LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITALIZATION

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Abstract: *Digital transformation in local public administration requires changes in managerial practices, staff capabilities and service processes. This conceptual article develops a service-level diagnostic framework through a critical narrative synthesis of twenty scholarly and institutional sources. Building on established accounts of organizational transformation, it distinguishes documented leadership practices, observable organizational states and independently assessed service outcomes. Strategic direction, employee learning and collaborative implementation are examined through operational goal alignment, demonstrated task proficiency and reliable case handovers. Three conditional propositions specify how authority, infrastructure and workload may enable or constrain these relationships. Candidate observations and rival explanations guide subsequent empirical investigation. Accessibility and the distribution of administrative costs are included in the evaluation of service performance. Historical European benchmarks provide Romanian policy context. The contribution is an analytical application for investigating local services; its propositions and measures require empirical validation.*

Keywords: *digital leadership; digital transformation; local public administration; organizational change; public value.*

JEL classification*: H83; M15; O33.*

1. Introduction

Digitalization has become a practical concern for local public administration because citizens and organizations increasingly encounter government through digital interfaces. Yet a portal, an electronic registry or a scanned archive does not by itself establish that an institution has transformed its operating model. The distinction matters for public management: expenditure on technology can coexist with duplicated procedures, fragmented responsibilities and limited improvements in service delivery. Leadership is relevant because the alignment of technology, people and administrative processes requires decisions that extend beyond information technology departments.

Vial (2019) describes digital transformation through the organizational responses associated with digital technologies and their implications for value creation. In public administration, Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019) emphasize changes in processes, culture and relationships with service users. These perspectives suggest that the relevant question is how leadership helps an institution translate digital possibilities into sustained administrative capabilities. The answer cannot be reduced to a leader's technical proficiency or personal enthusiasm for innovation.

Local authorities provide a distinctive setting for this question. Their responsibilities involve recurring interactions with residents, the administration of documents and the coordination of services across departments. Organizational decisions must remain compatible with public accountability and access to services. Leadership therefore involves negotiating priorities among efficiency, continuity, inclusion and procedural reliability. A faster digital transaction creates limited public value if residents cannot use it or if staff must reproduce the same transaction in a separate internal process.

This article asks: through which organizational mechanisms can leadership support digital transformation in local public administration, and under what conditions might those

mechanisms improve service outcomes? It develops an integrative conceptual framework connecting strategic direction, employee learning and collaborative implementation. Its contribution lies in linking these mechanisms to observable administrative outcomes and to the contextual conditions that may restrict them. Romania is used as a policy context, rather than as the setting of an empirical claim about a particular county or institution.

The analytical problem is how to evaluate leadership at the level of a local service without treating managerial intentions as evidence of transformation. Previous research connects context, organizational mechanisms and outcomes (Hanelt et al., 2021), while public-administration research distinguishes transformation processes and their expected consequences (Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, 2019). Building on these accounts, the present article develops a service-level diagnostic application that distinguishes managerial practices from observable organizational states, specifies rival explanations for subsequent testing and treats accessibility as an evaluation constraint.

2. Research approach and scope

The article is a conceptual study based on a narrative synthesis of scholarly publications and institutional reports. The source corpus contains 20 works, comprising 15 journal contributions (including one editorial), one academic book and four institutional publications or official publication pages. The scholarly material addresses leadership, digital transformation, institutional change and skills development. The institutional material provides digital-government frameworks and contextual benchmarks. The publication years range from 2000 to 2025, allowing foundational leadership concepts to be considered alongside more recent public-sector research.

The 20-source corpus was retained as a purposive collection addressing leadership, organizational change, public services and official digital-government frameworks. An in-depth comparison used accessible full texts of Cortellazzo, Bruni and Zampieri (2019), Vial (2019), Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019), Hanelt et al. (2021), and the OECD (2020) framework. Publisher abstracts, bibliographic records and official publication pages supported the scope and identification of other contributions. Claims about sources for which only an abstract or official summary was accessible are restricted to that material. Bibliographic verification is distinguished from full-text appraisal. This is a critical narrative synthesis, not a systematic review or a reanalysis of the underlying studies.

The comparison asks four questions of each central contribution: what is directly established by the source; whether its unit of analysis matches local service delivery; which inference would exceed its evidence; and what modification of the proposed framework follows. Interpretations are classified as source-based findings, transfers requiring contextual justification, or propositions developed in this article. Key evidential boundaries are summarized in the comparison (Table no. 1). No independent reviewers, formal quality scores or exhaustive database search are claimed. The selected literature informs the model but does not statistically validate it.

