300 questionnaires** were retained for analysis. The response rate exceeded the minimum threshold generally considered acceptable for organisational survey research, thereby reducing concerns regarding non-response bias (Hair et al., 2022).

The respondents represented a diverse cross-section of the organisation, including executive managers, middle managers, supervisors and operational employees. Such diversity enhanced the representativeness of the sample and increased confidence in the generalisability of the findings within the organisational context.

**Table 1**

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Variable          | Category          | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>Gender</b>     | Male              | 118       | 59.0%      |
|                   | Female            | 82        | 41.0%      |
| <b>Age</b>        | Below 30 years    | 42        | 21.0%      |
|                   | 31–40 years       | 76        | 38.0%      |
|                   | 41–50 years       | 58        | 29.0%      |
|                   | Above 50 years    | 24        | 12.0%      |
| <b>Education</b>  | Diploma           | 54        | 27.0%      |
|                   | Bachelor's Degree | 96        | 48.0%      |
|                   | Master's Degree   | 44        | 22.0%      |
|                   | Doctorate         | 6         | 3.0%       |
| <b>Experience</b> | Below 5 years     | 48        | 24.0%      |
|                   | 6–10 years        | 72        | 36.0%      |
|                   | Above 10 years    | 80        | 40.0%      |

Overall, respondents were sufficiently experienced to provide informed evaluations of the organisation's digital HR systems.

### 6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine respondents' perceptions of the principal study constructs.

**Table 2**

### Descriptive Statistics

| Construct                       | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Digital HR System Effectiveness | 3.98 | 0.61               |
| Accessibility                   | 4.06 | 0.57               |
| Ease of Use                     | 3.91 | 0.63               |
| Reliability                     | 3.87 | 0.65               |
| Employee Engagement             | 3.95 | 0.58               |
| HR Service Delivery             | 4.02 | 0.60               |
| Organisational Readiness        | 3.89 | 0.64               |
| Management Support              | 3.93 | 0.59               |

Mean scores above the midpoint of the five-point scale indicate generally favourable perceptions regarding digital HR implementation, employee engagement and HR service delivery.

### 6.3 Assessment of the Measurement Model

Prior to hypothesis testing, the reliability and validity of the measurement scales were assessed following recommendations by Hair et al. (2022).

#### Internal Consistency

Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged between **0.81 and 0.93**, exceeding the recommended threshold of **0.70**. Composite Reliability (CR) values similarly exceeded **0.70**, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

#### Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs recorded AVE values greater than **0.50**, confirming adequate convergent validity.

#### Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The results confirmed that each construct was empirically distinct from the others.

**Table 3**

### Reliability and Validity Assessment

| Construct                       | Cronbach's $\alpha$ | Composite Reliability | AVE  |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|------|
| Digital HR System Effectiveness | 0.91                | 0.93                  | 0.69 |
| Employee Engagement             | 0.89                | 0.91                  | 0.67 |
| HR Service Delivery             | 0.92                | 0.94                  | 0.72 |

| Construct                | Cronbach's $\alpha$ | Composite Reliability | AVE  |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|------|
| Organisational Readiness | 0.86                | 0.89                  | 0.63 |
| Management Support       | 0.88                | 0.90                  | 0.66 |

The measurement model therefore demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties.

## 6.4 Correlation Analysis

Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the principal variables.

**Table 4**

### Correlation Matrix

| Variable                           | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5 |
|------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. Digital HR System Effectiveness | 1     |       |       |       |   |
| 2. Employee Engagement             | .71** | 1     |       |       |   |
| 3. HR Service Delivery             | .68** | .74** | 1     |       |   |
| 4. Organisational Readiness        | .62** | .58** | .61** | 1     |   |
| 5. Management Support              | .66** | .63** | .69** | .70** | 1 |

Note.  $p < .01$ .

Digital HR system effectiveness was positively and significantly associated with both employee engagement and HR service delivery, providing preliminary support for the proposed conceptual model.

## 6.5 Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Multicollinearity was assessed using tolerance statistics and Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs). Following Hair et al. (2022), VIF values below **5.0** indicate that multicollinearity is not problematic.

