

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Digital Leadership in Latin America: Key Competencies for Managers

Liderazgo digital en Latinoamérica: Competencias clave para gerentes

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Abstract This study examines key digital leadership competencies in the Latin American context, aiming to identify priority skills for managers leading technological transformation processes in both public and private organizations. The investigation was conducted using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach. In the first phase, a systematic review of scientific literature indexed in databases such as Scopus and Web of Science was conducted to define a solid conceptual framework. In the second phase, a structured survey was administered to 126 managers from five Latin American countries, complemented by semi-structured interviews with organizational experts. The results showed that interpersonal competencies were the most valued by participants, followed by digital techniques and strategic competencies. Adaptive and ethical competencies received lower relative weighting, which poses challenges in terms of sustainability and digital governance. Factor analysis and the AHP method enabled the identification of distinct digital leadership profiles and a ranking of competition dimensions based on their perceived impact. The study's conclusions highlighted the need to strengthen comprehensive training programs that encompass both soft and technical skills, as well as ethical skills, and to create institutional conditions that facilitate the effective development of digital leadership. Recommendations were proposed for universities, human talent managers, and decision-makers in the public sector.

Keywords digital leadership, management competencies, organizational transformation, interpersonal skills, digital ethics.

Resumen Este estudio analizó las competencias del liderazgo digital en el contexto latinoamericano, con el objetivo de identificar aquellas habilidades prioritarias para gerentes que lideran procesos de transformación tecnológica en organizaciones públicas y privadas. La investigación se desarrolló bajo un enfoque mixto de tipo secuencial explicativo. En una primera fase, se realizó una revisión sistemática de literatura científica indexada en bases de datos como Scopus y Web of Science, para delimitar un marco conceptual sólido. En una segunda fase, se aplicó una encuesta estructurada a 126 gerentes de cinco países latinoamericanos, complementada con entrevistas semiestructuradas a expertos del ámbito organizacional. Los resultados evidenciaron que las competencias interpersonales fueron las más valoradas por los participantes, seguidas por las técnicas digitales y las estratégicas. Las competencias adaptativas y éticas obtuvieron una menor ponderación relativa, lo cual plantea desafíos en términos de sostenibilidad y gobernanza digital. El análisis factorial y el método AHP permitieron identificar perfiles diferenciados de liderazgo digital y jerarquizar las dimensiones competenciales según su impacto percibido. Se destacó la necesidad de fortalecer programas formativos integrales que incluyan habilidades blandas, técnicas y éticas, así como de generar condiciones institucionales que permitan el desarrollo efectivo del liderazgo digital. Se propusieron recomendaciones para universidades, responsables de talento humano y tomadores de decisiones en el sector público.

Palabras clave inteligencia emocional, desempeño laboral, entornos híbridos, gestión del talento humano, psicología organizacional.

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Introduction

The rise of digital transformation has reconfigured organizational dynamics globally, affecting not only production processes but also leadership styles, management structures, and how individuals and teams interact. In Latin America, this transformation has been uneven but sustained, with countries such as Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil leading the way in digitalization initiatives. At the same time, other economies face limitations in infrastructure, training, and access to technologies (CAF, 2021). This scenario requires managers, as key leaders of organizational change, to develop a renewed set of skills to address the challenges of the digital environment effectively.

Digital leadership, understood as the ability to mobilize people and organizations toward technological innovation and cultural transformation through the strategic use of digital tools, has become an essential competency for contemporary leaders (Northouse, 2021). This type of leadership is characterized by its flexible, collaborative, and results-oriented approach, focusing on continuous learning, change management, and the ethical integration of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data, and collaborative platforms (García-Peñalvo et al., 2022).

According to the “Digital Governance Index for Latin America” report (ECLAC, 2023), more than 70% of the organizations surveyed recognize that the lack of digital skills among their management teams constitutes a significant barrier to the adoption of disruptive technologies. Likewise, a recent study by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB, 2022) highlights that the lag in the development of digital skills among Latin American leaders represents a bottleneck for moving toward more agile, sustainable, and innovative organizational models.

In this sense, digital leadership competencies are not restricted to the mastery of technological tools, but encompass cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. These include skills such as digital strategic vision, collaborative leadership, emotional intelligence, knowledge management, resilience to change, and ethics in digital environments (Goleman, 2022; Kane et al., 2019). Developing these competencies requires deliberate training processes, human capital policies informed by data analytics, and management models that foster digital and inclusive organizational cultures.

