Middle Managers at the Center of the Action in Digital age

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Abstract: In the fast-paced digital age, middle managers play a pivotal role as the bridge between senior leadership and frontline employees, making them the driving force behind operational execution and strategic implementation. To excel in this dynamic environment, middle managers must embody both agility and resilience. Agility allows them to adapt quickly to ever-evolving technologies and market dynamics, enabling organizations to navigate digital transformations successfully. Simultaneously, resilience empowers them to cope with disruptions, learn from failures, and lead with determination in times of uncertainty. Embracing these qualities, middle managers become transformative leaders who steer their organizations towards sustained growth and competitive advantage in the face of constant change.

Key words: Agility, big data, data analytics, data mining, digital age, digital transformation, middle managers predictive analytics, resilience remote work culture, sandwicthed

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving digital age, middle managers play a crucial role at the center of the action. Today’s organizations need smart managers rather than hard working managers and not to maintain the status quo but expected to contribute to change towards organization growth and development. These individuals occupy a unique position within organizations, acting as a vital bridge between senior executives and front-line employees. Middle managers are responsible for translating strategic vision into actionable plans, overseeing day-to-day operations, and driving organizational success in the digital landscape. Their role has become increasingly pivotal as businesses strive to adapt and thrive in the face of technological advancements and changing consumer demands.

The middle managers, in the digital age serve as key conduits for strategic decision-making. They possess a deep understanding of both the overall business objectives and the specific digital initiatives required to achieve them. By aligning these objectives with the capabilities of digital technologies, middle managers can effectively shape the organization's digital transformation strategy. Middle managers in the digital age are tasked with understanding and harnessing the power of emerging technologies to drive organizational success. They must stay abreast of the latest digital trends, such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, cloud computing, and automation, and assess how these technologies can be integrated into existing business processes. By doing so, they enable their teams to leverage digital tools and platforms to streamline operations, enhance efficiency, and gain a competitive edge in the market.

Middle managers are key actors in strategy-implementation, they play a fundamental role in the transmission of the culture and values of an organization and, as human resource line managers, and they can boost productivity and innovation (Ahearne et al., 2014; Chenet et al., 2015; Mair, 2005; McConville, 2006).

They collaborate closely with senior leaders to analyze market trends, identify opportunities for innovation, and develop comprehensive roadmaps for implementation. Through their expert knowledge of emerging technologies and their implications for the business, middle managers provide valuable insights that inform strategic decision-making at the senior executive level. Middle managers play a critical role in fostering a culture of innovation and adaptation within their organizations. In the face of disruptive digital technologies, they must embrace change and inspire their teams to do the same. They facilitate cross-functional collaboration, encouraging employees to share ideas, experiment with new approaches, and embrace agile methodologies. By championing a culture of continuous learning and growth, middle managers empower their teams to adapt to technological advancements and seize new opportunities in the digital landscape.

They oversee the implementation and execution of digital initiatives, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively and that projects are delivered on time and within budget. Middle managers are adept at managing cross-functional teams, facilitating collaboration between departments, and breaking down silos to promote a seamless flow of information and ideas. They also play a critical role in change management, helping employees adapt to new digital tools, processes, and ways of working. By nurturing a culture of agility and innovation, middle managers enable organizations to harness the full potential of digital technologies and remain competitive in an ever-evolving marketplace.

In summary, middle managers are at the forefront of the action in the digital age. They bridge the gap between strategic vision and operational execution, leveraging their expertise to drive digital transformation and operational excellence. With their ability to navigate the complexities of technology, collaborate across functions, and inspire teams, middle managers are invaluable assets in ensuring that organizations thrive in the dynamic digital landscape.