Evidence from business organizations is used to inform possible organizational mechanisms, with explicit limits on transfer to public administration. For example, a study of virtual service work can illuminate communication and employee support without proving the effectiveness of the same practices in a Romanian municipality. The article offers conceptual propositions and an agenda for empirical investigation rather than a completed evaluation of local authorities.

Table no. 1. Evidence and boundaries informing the conceptual framework

Contribution and evidence	Supported interpretation	Limit for this article
Cortellazzo, Bruni and Zampieri (2019): full-text review	Leadership themes across settings	No local-service causal test
Vial (2019): accessible manuscript	Strategic responses, barriers and outcomes	Broad architecture is already established
Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019): full-text interviews	Expert meanings; outputs, outcomes and impacts	Expected consequences are not measured effects
Hanelt et al. (2021): full-text review	Context, mechanisms and continuous adaptation	Business evidence requires public-sector justification
OECD (2020): full policy framework	User-driven and coordinated governance	Normative guidance is not causal validation
Escobar, Almeida and Varajão (2023): publisher abstract	Review of cases, processes and success factors	Detailed factor-level interpretation is not claimed

Source: Synthesis based on Cortellazzo, Bruni and Zampieri (2019), Vial (2019), Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019), Hanelt et al. (2021), OECD (2020) and the publisher abstract of Escobar, Almeida and Varajão (2023). The implications are interpretations developed in this article.

3. Leadership and digital transformation

3.1. From adoption technology to organizational change

A useful starting point is the distinction between making information digital, applying digital tools to existing activities and changing the way an organization creates and delivers value. These processes may overlap, but they require different managerial assessments. An institution can replace a paper form with a downloadable file while leaving the citizen's journey and the internal approval chain largely unchanged. Transformation requires examining the wider service process and the responsibilities that sustain it (Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, 2019).

The business-oriented review of Hanelt et al. (2021) identifies continuous adaptation and digital ecosystems as prominent themes. The implication for local authorities is not that they should copy business models: it is that a fixed implementation sequence may be inadequate. Haug, Dan and Mergel (2024), whose public-sector review is considered here through its accessible summary, address the connection between incremental and transformative change. Neither contribution establishes that a specific leadership practice will improve a particular local service.

The pandemic illustrated the importance of digital channels for service continuity. Agostino, Arnaboldi and Diaz Lema (2021) discuss accelerated digital public-service delivery in Italian museums, highlighting challenges associated with engagement, planning and costs. This setting differs from local administrative casework but demonstrates why rapid adoption should be assessed together with the arrangements that make digital services sustainable. Emergency use can identify opportunities without resolving the longer-term organization of work.

Eom and Lee (2022), in editorial introducing research on digital government in turbulent times, examine the opportunities and dilemmas associated with crisis-driven transformation. Their discussion helps distinguish the pressure to adopt digital channels from the broader governance capacity needed to manage their consequences. For the present framework, crisis responsiveness is therefore a contextual concern rather than proof that rapid technological adoption has produced lasting administrative improvement.

3.2. Digital and transformational leadership

Avolio, Kahai and Dodge (2000) conceptualize e-leadership as technology-mediated social influence. Cortellazzo, Bruni and Zampieri (2019) review a heterogeneous literature spanning organizational levels and settings, with collaboration, skills and ethical concerns among its themes. This supports investigating leadership as a relational process. It does not establish that a single style produces uniform effects in public administration.

Bass and Riggio (2006) provide a vocabulary for shared vision, intellectual stimulation and individualized support. These concepts can inform questions about how staff experience change, but theoretical vocabulary is not evidence that transformational leadership reduces resistance in the authorities being discussed. The framework below consequently uses observable practices rather than assigning all desirable outcomes to a preferred leadership style.

Bartsch et al. (2021) examine task- and relation-oriented leadership and employee performance in crisis-induced virtual service work. Their setting differs from local government but informs questions about employee support when work arrangements change. Sacavém et al. (2025) examine leadership in organizational digital transformation. These contributions motivate attention to communication and employee support within the present conceptual application; they do not establish the effectiveness of its propositions in local authorities.