While there have been specific advances in Latin America—such as executive training programs in digital leadership at elite universities or corporate digital transformation policies in sectors like banking, telecommunications, and

healthcare—systematized empirical evidence on key digital leadership competencies remains scarce. In particular, there is limited knowledge about how these competencies manifest in the practice of managers in Latin American organizations, what factors influence their development, and what gaps are perceived in their training.

Recent academic literature has begun to systematize digital leadership models in European and North American contexts (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2023; El Sawy et al., 2020), but few studies address this topic from a Latin American perspective, considering the sociopolitical complexity, labor informality, the gender gap in management positions, and the structural limitations of the regional environment. This theoretical and practical gap hinders the formulation of leadership policies and programs that are truly adapted to the local context.

Within this framework, this study aims to identify and analyze key digital leadership competencies in Latin American managers, combining a systematic review of academic literature indexed in Scopus and WoS databases with an exploratory empirical study applied to a sample of leaders from organizations across different sectors. The hypothesis is that digital leadership in Latin America is at an uneven stage of maturity, with the incipient development of specific critical competencies, influenced by institutional, cultural, and organizational factors.

This approach enables a comprehensive view of digital leadership, encompassing both structural elements (infrastructure, ICT policies, and organizational culture) and subjective elements (soft skills, leadership styles, and attitudes toward technology) to propose a competency model tailored to the Latin American environment. The research also aims to provide concrete recommendations for management training programs, the design of digital transformation strategies, and the formulation of public policies to foster the development of managerial talent.

This article is structured in five sections. First, this contextual and theoretical introduction is presented. The research methodology used is then described, combining a qualitative approach with complementary quantitative techniques. The main results obtained from both the systematic review and the empirical work are then presented. The discussion section compares the findings with the international literature and reflects on their practical and theoretical implications. Finally, the conclusions and future research directions are presented.

Digital leadership is not only a desirable skill but also a

necessary condition for organizational sustainability in the post-pandemic era. In Latin America, where digital divides intersect with an urgent need for innovation, managers have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to lead transformation with a people-centered vision, leveraging technology and oriented toward inclusive development.

“The future of management will not be digital by definition, but by competence: it is not about using technology, but about leading with it” (Santos & Benavides, 2024, p. 34).

Methodology

This study uses a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach to identify and analyze key digital leadership competencies among Latin American managers, integrating a systematic literature review with empirical data collection. In the first phase, a PRISMA-guided review of 413 peer-reviewed articles from high-impact databases (2018–2024) narrowed to 32 relevant studies helped construct a matrix of core digital competencies. In the second phase, a quantitative survey (25 items, 5 competency dimensions) was conducted with 126 mid- and senior-level managers across Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 12 experts. The survey showed strong reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$) and was analyzed using SPSS (descriptive stats, factor analysis, cluster analysis), while AHP assessed the perceived importance of competencies. Qualitative data were analyzed in Atlas.ti using grounded theory, revealing themes such as cultural resistance, institutional barriers, and competency development strategies. This methodological triangulation provided a holistic view of digital leadership, capturing both the conceptual and practical challenges in a region marked by organizational and technological diversity. The approach offers a replicable model for designing future training programs and

comparative research across Latin America).

Results and discussion

The study’s results provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of digital leadership competencies in Latin America. From a quantitative perspective, the data collected reveal a clear hierarchy of assessments among the different competency dimensions considered. The most highly rated dimension was interpersonal skills, with an average score of 4.5 out of 5 on the Likert scale used, followed by digital technical skills (4.3), strategic skills (4.1), adaptive skills (4.0), and, finally, ethical skills (3.8). These results suggest that the region’s leaders place a high value on relational and communication skills in digital environments, even above technical mastery or strategic vision (Figure 1).

This predominance of interpersonal skills aligns with previous findings, which indicate that effective leadership in digital environments requires a strong ability to manage emotions, motivation, and collaboration through virtual means (Goleman, 2022; Salas & Hernández, 2021). In a context characterized by distributed teams, asynchronous communication, and hybrid environments, empathy, active listening, conflict resolution, and inspirational leadership emerge as crucial competencies. In the words of one of the directors interviewed: “It is no longer about managing from an office, but about knowing how to connect with people without seeing them every day”.