Related studies

1. Analyzing the impact of the shift to remote work mode on middle managers’ well-being in the pandemic (2023) Juan Sandoval-Reyesa, Lorenzo Revuelto-Taboadab and Edison Jair Duque-Olivac: This study aims to examine the effectiveness of remote work
demand and stress and wellbeing of managers. The study taken up on 200 managers from different economic sectors from five Latin American countries. This study aimed to identify the relationship between Remote Job Demands (RJD), work stress, (WS) role transitions’ management, and employee wellbeing (WB) during the initial stage of lockdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study analyzed this phenomenon for middle managers (MMs) considering the partial mediating effect of Work stress in the RJD-WB relationship. The results showed that remote job demands caused by the enforced change to remote work management of middle managers was related to a decrease in subjective wellbeing and an increase in perceived work stress. In summary, the overall negative effect, both direct and indirect, of the Remote Job Demands on the well-beings of middle managers, due to the shift to Remote work management was considerable and, to a large extent, due to the increase in perceived Work Stress 2. Digital Transformation for Agility and Resilience-An Exploratory Study (2022) George Mangalaraj, Sridhar Nerur, and Rahul Dwivedi: This study aims to examine the retailer’s strategies and IT role in facilitating the responsiveness to the uncertainties in the market place. This study’s findings show that IT capabilities have helped many organizations to address emergent needs. In this regard, existing IT capabilities allow organizations to exploit available digital options. The options that are recognized are a) organizations transitioning from or supplementing buy online and pick up in store to buy online b) provisioning scanning and checking out for contactless shopping through existing mobile apps; and c) realizing newer revenue stream through subscriptions for added services. This pivoting is instrumental in facilitating IT-enabled resilience and agility that enable organizations to deal with the unexpected 3. Getting traditionally rooted Indian leadership to embrace digital leadership challenges and way forward with reference to LMX (Sep2020) by Shalaka Sharad Shah and Sairaj Milind Patki: The study aims to understand the relationship between leadership and digitalization to foresee how the managers should prepare themselves to cater the challenges of the future in the context of growing digitalized India. India is also the largest base of digital consumers. Leaders struggle to lead in such challenging situations; which are becoming more volatile. It is imperative to examine what capacities, abilities and competencies leaders already have and what they need to further improve upon, in order to lead effectively in the digital world to examine the overall context of Indian traditional leadership, leader–member exchange is seen to be a relevant theory. At last, challenges and gaps are discussed and the notion of “creative personality” is recommended for Indian leaders to cater to the digital changes. 4. Investing in Middle Managers pay off By Emily Field, Bryan Hancock, Stephanie Smallets, and Brooke WL(2023): The McKinsey survey on middle managers and their strong, middle and bottom performing roles and their relationship with total shareholders returns. Creating the right atmosphere for middle managers to be the “force multipliers” They emphasized that the organizations cannot expect the middle managers to be inspirational and strategic leaders while they are juggling to compete and do not have time to step back and think big. They further observed that set a clear atmosphere to middle managers, they are meant to be is not a trivial endeavor. Here they provide five actions that can set managers and their organizations for success. They are 1) Optimize the organization’s ‘spans’ 2) Reset manager roles 3) Pivot to capability building 4) Drill down into manager experience 5) Build in accountability mechanisms The survey results indicates that Organizations with top-performing managers yield multiple times the total shareholder returns (TSR) of those with average or below-average managers over a period of five years 5. Leadership’s long arm: The positive influence of digital leadership on managing technology-driven change over a strengthened service innovation capacity ( Feb 2023) by Timo J. J. Brunner, Tobias Schuster and Claudia Lehmann: The study examines the digital leadership (DL) capabilities and their positive influence on the management of technology-driven change by leveraging service innovations. The results show that aggregated dimensions in terms of a digital leader’s personal, social, and organizational capital serve as underpinnings (DL-related capabilities) to drive strategic change in DT contexts 6. Making It Happen: Middle Managers’ Roles in Innovation Implementation in Health Care(2020) by Rubi Urquhart et al; This study’s main aim is to examine the relevance and role of middle managers in implementation process of innovation. The study results found that the middle managers see themselves as being responsible for making implementation of innovation process in their organization. Out of the implementation process the middle managers plays five roles related to implementation: planner, coordinator, facilitator, motivator, and evaluator. However, the data also revealed two determinants of middle managers’ role in implementation, which they must negotiate to fulfill their specific implementation roles and activities: The middle managers perform many other roles and responsibilities within their organizations, both clinical and managerial in nature, and they have limited decision-making power with respect to implementation and must work within the parameters set by upper levels of the organization. 7. Middle managers’ cognitive styles, capacity for change and organizational performance(2022) by Badri Munir Sukoco et al; The study explored to analyze how middle managers’ cognitive style contributes to organizational performance through organization capacity to change (OCC). The study results revealed that creating styles and organization performance is mediated by organization capacity to change and positively related to OCC while knowing and planning styles are not. 8. The evolving role of middle management (2020) by Kevin Prouty. Kevin Prouty explained that how the decision making process has been associated with the hierarchy of top down approach and the style and role of middle management in the traditional approach and the need for change in the data driven world especially in the manufacturing sector, He further explained that the insatiable need for middle managers is to be in connection to the explosion of data and the increasing demands from senior management for faster decision-making cycles. But effective middle managers must have a unique combination of detailed domain expertise, creativity, charisma, and ambition, and it would be difficult to have this middle management talent in the manufacturing sector which tends to struggle with skill gap.
Methodology
The methodology will involve a discussion method and an extensive review of existing literature related to middle management roles, agility, resilience, and their significance in the digital age. The review of literature will encompass online articles, academic papers, blogs, books, and research studies, focusing on the qualities and competencies required for middle managers to effectively navigate the challenges of the digital landscape while embracing agility and resilience.

