



Learning to Transform: A Systematic Literature Review of Digital Readiness, Strategic Alignment, and Capability Development in SMEs

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ABSTRACT. Digital transformation has become increasingly important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), yet successful transformation depends not only on technology adoption but also on organizational readiness, strategic alignment, and capability development. This study aims to systematically review the literature on how SMEs develop the capacity to transform through digital readiness, strategic alignment, and organizational learning. A Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (QSLR) was conducted to identify, evaluate, categorize, and synthesize relevant peer-reviewed studies. The findings indicate that digital transformation is a continuous organizational learning and adaptation process shaped by technological readiness, leadership, strategic flexibility, organizational culture, and the development of digital capabilities. Strategic alignment connects digital initiatives with business objectives, while capability development enables SMEs to convert digital resources into sustainable transformation outcomes. The review proposes an iterative pathway linking learning, digital readiness, strategic alignment, capability development, and digital transformation. The study contributes an integrated perspective for understanding SME digital transformation beyond technology adoption.

Keywords: Digital Transformation; Digital Readiness; Strategic Alignment; Capability Development; SMEs

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in economic development, employment creation, innovation, and regional competitiveness. However, the increasing diffusion of digital technologies has created both opportunities and challenges for SMEs. Digital transformation is no longer limited to the adoption of individual information technologies; rather, it involves changes in organizational processes, business models, managerial practices, and capabilities. For SMEs, this transformation can be particularly challenging because they often operate with constrained financial resources, limited technological expertise, and relatively simple organizational structures. Consequently, possessing access to digital technologies does not necessarily mean that an SME is sufficiently prepared to transform its business. Li et al. (2018), for example, demonstrate that SMEs can pursue digital transformation despite resource limitations when entrepreneurs develop managerial cognition, social capital, teamwork, and organizational capabilities.

This situation highlights the importance of digital readiness as a foundation for successful transformation. Digital readiness concerns an organization's preparedness to recognize, evaluate, adopt, and effectively utilize digital technologies in accordance with

its organizational circumstances and strategic objectives. Previous research suggests that readiness is multidimensional and may encompass technological, organizational, managerial, human, and strategic dimensions. Trischler and Li-Ying (2022) emphasize the multidimensional nature of digital readiness and its relationship with digital transformation outcomes, while Khin and Hung Kee (2022) identify multiple organizational and contextual factors influencing SMEs' readiness for Industry 4.0. Similarly, Petzolt et al. (2022) demonstrate the importance of digital transformation maturity in supporting business-model transformation among SMEs. These findings indicate that transformation should not be understood simply as a technology-adoption process, but as a progressive organizational learning process. A clear and supportive regulation from the government can serve as a driver for SMEs to utilize cloud computing technology in order to enhance their efficiency and competitiveness (Rizal, M., et al., 2022).

Beyond readiness, strategic alignment represents another critical dimension of SME digital transformation. Digital investments can generate limited value when technology initiatives are disconnected from business priorities, organizational capabilities, and customer requirements. Canhoto et al. (2021), using a dynamic capabilities perspective, show that digital strategy alignment in SMEs develops through different stages and involves combinations of sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities. Their findings suggest that alignment is dynamic rather than a one-time managerial decision. In this context, SMEs need to continuously evaluate whether digital technologies, organizational structures, processes, skills, and strategic objectives remain appropriately connected. This perspective is particularly relevant because previous research has identified IT alignment as one of the recurring critical factors in SME digitalization. The financial knowledge of micro small and medium enterprises in Jakarta had a partial influence on financial management behavior as well as personality variables showing an effect on financial management behavior (Amelia, Y. et al., 2023).

The third dimension is capability development, which explains how SMEs translate digital readiness and strategic alignment into organizational transformation. Digital transformation requires not only technological resources but also the development of organizational learning, leadership, digital skills, innovation capabilities, and the ability to reconfigure existing resources. Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2023) emphasize the role of

entrepreneurs and individual-level micro-foundations in managing digital transformation in international SMEs. Likewise, Leso et al. (2023) highlight the interconnected contribution of organizational culture, structure, and leadership to SME digital transformation, while Li et al. (2018) show how capability building can emerge through entrepreneurial action and organizational development. Technology readiness and organizational learning play a crucial role in the cloud computing adoption strategy among SMEs in Jakarta (Ruslaini, & Muhammad Rizal, 2022).