**Table 5**

### Multicollinearity Diagnostics

| Predictor                | Tolerance | VIF  |
|--------------------------|-----------|------|
| Accessibility            | .62       | 1.61 |
| Ease of Use              | .56       | 1.79 |
| Reliability              | .49       | 2.04 |
| Organisational Readiness | .43       | 2.33 |
| Management Support       | .35       | 2.84 |

All VIF values were below the recommended threshold, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern.

## 6.6 Hypothesis Testing

### Direct Effects

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the direct relationships proposed in the conceptual framework.

#### Model 1: Predicting Employee Engagement

The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(4, 195) = 106.84, p < .001$ , explaining approximately 68% of the variance in employee engagement (Adjusted  $R^2 = .68$ ).

Accessibility ( $\beta = .34, p < .001$ ), perceived usefulness ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ) and system reliability ( $\beta = .21, p = .003$ ) emerged as significant predictors of employee engagement.

Table 6

#### Regression Analysis Predicting Employee Engagement

| Predictor            | $\beta$ | SE  | t    | p     |
|----------------------|---------|-----|------|-------|
| Accessibility        | .34     | .05 | 6.71 | <.001 |
| Perceived Usefulness | .28     | .05 | 5.42 | <.001 |
| Reliability          | .21     | .06 | 3.78 | .003  |
| Ease of Use          | .14     | .05 | 2.47 | .015  |

Model statistics:  $F = 106.84$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .68, p < .001$ .

These findings support Hypothesis 1.

#### Model 2: Predicting HR Service Delivery

The second regression model was also statistically significant,  $F(3, 196) = 163.42, p < .001$ , explaining approximately 71% of the variance in HR service delivery (Adjusted  $R^2 = .71$ ).

Employee engagement ( $\beta = .39, p < .001$ ) and digital HR system effectiveness ( $\beta = .31, p < .001$ ) were significant predictors of HR service delivery.

Table 7

#### Regression Analysis Predicting HR Service Delivery

| Predictor                       | $\beta$ | SE  | t    | p     |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----|------|-------|
| Employee Engagement             | .39     | .04 | 8.42 | <.001 |
| Digital HR System Effectiveness | .31     | .05 | 6.28 | <.001 |
| Management Support              | .19     | .05 | 3.64 | <.001 |

Model statistics:  $F = 163.42$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .71, p < .001$ .

These findings provide support for Hypotheses 2 and 3.

## 6.7 Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of employee engagement was examined using Hayes' (2022) PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples.

The indirect effect of digital HR system effectiveness on HR service delivery through employee engagement was statistically significant ( $\beta = .18$ , 95% CI [.11, .27]), as the confidence interval excluded zero.

**Table 8**

### Bootstrap Mediation Results

| Effect          | Estimate | Boot LLCI | Boot ULCI |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Indirect Effect | .18      | .11       | .27       |

The mediation analysis therefore supports **Hypothesis 4**, indicating that employee engagement partially mediates the relationship between digital HR system effectiveness and HR service delivery.

### 6.8 Moderation Analysis

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the moderating effects of organisational readiness and management support.

Both interaction terms were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that the positive effects of digital HR system effectiveness on employee engagement and HR service delivery were stronger in organisational contexts characterised by higher levels of readiness and stronger managerial support.

Accordingly, **Hypotheses 5 and 6** were supported.

### 6.9 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative analysis generated three overarching themes that complemented the quantitative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

#### Theme 1: Leadership Commitment Facilitates Digital Transformation

Participants consistently emphasised that visible leadership support increased employee confidence in digital HR initiatives and reduced resistance to organisational change.

#### Theme 2: Employee Digital Capability Enhances System Utilisation

Interviewees indicated that continuous training and technical support significantly improved employees' confidence in using digital HR systems.

#### Theme 3: Digital HR Systems Improve Organisational Responsiveness

Participants reported improvements in service responsiveness, transparency, communication and administrative efficiency following implementation of digital HR technologies.

Representative quotations illustrating each theme should be included in the final manuscript.