A sandwiched middle manager in the digital transformation
They navigate the dynamics between top-level executives and frontline employees, acting as a bridge that connects strategic vision with operational execution. This position places them at the center of action within the corporate culture, where they face unique challenges and opportunities. Middle managers find themselves sandwiched in the corporate culture as they play a critical role in achieving organizational goals and objectives.

On one side, they are responsible for implementing the directives and strategies set by senior management. They must ensure that the organization's goals and objectives are effectively communicated and understood by the frontline employees. This requires them to act as conduits, translating the high-level vision into tangible actions and tasks that can be executed on the ground. They must also ensure alignment and consistency across different teams and departments, fostering a cohesive culture that supports the achievement of organizational objectives.

On the other side, middle managers are also responsible for advocating for the needs and concerns of frontline employees to senior management. They serve as the voice of their teams, representing their perspectives, challenges, and feedback within the organizational hierarchy. This entails fostering an inclusive and supportive culture where employees feel empowered to share their ideas and concerns. Middle managers must create an environment where open communication is encouraged, enabling them to bridge the gap between senior management and frontline employees, and ensuring that the organization's goals are realistic, achievable, and aligned with the realities on the ground.

The role of middle managers in the corporate culture is complex and multifaceted. They must balance the expectations and demands from both senior management and frontline employees, navigating the various layers of the organization's hierarchy. This requires strong leadership skills, effective communication, and the ability to build relationships and influence stakeholders at different levels.

Middle managers who can effectively navigate this sandwiched position in the corporate culture can create a positive and productive work environment, aligning the efforts of the entire organization towards the achievement of common goals and objectives.

Critical Role of Middle Management
Middle manager plays a critical role and acting as a bridge between high-level strategic decision-making and ground-level implementation. As the interpreters and translators of the organization's vision and mission, they turn strategic objectives into actionable tasks that can be comprehensively understood and executed by their teams. This role becomes even more vital during digital transformation. Middle managers can decipher digital transformation initiatives and present them in a way that aligns with the company's overarching mission and vision. They can explain how new digital tools and strategies contribute to the fulfillment of organizational objectives, ensuring buy-in and commitment from their teams.

The middle managers act as change agents and leaders. As change agents, they manage the implementation of digital initiatives, ensure that these changes become embedded in the daily workflows, and address any resistance to change. They inspire and guide their teams, setting a tone of openness, adaptability, and innovation that is crucial for digital transformation. As leaders, middle managers foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation, which aligns with the organization's vision and mission. By acting as the connection between the top executives and frontline employees, middle managers facilitate a two-way flow of communication that enables real-time feedback and adjustments, making them pivotal in ensuring a successful digital transformation. Therefore, the role of middle management in digital transformation is not just crucial; it is indispensable for the alignment of the transformation process with the organization's vision and mission.

Middle managers and autocratic tendencies
Every manager is not the same in his style of direction, orientation and personality traits. Hence their leadership style varies. The middle managers with an autocratic nature can pose a significant barrier to the successful execution of digital transformation. In an autocratic management style, decision-making is centralized and often lacks the input or involvement of team members. This unilateral decision-making can stifle the sense of ownership and engagement among employees, key factors necessary for a successful digital transformation. Autocratic middle managers may be resistant to new ideas and technologies, and their control-oriented approach can impede the openness and adaptability required to embrace digital tools and practices. This type of leadership can suppress the innovative and collaborative culture that is vital for digital transformation, ultimately undermining its objectives.

When middle managers exhibit only workaholic behaviors, it can negatively impact the pace and sustainability of digital transformation efforts. Workaholics often lead to overwork and stress, which can result in burnout among team members, decreased morale, and lower productivity. It also creates an environment where there's less focus on innovation and more emphasis on maintaining the status quo, which is contrary to the essence of digital transformation. Workaholic managers tend to foster cultures that do not prioritize work-life balance, which can deter the creative thinking and resilience needed for successful digital transformation. In essence, the autocratic nature and workaholic tendencies of middle managers can potentially obstruct the core objectives of digital transformation.