Second, digital technical skills were highly valued, especially those related to the use of collaborative tools, knowledge management platforms, and a basic understanding of data analysis. However, a deeper analysis of the qualitative interviews reveals a troubling dichotomy: although leaders recognize the importance of these skills, many express insecurity in applying them directly. Nearly 40% of interviewees admitted that they rely on their technology teams or external consultants to understand and apply advanced digital tools. This finding reinforces the thesis of García-Peñalvo

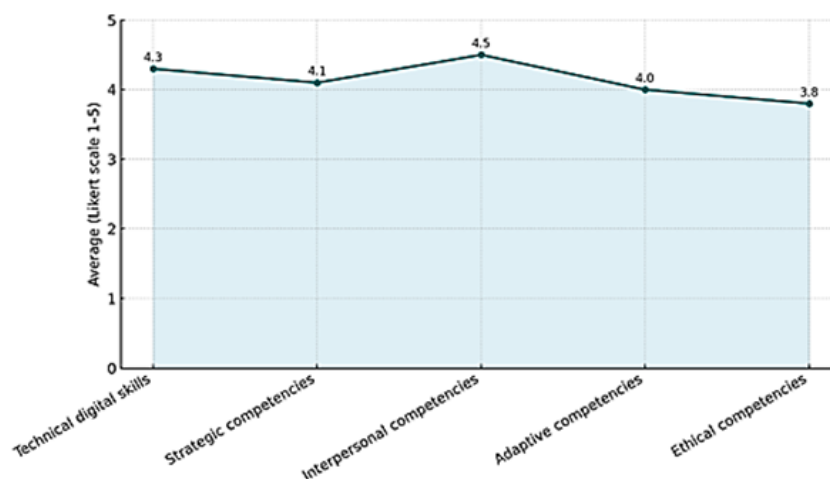


Figure 1. Average score by digital leadership competence dimension.

et al. (2022), who warn that digital leadership should not be confused with the instrumental use of technology, but rather with the ability to make informed and strategic decisions about its organizational integration.

Strategic competencies, although valued, show a slight decline in importance compared to what is expected in digital transformation contexts. Although these capabilities include systemic vision, change planning, and innovation orientation, their average rating was lower than that of technical and interpersonal skills. One possible explanation may lie in the persistent short-term culture that prevails in many Latin American organizations, particularly in the public sector, where political cycles limit long-range strategic planning (Cortés, 2022).

Regarding adaptive competencies, the result (4.0) indicates that while leaders recognize the need to be resilient, flexible, and capable of learning in dynamic environments, they still encounter practical difficulties in integrating these capabilities into their leadership practices. Most interviewees associate adaptability with improvisation, rather than with a deliberate strategy of continuous learning and improvement. This point was highlighted by Antonacopoulou and Bento (2023), who argue that adaptability should be cultivated as a conscious competency, based on organizational reflection and the ability to learn from mistakes, rather than as a reactive response to chaos.

The lowest-rated dimension was ethical competencies, which constitutes an important warning in a scenario of increasing automation, use of algorithms for decision-making, and massive exploitation of personal data. The average score (3.8) indicates an underestimation of the role played by the principles of transparency, fairness, privacy, and digital responsibility in leadership. The interviews confirmed this trend: only three of the twelve experts consulted explicitly mentioned the need to integrate ethical criteria into digital decision-making. This weakness aligns with studies such as that of Kane et al. (2019), which indicate that organizational leaders tend to focus on operational efficiency and economic performance, neglecting critical analysis of the social and ethical impacts of the technologies they implement.

The AHP table developed with expert judgment reinforces this hierarchy. Interpersonal skills were considered the most prioritized dimension with a relative weight of 26.3%, followed by digital technical skills (24.5%) and strategic skills (21.0%). Adaptive and ethical skills obtained significantly lower values (17.2 and 11.0%, respectively). This pattern not only confirms the descriptive results but also allows us to infer that, from a practical perspective, decision-makers prioritize those skills with an immediate impact on daily management, relegating those that, although fundamental, have a more delayed or symbolic return.