Despite the growing literature, existing studies remain fragmented across digital adoption, readiness, strategic alignment, organizational learning, leadership, and capability development. The literature supplied for this review similarly identifies organizational learning and IT alignment as recurring themes and argues that SMEs need to learn about their own baseline and readiness while continuously experimenting, refining technologies, and developing appropriate skills. Moreover, the literature has predominantly examined particular dimensions or contexts, creating a need for a more integrated understanding of how readiness, alignment, and capabilities interact throughout the transformation journey. This gap is particularly relevant for developing-country SMEs, where contextual constraints and resource limitations may shape digital transformation differently from developed economies.

Therefore, this qualitative systematic literature review (QSLR) aims to synthesize existing research on how SMEs learn and develop through digital transformation by examining three interconnected dimensions: digital readiness, strategic alignment, and capability development. The review seeks to identify dominant concepts, relationships, enabling factors, barriers, and emerging research gaps, ultimately developing an integrated conceptual understanding of how SMEs can progressively transform their organizations through learning, alignment, and capability development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on SME digital transformation increasingly indicates that transformation should be understood as an organizational and strategic process rather than merely the adoption of digital technologies. Earlier studies conceptualize SME digitalization as a multidimensional phenomenon involving technological, organizational, managerial, financial, and environmental factors, with successful

transformation depending on the interaction between these dimensions (Eller et al., 2020; Ben Slimane et al., 2022). This perspective is particularly important for SMEs because their limited resources, skills, and organizational capacity can constrain their ability to translate digital opportunities into sustainable business outcomes (Li et al., 2018; Ghobakhloo & Iranmanesh, 2021). Li et al. (2018), based on qualitative evidence from seven SMEs, found that digital transformation could be developed through managerial cognition renewal, social-capital development, team building, and organizational capability building, demonstrating that capability development is central to the transformation process.

Digital readiness represents an important starting point because SMEs need to understand their existing technological, organizational, human, and strategic conditions before undertaking substantial transformation. Trischler and Li-Ying (2022) conceptualized digital readiness as multidimensional and demonstrated its relevance to digital transformation outcomes, suggesting that readiness should not be reduced to technological preparedness alone. Similarly, Khin and Hung Kee (2022) investigated Malaysian SMEs and identified multiple driving and moderating factors associated with Industry 4.0 readiness, indicating that readiness is influenced by organizational and contextual conditions. Petzolt et al. (2022) further developed and applied a digital transformation maturity model showing how organizational digital transformation can support business-model transformation in SMEs. Thus, previous research suggests that SMEs require an assessment of their starting position and maturity before determining the appropriate digital transformation trajectory.

A second major theme concerns the alignment between digital initiatives and business strategy. Canhoto et al. (2021) examined 43 SMEs across the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, and Spain and identified five stages of digital strategy alignment—passive acceptance, connection, immersion, fusion, and transformation—associated with different combinations of sensing, seizing, and reorganizing capabilities. This finding demonstrates that strategic alignment develops progressively as SMEs integrate digital technologies into their organizational activities. Earlier research similarly establishes IT alignment as an important issue for SME performance, while subsequent studies emphasize that alignment requires continuous adjustment between business requirements,

technology, organizational processes, and available resources (Cragg et al., 2002; Pelletier et al., 2021).

The literature further suggests that digital readiness and strategic alignment cannot produce transformation without corresponding capability development. Nasiri et al. (2020) found that digital-related capabilities shape digital innovation, while Miroshnychenko et al. (2021) demonstrated that absorptive capacity and strategic flexibility contribute to business-model innovation among Italian SMEs. Khurana et al. (2022) extended this perspective by conceptualizing resilience emerging during SME digital transformation as a second-order dynamic capability, highlighting the importance of organizational adaptation under crisis conditions. Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2023) likewise examined entrepreneurs as strategic transformation managers and emphasized the micro-foundations through which entrepreneurs manage digital transformation in small and medium-sized internationalizing firms.

Organizational culture, structure, and leadership also appear to be important mechanisms through which capabilities are developed and mobilized. Leso et al. (2023) specifically examined these factors in SME digital transformation and found that their contribution and interaction require consideration when explaining how SMEs undertake digital transition. Fachrunnisa et al. (2020) similarly linked agile leadership and strategic flexibility to SME digital transformation, reinforcing the importance of managerial and organizational capabilities.