On the other hand, smart middle managers navigate the rapidly evolving digital landscape, ensuring their organizations remain competitive and responsive to customer needs. Embracing change and continuous learning, these leaders propel their companies towards success in the ever-changing digital frontier. In addition to their technical prowess, they are effective communicators who foster collaboration and empower their teams to embrace innovation and creativity.
Agility and Resilience

Business organizations are ongoing concerns while addressing the change due to digital transformation of any organization it is very vital and critical for the middle managers to address the challenges to adopt the new environment. Resistance to change is inherent character in the organization at which the role of the middle managers is important. In an ever-changing business landscape, agility and resilience have become vital traits for middle managers to ensure the achievement of corporate goals and objectives. Agility refers to the ability of middle managers to react rapidly and adapt to changes within their organization or industry. This ability allows managers to recalibrate strategies, reallocate resources, and redirect efforts towards achieving corporate goals in the face of evolving market dynamics or internal organizational changes. For example, during periods of industry disruption or a major business transformation, agile middle managers can swiftly reassess and adjust their tactics, thereby maintaining momentum towards corporate objectives.

Resilience addresses not only the ability to make change, but also the ability to bounce back and bounce forward. It addresses the challenges not only of the organization, but the people and communities. Resilience pertains to the capacity of middle managers to endure, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and challenges. This trait is pivotal to ensure continuous progression towards corporate goals amidst adversity. Resilient managers are adept at absorbing shocks, persisting during hardship, and rejuvenating their teams and strategies post-disruption. They act as pillars of stability and support, maintaining morale, productivity, and focus on the corporate objectives. When facing setbacks such as missed targets or project failures, resilient middle managers can navigate their teams towards recovery and learning, thereby ensuring that the path to achieving corporate goals remains clear and pursued. By fostering agility and resilience, organizations can empower their middle managers to effectively steer their teams towards the achievement of corporate objectives, no matter the uncertainties and challenges encountered along the way.

Further, instilling these qualities in middle management also impacts the wider organizational ecosystem. Managers who embody agility and resilience inspire their teams to adopt similar behaviors, leading to a more nimble and robust workforce. This cascading effect, in turn, enhances the overall organizational agility and resilience, placing the corporation in a better position to respond to change, withstands shocks, and achieves its strategic objectives. Hence, the development and promotion of agility and resilience in middle managers not only ensures that corporate goals and objectives are met but also contributes to building an adaptive and resilient organization that can thrive amidst change and adversity.

Remote work culture and role of middle managers

Remote work culture refers to the work environment and practices associated with employees working from locations outside the traditional office setting. This could be from home, co-working spaces, or any location with internet connectivity. Enabled by digital technologies, remote work culture has gained significant traction due to its flexibility, potential cost savings, and ability to access a wider talent pool. However, it also requires the establishment of effective communication norms, trust building, performance management strategies, and digital security measures. It emphasizes the importance of work-life balance, autonomy, and results-based performance rather than the traditional time-based evaluations. The rise of remote work culture has transformed the way organizations operate, leading to new ways of collaboration, leadership, and team engagement.

In the digital age, the rise of remote work culture has transformed the role of middle managers, requiring them to adapt to new ways of leading and managing their teams. No longer able to rely on traditional in-person management practices, middle managers must now harness digital tools to maintain effective communication, foster collaboration, and ensure team productivity. They play a crucial role in implementing and sustaining remote work policies, often being responsible for setting clear expectations, coordinating team activities, and ensuring that everyone has the necessary resources to work effectively from home. The middle managers are instrumental in creating a virtual work environment that is inclusive, equitable, and conducive to high productivity and job satisfaction. They need to consider different time zones, work styles, and individual circumstances to promote a balanced and inclusive remote work culture.

Moreover, middle managers have a vital role in maintaining team cohesion and engagement in a remote work setting. They are responsible for establishing communication norms, facilitating virtual team-building activities, and providing continuous feedback to ensure that employees feel connected and valued, despite the physical distance. Middle managers are also tasked with leading by example in demonstrating effective remote work habits, including respecting boundaries and encouraging work-life balance. In the context of digital transformation, their role extends to championing the use of new digital tools and platforms, facilitating digital upskilling, and guiding their teams through the transition to new digital processes. Ultimately, the role of middle managers in a remote work culture is more critical than ever as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of managing teams in the digital age.