3.3. Institutional context and public value

Public organizations do not implement digital change in an institutional vacuum. Hinings, Gegenhuber and Greenwood (2018) explain digital innovation and transformation through an institutional perspective, directing attention to established practices and expectations. Applied conceptually to local administration, this suggests that leadership must engage with routines that may preserve continuity while also constraining redesign. Staff hesitation may reveal unclear responsibilities or operational risks, rather than a general unwillingness to innovate.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) offers six policy dimensions of digital government and emphasizes coordinated, user-driven approaches. These are normative orientations for governance rather than causal estimates of managerial effectiveness. Bertot, Estevez and Janowski (2016) discuss the capabilities needed for digital public-service innovation. The present analysis uses both contributions to frame evaluation questions, not to certify that a proposed management intervention will succeed.

Public value is used here as an analytical orientation encompassing service effectiveness, accessibility, transparency and responsible use of resources. It is not treated as a single directly observed variable. A local authority may improve one dimension while encountering difficulties in another. Leadership should therefore make the relevant objectives

and trade-offs explicit instead of assuming that a higher volume of digital transactions necessarily represents a better service.

Escobar, Almeida and Varajão (2023) review public-sector digital transformation through case studies, processes and success factors. Their synthesis supports examining implementation as a set of connected organizational conditions rather than attributing success to a single managerial characteristic. Building on this perspective, the framework below groups leadership responsibilities into complementary mechanisms and separates those responsibilities from service outcomes. This grouping is an interpretive contribution of the present article, not a model statistically tested in their review.

Comparison of the central contributions establishes the basis for the service-level application. Vial's (2019) organizational framework addresses responses, barriers and outcomes, and Hanelt et al. (2021) connect context and mechanisms. Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019) distinguish outputs, outcomes and longer-term impacts. Building on these established distinctions, the present framework identifies a concrete service bottleneck, matches a leadership practice to that bottleneck and specifies observations that could challenge the proposed relationship. Its contribution is a diagnostic application of existing transformation research to local service processes.

4. An integrative conceptual framework

The proposed framework organizes leadership responsibilities into three complementary mechanisms: strategic direction, employee learning and collaborative implementation. Strategic direction establishes the problem to be addressed and the public-service outcomes sought. Employee learning develops the capabilities needed to change everyday practice. Collaborative implementation connects departments and service users so that redesigned procedures function across organizational boundaries. The mechanisms are analytically distinct but can reinforce one another.

The framework distinguishes three levels: documented managerial practices, organizational states that those practices may influence, and service outcomes assessed independently. The states are operational goal alignment, demonstrated task proficiency and reliable case handovers. Separate observations at each level reduce the risk of measuring leadership and its proposed consequences through identical staff perceptions. The relationships are conditional and potentially reciprocal. Infrastructure, staffing, decision authority, service complexity and user capabilities may affect each level. The assessment matrix separates the proposed practices, states and indicators (Table no. 2); these are candidate measures requiring validation rather than established scales.

Table no. 2. Leadership mechanisms and proposed assessment indicators

Managerial practice	Distinct process state	Candidate observations
Assign and review a service objective	Operational goal alignment	Decision records; independent correspondence check
Protect practice time and task support	Demonstrated task proficiency	Task completion accuracy; error recovery
Assign handover responsibility and review cases	Reliable case handovers	Missing transfers; unresolved dependencies; repeat requests

Source: Conceptual synthesis based on Hanelt et al. (2021) and OECD (2020) for strategic alignment; Sousa and Rocha (2019) and Schwarzmüller et al. (2018) for learning and work design; Bertot, Estevez and Janowski (2016) and Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019) for coordinated implementation. Indicators are proposed in this article and require validation.

4.1. Strategic direction and coherent priorities

Strategic direction begins with a service problem rather than a predetermined technological solution. For instance, an institution seeking to reduce incomplete applications should identify why applications fail before selecting a portal feature. Leadership can clarify the intended outcome, assign responsibility for the whole process and ensure that procurement and implementation decisions address the same objective. This interpretation follows the broader connection between digital transformation, organizational strategy and public-service capabilities (Hanelt et al., 2021; OECD, 2020).

Proposition 1: assigning and reviewing a service objective is expected to improve the correspondence between investment decisions and the documented service problem when the responsible team has authority over the relevant process. The managerial practice is assessed from decisions and review records; alignment is assessed independently from whether implemented changes address the stated problem. A strategy document or a favorable staff opinion cannot serve as both predictor and outcome. This proposition may fail where procurement, funding or procedural requirements remove meaningful local discretion.

4.2. Employee learning and practical readiness

Employee learning concerns the capacity to perform redesigned tasks, recognize errors and seek support. Sousa and Rocha (2019) connect digital learning with the skills needed for organizational transformation. Schwarzmüller et al. (2018) identify changes in work design and leadership associated with digital transformation. For local administration, these perspectives suggest assessing whether learning opportunities match the actual tasks expected of staff, rather than relying only on attendance at training sessions.