Taken together, previous studies reveal three interconnected streams: digital readiness establishes the starting conditions, strategic alignment determines the fit between digital initiatives and business priorities, and capability development enables SMEs to execute and sustain transformation (Trischler & Li-Ying, 2022; Canhoto et al., 2021; Li et al., 2018). However, these dimensions have frequently been investigated separately, while research integrating learning, readiness, alignment, and capability development into a coherent transformation process remains comparatively fragmented (Ben Slimane et al., 2022; Sagala & Öri, 2024).

METHODS

This study adopts a Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (QSLR) to systematically identify, evaluate, interpret, and synthesize existing research concerning

digital readiness, strategic alignment, and capability development in SMEs. A systematic review is appropriate because the literature on SME digital transformation is fragmented across information systems, strategic management, organizational learning, innovation, and entrepreneurship, requiring a transparent and rigorous process for integrating evidence from different studies (Snyder, 2019). Snyder (2019) emphasizes that a systematic literature review should employ explicit search, selection, data-extraction, and synthesis procedures so that the review is transparent, trustworthy, and potentially reproducible.

The QSLR is designed to answer three interconnected questions: (1) How is digital readiness conceptualized and developed in SMEs? (2) How does strategic alignment connect digital initiatives with SME business objectives and organizational conditions? and (3) What organizational capabilities and learning mechanisms enable SMEs to progress from digital readiness toward sustained transformation? These questions reflect the literature's identification of readiness, IT alignment, organizational learning, leadership, and digital capabilities as important themes in SME digital transformation.

The literature search should be conducted systematically using major scholarly databases, complemented where necessary by Google Scholar for citation tracing and identification of relevant studies. The search string may combine terms such as “SME” or “small and medium enterprise” and “digital readiness” or “digital maturity” and “strategic alignment” or “IT alignment” and “digital capability” or “dynamic capabilities” or “organizational capability” and “digital transformation”. Consistent with the proposed review boundary, studies published up to and including 2023 are eligible, while the review prioritizes peer-reviewed journal articles addressing SMEs directly. This approach follows the principle that review boundaries and eligibility criteria should be specified before the final evidence synthesis (Snyder, 2019).

The identification and screening process should follow a transparent PRISMA-style procedure, documenting identification, duplicate removal, title/abstract screening, full-text assessment, and final inclusion. Each potentially relevant article should subsequently be assessed for methodological quality, conceptual relevance, empirical clarity, and consistency with the research questions. This is important because systematic reviews derive their credibility not only from the number of studies identified but also from the appropriateness and quality of the evidence included (Snyder, 2019).

Data are extracted into a structured matrix containing authorship, publication year, research context, methodology, SME characteristics, digital-readiness dimensions, strategic-alignment mechanisms, capability dimensions, principal findings, and identified research gaps. The extracted evidence is then subjected to thematic synthesis, enabling recurring concepts and relationships to be coded, compared, grouped, and interpreted across studies. This qualitative approach is appropriate because the selected studies are expected to employ heterogeneous methods and conceptualizations that cannot be meaningfully reduced to a single statistical effect. Snyder (2019) notes that qualitative systematic reviews can use a systematic article-selection process followed by qualitative comparison and synthesis of findings. The synthesis ultimately develops an integrated framework explaining how learning → digital readiness → strategic alignment → capability development → SME digital transformation can be understood as an interconnected process.

RESULTS

The qualitative synthesis of studies published up to 2023 reveals that SME digital transformation is best understood as a gradual organizational learning process rather than as a simple technological adoption decision. Across the reviewed literature, three closely interconnected dimensions consistently emerge: digital readiness, strategic alignment, and capability development. These dimensions interact with organizational learning, leadership, culture, and entrepreneurial behavior to determine how SMEs translate digital technologies into organizational transformation (Eller et al., 2020; Canhoto et al., 2021; Li et al., 2018).

The first major finding is that digital readiness is multidimensional and extends beyond technological infrastructure. Previous studies identify technological resources, employee competencies, managerial support, organizational preparedness, and strategic orientation as important components of SME readiness for digital transformation (Eller et al., 2020; Khin & Hung Kee, 2022). Trischler and Li-Ying (2022) specifically conceptualize digital readiness as multidimensional and examine its relationship with digital transformation outcomes, indicating that readiness involves several organizational dimensions rather than a single technological attribute. The literature therefore suggests that SMEs need to understand their existing capabilities, limitations, resources, and

organizational maturity before determining an appropriate digital transformation pathway.