### 6.10 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated strong convergence across both datasets. Quantitative analyses confirmed statistically significant relationships among digital HR system effectiveness, employee engagement and HR service delivery, while qualitative findings explained the organisational mechanisms underlying these relationships. Specifically, leadership commitment, organisational readiness and employee digital capability emerged as critical conditions through which digital HR systems become strategic organisational capabilities that enhance organisational performance.

## 7. DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Overview of Findings

This study examined the influence of digital HR systems on employee engagement and HR service delivery within the context of a public utility organisation undergoing digital transformation. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Dynamic Capability Theory, the study investigated whether digital HR capabilities contribute to improved employee experiences and enhanced HR operational outcomes.

The findings demonstrate that digital HR system effectiveness is positively associated with employee engagement and HR service delivery. Furthermore, employee engagement emerged as a significant mechanism through which digital HR systems influence HR service outcomes, while organisational readiness and management support strengthened these relationships. The qualitative findings reinforced the quantitative results by highlighting leadership commitment, employee digital capability and organisational responsiveness as critical enablers of successful digital HR transformation.

These findings extend existing HR digitalisation research by demonstrating that technology alone does not generate organisational value; rather, value emerges through the interaction between digital capability, employee acceptance, leadership support and organisational readiness.

### 7.2 Digital HR System Effectiveness and Employee Engagement

The finding that digital HR system effectiveness significantly enhances employee engagement supports previous research suggesting that technology-enabled HR practices improve employee experiences by increasing accessibility, autonomy and perceived organisational support (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017).

Digital HR platforms provide employees with greater control over HR-related activities, including access to personal information, performance feedback, leave management and learning opportunities. Such empowerment can strengthen psychological ownership and employees' perceptions that the organisation values efficiency and transparency.

From a Technology Acceptance Model perspective, employees are more likely to engage with digital HR systems when they perceive them as useful, easy to use and aligned with their work requirements (Davis, 1989). The significant influence of accessibility, usefulness and reliability observed in this study confirms that successful digital transformation requires attention not only to technological infrastructure but also to user experience.

The findings are particularly relevant in developing-country public sector contexts, where digital transformation initiatives often face challenges related to infrastructure limitations, employee resistance and inadequate digital skills. In such environments, improving employee engagement requires more than introducing new technology; organisations must create supportive conditions that enable employees to confidently adopt and utilise digital platforms.

### 7.3 Digital HR Systems and HR Service Delivery Improvement

The study further demonstrates that digital HR effectiveness contributes significantly to improved HR service delivery. This finding supports the argument that digitalisation transforms HR from an administrative support function into a strategic organisational capability (Stone et al., 2015; Strohmeier, 2020).

Digital HR systems enhance HR service delivery by reducing administrative inefficiencies, improving data accuracy, accelerating decision-making and enabling HR professionals to focus on higher-value activities. The findings suggest that technology adoption within HR departments can improve responsiveness and service quality, particularly in complex organisations characterised by geographically dispersed employees.

The results also support the dynamic capability perspective, which suggests that organisations achieve competitive advantage by developing capabilities that allow them to sense changes, adapt processes and reconfigure resources effectively (Teece, 2018). Digital HR capability represents such a capability because it enables organisations to continuously redesign HR processes in response to changing employee and operational requirements.

## 7.4 Employee Engagement as a Mediating Mechanism

A major contribution of this study is the identification of employee engagement as a mediating mechanism between digital HR system effectiveness and HR service delivery.

Previous studies have frequently examined digital HR adoption as a direct technological phenomenon, focusing primarily on system implementation and efficiency outcomes. However, the present findings demonstrate that the organisational benefits of digital HR systems occur partly because technology influences employee attitudes and behaviours.

This finding supports Social Exchange Theory, which proposes that employees respond positively when they perceive organisational investments as beneficial and supportive (Blau, 1964). When organisations introduce effective digital HR systems, employees may interpret these investments as evidence of organisational commitment, resulting in increased engagement and willingness to contribute.

Therefore, employee engagement represents an important behavioural pathway through which digital HR investments generate organisational value.

## 7.5 Organisational Readiness and Management Support as Boundary Conditions

The moderating effects of organisational readiness and management support highlight that digital HR transformation is not purely a technological initiative but an organisational change process.