The Impact of predictive analytics

Predictive analytics as a modern management analytics that involves with the use of statistical techniques, data mining, and machine learning to analyze current and historical data to make informed predictions about future events or trends. Predictive analytics, with its vast arsenal of tools and techniques, serves as a powerful aid for middle managers steering the helm of digital transformation. Predictive analytics captured the increasing support from all over the world by many organizations. According to a report the predictive analytics market gained momentum with around US$ 12.5 billion in 2022 and expected to reach US $ 38 Billion by 2028 with a CAGR of 20.4 % from 2022 to 2028.

One of the prominent tools used in predictive analytics is data mining. This process, which involves uncovering patterns and relationships in large datasets, can offer actionable insights. Trends, patterns, or associations unearthed via data mining can inform strategic decisions and provide valuable foresight. Statistical modeling, another critical tool, uses mathematical equations to delineate relationships between different variables, enabling prediction of future outcomes based on current or past data. Middle
managers can utilize statistical models to predict future performance and understand the potential impact of various strategic decisions, thereby facilitating more informed and effective planning.

Machine learning, another predictive analytic tool, involves algorithms that analyze data, learn from it, and then predict or decide without explicit programming. This automatic adaptation to changes in data and trends enhances prediction accuracy over time, making machine learning particularly beneficial for middle managers. In addition, artificial neural networks (ANNs), computing systems designed to mimic the human brain's neural networks, can process vast amounts of data and recognize intricate patterns, offering sophisticated insights that aid in strategy implementation. Tools like decision trees and time series analysis can respectively provide a visual aid for strategic decisions and recognize patterns in time-bound data. Middle managers can harness these predictive analytics tools to forecast future events, gauge the potential impact of different strategies, and make decisions that best align with the goals of digital transformation.

**Data Analytics and Middle Management**

Data analytics has a profound impact on easing the role and enhancing the effectiveness of middle managers in their daily operations. It equips managers with fact-based insights that can guide decision-making and strategic planning. Through data analytics, middle managers can understand patterns, trends, and correlations in data, thereby making informed decisions on everything from resource allocation to performance management. This ability to base decisions on data rather than intuition or speculation can greatly increase the accuracy, speed, and effectiveness of managerial decisions.

Moreover, data analytics can help middle managers streamline their operations and improve team productivity. With tools for tracking and analyzing performance metrics, middle managers can identify areas of inefficiency, understand the root causes, and take necessary corrective actions. Data analytics can also provide insights into employee productivity, team collaboration, and operational processes, enabling managers to identify opportunities for improvement and innovation. Additionally, data analytics can play a significant role in personalizing employee experiences and improving engagement, as managers can use data to understand individual strengths, preferences, and development needs. In sum, the use of data analytics in day-to-day management can greatly enhance the effectiveness of middle managers by offering valuable insights, improving decision-making, and optimizing operations.

Data analytics employs a variety of tools and techniques that are beneficial for management. Key among these is data mining, which explores large datasets to uncover hidden patterns and correlations, aiding strategic decision-making. Machine learning, a branch of artificial intelligence, enables predictive modeling, helping managers anticipate factors like customer behaviors, market changes, and internal performance.

Big data analytics allows for processing large volumes of diverse data in real or near-real-time, granting managers a deeper understanding of operations, customer behavior, and market trends. Data visualization tools like Tableau or PowerBI simplify complex datasets into understandable formats, facilitating effective communication of data-derived insights. Descriptive analytics provides insight into past behaviors to forecast future outcomes, while prescriptive analytics suggests actions for optimal results, employing sophisticated tools and technologies like machine learning and algorithms. Time series analysis identifies patterns or trends in time-bound data, and sentiment analysis gauges public sentiment about a product, service, or brand by analyzing social media and other online mentions. Collectively, these data analytics tools and techniques enhance management effectiveness by enabling evidence-based decision-making, accurate forecasting, operational optimization, and a better understanding of market and customer dynamics.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, middle managers are a critical asset for organizations in the digital age, acting as the central catalysts for successful adaptation and implementation of digital strategies. Their pivotal role as intermediaries between senior leadership and front-line employees positions them at the heart of the action, making their ability to embrace agility and resilience paramount. By cultivating agility, middle managers can respond swiftly to market disruptions, emerging technologies, and changing customer demands, facilitating seamless transitions during digital transformations. Moreover, fostering resilience equips them to endure setbacks and overcome challenges, inspiring their teams to persevere and innovate in the face of uncertainty. Together, these qualities enable middle managers to drive organizational performance, fostering sustained growth and competitive advantage in the ever-evolving digital landscape. As organizations continue to navigate the complexities of the digital age, investing in the development and support of agile and resilient middle managers will be pivotal to achieving long-term success and achieving a sustainable position in the digital marketplace.

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