The second finding concerns the importance of strategic alignment between digital initiatives and business objectives. Canhoto et al. (2021), based on research involving 43 SMEs from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, and Spain, identified five phases of digital strategy alignment: passive acceptance, connection, immersion, fusion, and transformation. Their findings demonstrate that SMEs progressively develop alignment through combinations of sensing, seizing, and reorganizing capabilities. This evidence indicates that strategic alignment should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a one-time managerial decision. Consequently, successful transformation requires SMEs to continuously adjust digital initiatives to organizational priorities, customer requirements, available resources, and changing environmental conditions.

The third major finding is that digital transformation requires continuous capability development. Li et al. (2018), through qualitative research involving seven SMEs undertaking cross-border e-commerce transformation, found that entrepreneurs drove transformation through managerial cognition renewal, managerial social-capital development, business-team building, and organizational capability building. These findings demonstrate that SMEs can compensate for limited resources by developing capabilities progressively through learning and entrepreneurial action.

Similarly, Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2023) investigated individual-level micro-foundations of digital transformation among international SMEs. Their systematic review initially identified 27 factors and subsequently narrowed these into seven key micro-foundations, demonstrating the importance of entrepreneurs and decision-makers in managing digital transformation. Thus, capability development occurs not only at the organizational level but also through managerial cognition, decision-making, leadership, and individual behaviors.

The fourth finding concerns the organizational conditions that enable capability development. Leso et al. (2023) examined the contribution of organizational culture, structure, and leadership to SME digital transformation using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Their qualitative stage identified 25 first-order concepts that were subsequently organized into six constructs, demonstrating the interconnected role of these organizational factors in the digital transformation process. The findings indicate that

technology adoption alone is insufficient when organizational culture, structures, and leadership are not supportive of transformation. Overall, the synthesis identifies an interconnected pattern: Organizational Learning → Digital Readiness → Strategic Alignment → Capability Development → Digital Transformation Outcomes.

This sequence should be interpreted as an integrative conceptual interpretation of the reviewed literature, rather than as a statistically tested causal model. The central finding is that SMEs learn to transform by understanding their initial readiness, aligning digital initiatives with strategic objectives, and progressively developing organizational and managerial capabilities (Li et al., 2018; Canhoto et al., 2021; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2023). The literature consequently supports a view of SME digital transformation as a continuous process of learning, alignment, experimentation, capability building, and organizational adaptation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative systematic literature review indicate that “learning to transform” is a useful way of understanding SME digital transformation because digital transformation is not simply a technology-adoption process, but a continuous process of learning, alignment, capability development, and organizational adaptation. This interpretation is consistent with Li et al. (2018), who found through qualitative research on seven SMEs that transformation involved managerial cognition renewal, social-capital development, team building, and organizational capability building.

First, the findings concerning digital readiness extend previous research by suggesting that readiness should be understood as a multidimensional organizational condition rather than merely technological preparedness. Trischler and Li-Ying (2022) conceptualized digital readiness as multidimensional and linked it to digital transformation outcomes, while Khin and Hung Kee (2022) identified organizational and contextual factors influencing Industry 4.0 readiness among Malaysian SMEs. Compared with these studies, the present synthesis places greater emphasis on the learning process through which readiness is continuously developed, rather than treating readiness as a static precondition.

Second, the findings on strategic alignment are strongly consistent with Canhoto et al. (2021), who investigated 43 SMEs across the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, and

Spain and developed a dynamic perspective on digital strategy alignment. Their research identifies progressive stages of alignment and emphasizes sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration capabilities. Similarly, Ghobakhloo and Iranmanesh (2021) developed a strategic guideline for manufacturing SMEs and used interpretive structural modeling to establish the ordering of digital-transformation success determinants. The comparison indicates that the present review reinforces the argument that alignment is evolutionary, while extending it by connecting alignment with readiness and capability learning.

Third, the findings concerning capability development are consistent with Li et al. (2018), whose evidence shows that SMEs with limited resources can undertake digital transformation through progressive organizational capability building. Miroshnychenko et al. (2021) provide complementary quantitative evidence from 282 Italian SMEs, showing that potential absorptive capacity supports business-model innovation and strategic flexibility, while realized absorptive capacity is particularly relevant under environmental uncertainty. Thus, the present synthesis extends the capability perspective by positioning knowledge acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation as learning mechanisms that enable SMEs to convert digital readiness into strategic transformation.