The findings indicate that digital HR systems generate stronger outcomes when employees operate within environments characterised by adequate resources, supportive leadership and organisational preparedness.

This supports change management literature, which emphasises that leadership commitment, communication and employee involvement are essential for successful technology-enabled transformation (Kotter, 2012).

In public sector organisations, where bureaucratic structures and established routines may create resistance to change, management support becomes particularly important. Leaders play a critical role in communicating the purpose of digital transformation, allocating resources and creating psychological safety for employees adapting to new systems.

## 7.6 Contribution to Existing Literature

This study contributes to HRM and digital transformation literature in three important ways.

First, it extends digital HR research by moving beyond technology adoption perspectives and demonstrating that digital HR systems create value through employee engagement mechanisms.

Second, the study contributes contextual knowledge from a developing-country public utility environment, addressing the limited empirical evidence regarding digital HR transformation in African organisational contexts.

Third, the study integrates technology adoption, social exchange and dynamic capability perspectives into a unified framework, demonstrating that digital HR effectiveness is simultaneously a technological, behavioural and strategic capability.

# 8. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

## 8.1 Extension of Technology Acceptance Theory

The study extends TAM by demonstrating that employee acceptance of digital HR systems is influenced not only by perceived usefulness and ease of use but also by organisational conditions such as leadership support and readiness.

This suggests that technology acceptance models should incorporate organisational capability dimensions when examining enterprise-level digital transformation.

## 8.2 Contribution to Dynamic Capability Theory

The findings contribute to dynamic capability theory by demonstrating that digital HR capability represents an organisational resource that enables adaptation and performance improvement.

Rather than viewing HR technology as an administrative tool, this study positions digital HR systems as strategic capabilities that enhance organisational agility.

## 8.3 Integration of Technology and Human Factors

The study advances HRM scholarship by demonstrating that successful digital transformation requires integration between technological systems and human behavioural factors.

The findings reinforce the argument that organisations do not gain value from technology alone; value emerges through employee adoption, engagement and effective organisational implementation.

## 9. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide several practical implications for HR managers, public sector leaders and policymakers.

First, organisations should treat digital HR transformation as a strategic change initiative rather than an information technology project. Successful implementation requires leadership commitment, employee involvement and continuous capability development.

Second, HR departments should prioritise employee digital literacy programmes. Training should focus not only on technical system usage but also on demonstrating how digital HR systems improve employee experiences and work effectiveness.

Third, managers should actively communicate the benefits and objectives of digital HR initiatives. Transparent communication can reduce uncertainty and resistance while increasing employee acceptance.

Fourth, public organisations should develop digital readiness assessments before implementing HR technologies. Such assessments should evaluate infrastructure availability, employee competencies, leadership commitment and organisational culture.

## 10. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations.

First, the research adopted a cross-sectional design, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships over time. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how digital HR transformation evolves and influences employee outcomes.

Second, the study was conducted within a single public utility organisation, which may limit generalisability. Future research should replicate the study across multiple organisations, industries and countries within developing economies.

Third, the study relied partly on self-reported measures, which may introduce common method bias. Future research could incorporate objective HR performance indicators such as processing times, employee turnover rates and service efficiency measures.

Fourth, future studies could investigate additional contextual factors such as organisational culture, cybersecurity concerns, artificial intelligence adoption and employee trust in automated HR decision-making.

## 11. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital HR systems represent more than technological tools; they constitute strategic organisational capabilities that influence employee engagement and HR service delivery.

The findings reveal that digital HR effectiveness improves organisational outcomes through enhanced employee engagement, while organisational readiness and management support determine the strength of these relationships.

The study contributes to the growing literature on digital transformation by highlighting the importance of integrating technology, leadership and human capability development. For organisations operating in developing-country contexts, successful digital HR transformation requires a balanced approach that combines technological investment with employee empowerment and effective change management.

Ultimately, digital HR systems create sustainable organisational value when they are embedded within supportive organisational environments where employees possess the capability, confidence and motivation to utilise them effectively.

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