The results of the exploratory factor analysis empirically

validated the theoretical grouping proposed in the instrument's construction, identifying five differentiated factors that explain 78.6% of the total variance. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was robust ($\alpha = 0.89$), which supports the reliability of the results obtained. Furthermore, the cluster analysis allowed the managers to be classified into three main profiles: "relational leaders" (who stand out for their high scores in the interpersonal dimension but low in the others); "functional leaders" (with high technical and strategic competencies but deficiencies in soft skills); and "integral leaders," who showed balanced development in all dimensions, although they represented only 23.8% of the sample.

From a qualitative perspective, the semi-structured interviews revealed a shared perception of the dizzying and often disorganized nature of digital transformation in organizations. Several interviewees expressed feelings of "digital fatigue," resulting from the proliferation of tools, platforms, and technical demands without a coherent strategy. Cultural barriers were also identified, such as adherence to vertical hierarchies, low tolerance for error, and a lack of incentives for innovation. As one innovation manager at a Colombian technology company put it: "Here, we reward those who do not make mistakes, not those who try new things. You cannot lead digital transformation like this."

At the same time, the collected discourses allow us to identify emerging best practices. Some leaders expressed the importance of creating spaces for peer learning, promoting reverse mentoring (where young people train senior leaders in digital skills), and fostering cultures of transparency and collaboration that enhance decentralized innovation. These strategies align with the principles of distributed leadership and organizational learning proposed by Northouse (2021) and El Sawy et al. (2020), who argue that the most effective digital leadership is not hierarchical, but facilitative.

In the comparative discussion with international studies, a notable convergence is observed around the importance of soft skills as a pillar of digital leadership. However, regional specificities also emerge. Unlike European or Asian countries where digital transformation is institutionalized and regulated, a fragmented model predominates in Latin America, with significant progress in specific sectors (such as banking and telecommunications) but deep gaps in the public sector and SMEs. This suggests the need to adapt digital leadership models to the structural, cultural, and economic conditions of the Latin American environment (CAF, 2021; IDB, 2022).

Finally, the integrated analysis shows that building digital leadership in Latin America requires a three-pronged strategy: (1) structured training in interpersonal and technical skills based on a continuous learning approach; (2) mainstreaming ethical criteria into digital decision-making; and (3) creating institutional and cultural conditions that enable

innovation with equity and sustainability. If these dimensions are not addressed simultaneously, digital leadership in the region could perpetuate the same structural inequalities that technology was intended to resolve.

In practical terms, the study offers specific recommendations for key players in the organizational ecosystem:

- For educational institutions and universities, it is recommended to redesign graduate and executive education programs that transversally integrate digital, ethical, adaptive, and strategic competencies into the curriculum.
- For human resources managers, it is suggested to implement digital skills assessment systems, personalized management development plans, and cross-mentoring processes.
- For the public sector, it is proposed to create regulatory frameworks that govern the ethical use of technologies and establish minimum digital literacy criteria for positions of responsibility.
- For organizational leaders, it is recommended to make an active commitment to their digital transformation, creating spaces for continuous learning, promoting distributed leadership, and playing an exemplary role in the ethical use of technology.

Conclusions

This study confirms that digital leadership in Latin America is a crucial factor for organizational development amid rapid technological change, growing inequality, and increasing pressure to adapt. Through a mixed-method approach combining literature review and empirical research, the study identifies key digital leadership competencies—interpersonal, technical, strategic, adaptive, and ethical—while revealing significant gaps between their perceived importance and actual practice. Interpersonal skills, particularly communication, empathy, and trust-building, are rated as most important; yet, technical and strategic skills often remain underdeveloped or delegated. Adaptive skills are applied reactively rather than strategically, and ethical competencies—vital in a digital age—are often overlooked or reduced to legal compliance. The findings reveal asymmetry in leadership development across sectors and countries, which hinders inclusive digital transformation. The study recommends systemic training, competency assessment, and institutional reform to foster more ethical, flexible, and collaborative leadership. Ultimately, leading in the digital era demands a cultural shift, not just technological adoption, and opens research pathways into longitudinal competency development and cross-sectoral comparisons.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Data curation:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Formal analysis:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Research:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Methodology:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Supervision:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Validation:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Visualization:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Writing the original draft:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R. **Writing, review and editing:** Mursulí, A. I., & Linares, R.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI and

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