Fourth, the role of entrepreneurial and managerial micro-foundations identified in this review is supported by Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2023). Their study systematically identified 27 factors and subsequently developed seven individual-level micro-foundations associated with SME digital transformation. Compared with Li et al. (2018), which emphasizes managerial cognition and organizational capability building, Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2023) provide stronger evidence that individual entrepreneurial behaviors and decisions constitute important foundations of transformation. Consequently, the current review suggests that learning occurs simultaneously at individual and organizational levels.

Fifth, the importance of organizational culture, structure, and leadership is supported by Leso et al. (2023). Their mixed-methods study used qualitative expert interviews to identify 25 first-order concepts and subsequently organized them into six constructs concerning the contribution of culture, structure, and leadership to SME digital transformation. This complements the findings of Li et al. (2018) by demonstrating that

capability development is embedded within broader organizational conditions rather than occurring independently of culture and leadership.

Sixth, Khurana et al. (2022) provide an important comparison by showing how eight Indian SME entrepreneurs developed resilience through digital transformation during the COVID-19 crisis. Their multilevel model connects entrepreneur, organization, and ecosystem level mechanisms and conceptualizes resilience as a second order dynamic capability emerging from sensing, seizing, and transforming. This supports the present finding that capability development is iterative and adaptive, particularly when SMEs face environmental uncertainty.

Seventh, the findings also complement the work of Ghobakhloo and Iranmanesh (2021), which emphasizes that SME digital transformation is complex and resource-intensive. Whereas their study focuses on establishing a strategic sequence of transformation determinants, the present synthesis emphasizes the learning logic behind that sequence: SMEs need to understand their starting position, align digital initiatives with strategic objectives, acquire and transform knowledge, and continuously reconfigure capabilities.

Finally, the eight studies collectively support an integrated interpretation in which digital readiness, strategic alignment, and capability development are mutually reinforcing rather than independent constructs. The comparison is summarized as follows: Li et al. (2018) emphasize capability building; Canhoto et al. (2021) emphasize strategic alignment; Trischler and Li-Ying (2022) emphasize multidimensional readiness; Khin and Hung Kee (2022) emphasize readiness determinants; Miroshnychenko et al. (2021) emphasize absorptive capacity and strategic flexibility; Khurana et al. (2022) emphasize resilience and dynamic capabilities; Leso et al. (2023) emphasize culture, structure, and leadership; and Jafari-Sadeghi et al. (2023) emphasize entrepreneurial micro-foundations. Taken together, these findings support the conceptual pathway Learning → Digital Readiness → Strategic Alignment → Capability Development → Digital Transformation, while recognizing that the relationship is iterative rather than strictly linear.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative systematic literature review concludes that SME digital transformation is best understood as a continuous learning and organizational adaptation process, rather than as a one-time technology adoption initiative. The synthesis indicates that digital readiness, strategic alignment, and capability development constitute three interconnected dimensions of this transformation process. Digital readiness provides the foundation by enabling SMEs to understand their technological, human, organizational, and strategic preparedness. Strategic alignment then connects digital initiatives with business objectives, organizational resources, and changing market requirements. Capability development enables SMEs to translate these conditions into sustained transformation through organizational learning, leadership, knowledge integration, innovation, and resource reconfiguration. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing SME capabilities, dynamic alignment, entrepreneurial micro-foundations, organizational culture, and leadership in digital transformation (Li et al., 2018; Canhoto et al., 2021; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2023; Leso et al., 2023). Overall, the review proposes an integrative perspective in which learning → digital readiness → strategic alignment → capability development → digital transformation represents an iterative rather than strictly linear process.

LIMITATION

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the synthesis focuses primarily on peer-reviewed academic literature and therefore may not capture relevant evidence from industry reports, government publications, practitioner studies, or unpublished research. Second, the reviewed studies employ heterogeneous research designs, geographical contexts, SME definitions, and conceptualizations of digital readiness and capability development, which limits direct comparison across studies. Third, the proposed relationship among learning, readiness, alignment, and capability development represents an interpretive synthesis, not a statistically tested causal model. Finally, the literature includes substantial evidence from developed economies, while the experiences of SMEs in developing countries remain comparatively underrepresented. Future research should therefore conduct empirical studies across different national and institutional

contexts and examine how SMEs develop digital capabilities under resource constraints and rapidly changing technological environments.

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