Proposition 2: protected practice time and access to task-specific support are expected to improve demonstrated proficiency when staff can use the relevant system in their daily work. Training attendance measures exposure, not competence. Proficiency should be assessed through predefined tasks or error-recovery exercises, separately from confidence ratings. Service effects require a further link between improved proficiency and fewer avoidable errors. The proposition may fail where unusable interfaces, inadequate access or excessive workload prevent the application of learning.

4.3. Collaborative implementation and coordinated workflows

A digital service often depends on several departments, even when the citizen sees a single interface. Collaborative implementation addresses the handovers between those departments and the relationship between internal procedures and the user's experience. Leadership can establish a process owner, make unresolved dependencies visible and create channels through which staff and users report problems. These activities connect the organizational and contextual dimensions emphasized by Bertot, Estevez and Janowski (2016) and Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (2019).

Proposition 3: assigning responsibility for cross-departmental handovers and reviewing incomplete cases is expected to improve transfer reliability where departments share compatible procedures and can resolve reported dependencies. Meeting counts measure activity, not collaboration quality. Reliability should be assessed through missing transfers, unresolved dependencies or repeated information requests. Changes in service completion require separate measurements. The proposition may fail when interinstitutional dependencies, incompatible systems or unresolved authority conflicts exceed the control of local leadership.

A critical interpretation allows evidence to weaken the propositions. Clear priorities with unrelated investments challenge the alignment mechanism; completed training without demonstrated proficiency challenges the learning mechanism; repeated coordination meetings with unchanged transfer failures challenge the handover mechanism. These are diagnostic counterexamples, not a complete causal test. Improvement after implementation could still reflect additional staff, simpler cases or a more reliable platform. Comparing changes over time and investigating the sequence of events would therefore be necessary before attributing an outcome to leadership.

5. Implications for Romanian local public administration

Romania's national digital-government context provides a reason to examine organizational capabilities alongside infrastructure. The European Commission's 2022 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) placed Romania 27th among the 27 European Union member states (European Commission, 2022). This is a historical national benchmark. It does not establish the performance of an individual county, explain the causes of local service difficulties or describe the country's position in 2026.

The eGovernment Benchmark provides an additional framework for examining digital public services, while the United Nations E-Government Survey includes local e-government development within its wider assessment (European Commission, 2023; United Nations, 2022). Their units of analysis and assessment methods differ from a staff questionnaire. National and international benchmarks can therefore inform the questions asked of local authorities but cannot substitute for institution-level evidence.

For Romanian local administrations, the proposed framework suggests beginning with a limited set of services for which the full process can be mapped. Managers could identify the intended public outcome, document departmental handovers and examine where digital and paper procedures coexist. This diagnosis would help distinguish problems caused by technology from those associated with unclear responsibilities, training needs or the sequence of administrative decisions. Such distinctions are necessary before selecting a suitable intervention.

A second implication concerns the evaluation of leadership development. Training managers in digital tools is useful only as part of a wider capability to define service priorities, organize employee learning and coordinate implementation. The framework therefore suggests connecting managerial development to concrete service-improvement projects. Evaluation could examine the quality of problem definition, follow-through on implementation decisions and the use of feedback. These are proposed assessment areas, not verified indicators of effectiveness in Romanian institutions.

An economic assessment should distinguish initial expenditure from the recurring organizational costs of digital service delivery. Procurement, maintenance, staff learning, support and transitional duplication can affect the resources required per completed case. This article does not estimate savings or assume that digital channels are always less costly. It proposes that leadership decisions be examined against service demand, completion rates and staff time, while considering access and reliability alongside expenditure. The separation of implementation inputs and service outcomes is consistent with the need to examine processes and success conditions in public-sector transformation (Escobar, Almeida and Varajão, 2023).

6. Discussion and managerial implications

The framework contributes to the leadership debate by treating digital transformation as a coordinated organizational process. Strategic direction without learning may create objectives that staff cannot implement. Learning without coordinated workflows may improve individual competence while leaving interdepartmental problems unresolved. Collaboration without priorities may generate useful ideas without the resources or responsibility needed to carry them forward. The proposed mechanisms should therefore be studied in combination, while allowing their relative importance to vary across services and institutions.

