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Dijital Dönüşüm Çağında Liderlik: Turizm Organizasyonlarında Kalabalık Yalnızlık ve Dijital Bağımlılıkla Mücadele

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Bu çalışma, dijital dönüşüm sürecinde turizm sektöründe giderek belirginleşen "kalabalık yalnızlık" ve "dijital bağımlılık" olgularını liderlik bağlamında kavramsal düzeyde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Kalabalık yalnızlık, bireylerin dijital araçlar aracılığıyla sürekli bağlantı hâlinde olmalarına rağmen sosyal ve duygusal açıdan kendilerini izole hissetmeleri durumunu ifade ederken; dijital bağımlılık, teknolojik araçlara aşırı ve kontrolsüz düzeyde yönelimi kapsamaktadır. Bu olguların, insan odaklı hizmet sunumunun temel olduğu turizm sektöründe çalışanların ruh sağlığı, örgütsel aidiyet ve performansları üzerinde olumsuz etkiler doğurabileceği öngörülmektedir. Çalışma, bu bağlamda liderliğin dönüştürücü rolünü tartışmak üzere betimleyici bir literatür taraması yöntemi benimsemiştir. Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, ProQuest ve EBSCOhost gibi önde gelen akademik veri tabanlarından elde edilen çalışmalar tematik bütünlük çerçevesinde analiz edilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, empatik iletişim, dijital yeterlilik ve psikolojik güvenlik unsurlarını içeren insan merkezli liderlik yaklaşımlarının, dijitalleşmenin neden olduğu izolasyon ve tükenmişliği azaltmada kritik rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Bu doğrultuda çalışma, dijital çağın psiko-sosyal risklerine liderlik literatüründe özgün kavramlar üzerinden dikkat cekmekte ve turizm örgütlerinde dijitalleşmenin insan üzerindeki etkilerine yönelik stratejik çözüm önerileri sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital çağda liderlik, kalabalık yalnızlık, dijital bağımlılık, turizm sektörü, örgütsel refah, insan merkezli yönetim.

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Leadership in the Age of Digital Transformation: Addressing Crowded Loneliness and Digital Dependency in Tourism Organizations

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Review Article

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to conceptually examine the emerging phenomena of "crowded loneliness" and "digital addiction" in the tourism sector within the framework of leadership in the digital transformation era. Crowded loneliness refers to a paradoxical state in which individuals feel emotionally and socially isolated despite being constantly connected through digital technologies, while digital addiction denotes an excessive and uncontrolled reliance on technological tools. These phenomena pose significant risks to employee well-being, organizational commitment, and service quality, particularly in labor-intensive and socially interactive industries such as tourism. Adopting a narrative literature review approach, this study synthesizes academic sources retrieved from leading databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. The findings underscore the importance of humancentered leadership practices-characterized by empathetic communication, digital competence, and psychological safety—in mitigating the isolating and exhausting consequences of digitalization. Accordingly, the study contributes to the literature by integrating emerging psychosocial risks into leadership discourse and proposing strategic solutions tailored to the challenges faced by tourism organizations undergoing digital transformation.

Keywords: Leadership in the digital age, crowded loneliness, digital addiction, tourism sector, organizational well-being, human-centered leadership.

Introduction

The rapid development of information technologies has had a profound impact on the operations of individuals and organisations. In the tourism sector, an industry centred on the needs of the human host, this transformation has engendered both opportunities and challenges. Digitalisation has been shown to enhance operational efficiency, reduce costs, and streamline business processes. However, it has also been demonstrated that digitalisation can erode social relationships among employees and foster excessive reliance on digital technologies. A salient consequence of this phenomenon is the emergence of "crowded loneliness," a term used to denote the state in which individuals, despite being digitally connected and physically surrounded by others, experience a sense of emotional and social isolation.

The central problem that this study seeks to address is that, while digitalisation has been shown to enhance productivity, it has concomitantly been demonstrated to engender social isolation and digital addiction among employees, exerting a detrimental effect on their organisational commitment and job performance. These challenges are especially evident in labour-intensive sectors, such as tourism, where interpersonal interaction is pivotal to employee well-being and service quality.

Cascio and Montealegre (2016) emphasised that digitalisation reengineers business processes and organisational structures, requiring revolutionary changes in work arrangements. Digitalisation, while enhancing efficiency, concomitantly introduces new risks, including job insecurity, work-life imbalance and weakened interpersonal communication. In the absence of adaptation to these dynamics by organisational structures through prioritisation of the human factor, problems such as digital addiction and emotional detachment may intensify. As stated by Çelik (2021), organisational commitment is founded upon face-to-face relationships, shared values, and a robust organisational culture. The decline of these elements due to digitalisation has the potential to engender a decline in employee motivation and an increase in turnover intentions.

In this context, the importance of human-centred leadership is increasing. In the context of digital environments, leadership styles that emphasise emotional connection, social bonding, and trust-building are imperative to mitigate the isolating effects of technology. Avolio and Kahai (2003) were the first to introduce the concept of e-leadership, which emphasised the need for leaders to effectively utilise digital tools while cultivating trust-based relationships. The authors' work differentiates between traditional and e-leadership models, emphasising the role of virtual team management and communication dynamics in shaping organisational outcomes.

A substantial number of studies have explored the structural and managerial aspects of digitalisation; however, its emotional and psychosocial consequences, particularly in service sectors such as tourism, have received limited scholarly attention. The concepts of crowded loneliness and digital addiction are nascent in the leadership literature, and there is a paucity of studies that have examined how empathetic leadership can address these challenges in digitally mediated work environments.

In order to achieve the aforementioned aims, the present study employs a narrative literature review methodology. This methodology allows for a flexible and interpretive synthesis of academic research on digitalisation, psychosocial risks, and leadership in the context of tourism organisations. This approach is distinct from systematic reviews in that it does not employ rigid inclusion/exclusion protocols; rather, it prioritises conceptual integration and critical interpretation.

The purpose of this study is twofold: firstly, to explore how digitalization-related phenomena, specifically the concepts of 'crowded loneliness' and 'digital addiction', impact employee well-being and organisational performance in tourism organisations; and secondly, to identify leadership strategies that can mitigate these effects within a theoretical framework.

The present study makes two distinct contributions to the extant literature. Firstly, it makes a theoretical contribution by introducing a conceptual framework that integrates hitherto under-addressed psychosocial risks into contemporary leadership discourse. Secondly, it proffers a pragmatic contribution in the form of sector-specific strategies for tourism organisations, wherein human interaction is paramount for ensuring both staff and customer satisfaction. It is evident that the present study addresses a critical gap in leadership research. Furthermore, it enhances the understanding of digital transformation's human dimensions in service-intensive settings.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm. The present study employs document analysis as the data collection technique, with a review of current academic literature from the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. The review process was guided by keywords such as "Leadership in the Digital Age," "Crowded Loneliness in Organizations," "Digital Addiction," "Tourism Leadership," and "Employee Well-Being." The objective of the present study is to provide a conceptual foundation for leadership practices in the age of digital transformation, by synthesising and interpreting the relevant sources.

Conceptual Framework

Digital addiction has been defined as a behavioural and psychological disorder caused by excessive and uncontrolled use of digital devices and the internet (Young, 1998). Specific forms of addiction, such as social media addiction and compulsive use of virtual environments, have been shown to have a detrimental effect on individuals' daily functioning (Andreassen, 2015). These forms of addiction have been found to lead to a number of issues, including interpersonal detachment, cognitive difficulties and time management problems. These digital dependencies frequently engender a psychosocial



condition known as "crowded loneliness," whereby individuals experience feelings of isolation despite being digitally connected and physically surrounded by others (Bauman, 2013). In the tourism sector, this paradox is especially evident due to the sector's reliance on emotional labour and social interaction. The present paper sets out to explore the interconnectedness between digital overexposure and emotional detachment, and to highlight the emerging need for leadership practices that can address the human consequences of digitalization. As employees increasingly experience disengagement and social disconnection, the leadership approach adopted within organisations becomes a key variable in mitigating these effects. Social leadership, defined as the guidance and motivation of individuals towards shared goals with consideration for social needs (Northouse, 2021), provides a foundation for the resolution of these challenges. Nevertheless, conventional leadership models frequently prove to be inadequate in the context of digitally mediated environments. In such a context, the concept of e-leadership assumes particular significance. As Avolio and Kahai (2003) contend, digitalisation has a profound effect on communication patterns and demands new competencies from leaders. These include the ability to manage remote teams, build trust in a virtual environment, and maintain engagement in screen-dominated workspaces. Consequently, leadership must evolve to encompass not only the technical guidance of digital transformation, but also the psychological well-being of employees. In summary, the intersection of digital addiction, crowded loneliness, and leadership response forms the conceptual triad of this study, thereby establishing the basis for a theoretical model focused on human-centred leadership in digitalised tourism settings.