This perspective also limits leader-centered explanations. Infrastructure, financial constraints, institutional routines and user capabilities may restrict outcomes despite capable management. Conversely, an institution may inherit strong technical systems without developing the routines needed to adapt them to changing service needs. The institutional argument of Hinings, Gegenhuber and Greenwood (2018) and the public-sector synthesis of Haug, Dan and Mergel (2024) support examining the relationship between leadership agency and organizational conditions.

For practice, leadership teams could distinguish implementation indicators from outcome indicators. Equipment acquisition, staff training and portal availability document activities or capabilities. Processing time, avoidable rework, successful completion and accessibility describe different aspects of service performance. None is sufficient on its own. A service may become faster for experienced users while remaining difficult for first-time applicants, requiring evaluation to consider both efficiency and access.

The article does not assume that every administrative procedure should be redesigned in the same way or that a single leadership style will produce identical results across authorities. Its practical argument is narrower: explicit objectives, task-relevant learning and cross-departmental coordination provide a coherent basis for organizing digital change. Their effectiveness remains an empirical question. Managers should use evaluation to identify where the framework fits local conditions and where additional organizational or policy measures are necessary.

The distinction between implementation conditions and outcomes also helps explain why transferable lessons require attention to context. Escobar, Almeida and Varajão (2023)

provide a public-sector evidence base for investigating processes and success factors, while Eom and Lee (2022) identify challenges associated with transformation under turbulent conditions. Taken together, these contributions justify evaluating how leadership practices interact with organizational resources and service demands. They do not establish a universal sequence of interventions or a guaranteed return from any particular leadership style.

The diagnostic contribution builds on established distinctions between context, mechanisms and outcomes. It specifies separate observations for managerial practices and service-process states, identifies authority and infrastructure constraints, and requires favorable aggregate outcomes to be interpreted alongside access conditions. For example, improvements in completion among experienced users may coexist with difficulties for residents needing assistance. This application provides a basis for future local-administration research; empirical comparison is needed to establish its usefulness relative to other approaches.

Evaluation also requires a distributional check. A higher digital completion rate may reflect a shift toward users already able to navigate the service, while people needing assistance remain uncounted. A lower recorded cost may reflect work transferred to citizens or to another department. The framework therefore treats accessibility and the location of costs as constraints on interpretation rather than presuming a single improvement score. This is an analytical extension proposed here; its measures and trade-offs require explicit choices in any empirical application.

7. Limitations and future research

The narrative selection is limited and may omit relevant competing frameworks. Full-text access was uneven, and bibliographic verification should not be confused with a comprehensive appraisal of every publication. The central comparison supports conceptual distinctions but cannot establish the prevalence or causal strength of the proposed mechanisms. Review articles synthesize underlying studies that have not been independently recorded here; interview-based accounts describe meanings and expected consequences rather than independently observed performance effects. Transfer from business settings to local public administration requires further empirical justification.

Future research could compare local authorities using a common service process as the unit of analysis. A reproducible design would document institutional selection, fieldwork dates, respondent roles and the number of staff in each authority. Leadership practices, intermediate capabilities and service outcomes should be measured separately. Staff questionnaires could be combined with process records, task observations and service-user evidence. Where staff responses are nested within institutions, the analysis should account for that structure rather than treating every response as an independent observation of institutional performance. For processing time and resource use, comparisons should also consider case complexity and changes in staffing or technical infrastructure.

A longitudinal design would be particularly useful for examining the proposed sequence from leadership practices to intermediate capabilities and service outcomes. Measurements before and after a clearly documented implementation could identify changes in readiness, coordination and performance. Analysis would still need to consider alternative explanations, including funding changes, new technical infrastructure and differences in service complexity. The propositions offered here provide a basis for specifying such investigations without anticipating their results.

8. Conclusions

Leadership in digital local public administration concerns the organization of change as well as the use of technology. The literature supports examining how strategic direction, employee learning and collaborative implementation connect digital investment with administrative capabilities. The proposed framework brings these mechanisms together and identifies contextual conditions that may enable or restrict their contribution to public-service outcomes.

Three conclusions follow from the synthesis. First, local service assessment should connect leadership practices to organizational mechanisms and contextual constraints rather than infer transformation from technology adoption. Second, empirical assessment requires independent measures of managerial practice, task proficiency, handover reliability and service performance. Third, completion rates and resource use should be interpreted alongside accessibility and rival explanations. The contribution is a diagnostic framework and three conditional propositions for subsequent investigation. Institution-level research is needed to evaluate the proposed relationships in Romanian local public administration.

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