Method

The present study adopts a qualitative narrative literature review approach within an interpretive paradigm to conceptually examine the phenomena of "crowded loneliness" and "digital addiction" in tourism organisations through a leadership lens. The study is predicated on the assumption that the process of digitalisation engenders a dissolution of social bonds among employees, concomitantly resulting in an augmentation of individual dependencies. The present study explores how leadership can strategically respond to these emerging psychosocial challenges in the digital age.

In contradistinction to systematic reviews, which are characterised by the rigour of their inclusion/exclusion criteria and the objective of analysing a defined corpus of studies, narrative reviews are distinguished by their greater flexibility and interpretive nature. The objective of this research is to synthesise and critically evaluate theoretical developments, identify conceptual patterns, and reflect on emerging issues within a broader intellectual context (Snyder, 2019). Consequently, this approach is well-suited for elucidating the intersection of leadership literature with digital transformation and its human-centred ramifications within the tourism sector.

Narrative reviews also serve to structure existing academic knowledge, identify gaps, and suggest new perspectives (Webster & Watson, 2002; Okoli & Schabram, 2010). In this study, relevant sources were identified through searches conducted in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. The selection of literature was guided by thematic relevance rather than formal coding procedures. No rigid inclusion/exclusion protocols were applied, as the aim was not to quantify findings but to interpretively map key concepts and approaches.

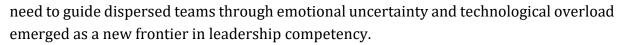
The following keywords were utilised in the literature search: The following papers were selected for review: 'Leadership in the Digital Age', 'Crowded Loneliness in Organizations', 'Digital Addiction', 'Leadership', 'Organizational Challenges in Digitalization', and 'Employee Well-Being in Tourism'. Research addressing the intersection of these themes was prioritised. The present review encompasses scholarly work published primarily between 2010 and 2024, thereby encapsulating the evolution of leadership theory in response to digital transformation.

This methodological approach facilitates the conceptual integration of fragmented literature, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for future research and practical strategies related to leadership and employee well-being in digitalised tourism settings.

Findings: Thematic Analysis of the Literature

1. Challenges of Digitalization in Tourism Leadership

Digitalization has had a profound impact on the manner in which organizations communicate and coordinate their activities. In the tourism sector, which is predicated on face-to-face interaction, personalisation, and emotional labour, this transformation introduces a series of organisational and managerial challenges. The transition to remote and virtual structures has precipitated a shift in the manner in which leaders and employees interact with one another. As posited by Bell and Kozlowski (2002), logistical issues such as time-zone discrepancies, the absence of informal communication opportunities, and excessive reliance on technology are identified as significant impediments to the effective leadership of virtual teams. These difficulties are further compounded in the tourism sector, where employee satisfaction and service quality are closely intertwined with interpersonal dynamics. Gibson and Gibbs (2006) observe that geographically dispersed teams may experience a deterioration in psychological safety, a pivotal component for innovation and team cohesion. It is imperative for leaders to formulate bespoke strategies to engender a culture of trust and inclusivity, for virtual communication alone is inadequate for maintaining optimal team dynamics. The advent of the pandemic represented a pivotal moment in this regard, prompting a swift and substantial shift in the prevailing paradigm. As Contreras et al. (2020) assert, the abrupt and compulsory transition to telework revealed both the possibilities and the vulnerabilities inherent in leadership models. In the context of rapidly evolving expectations for flexibility, empathy and adaptability, traditional hierarchical models have been shown to be inadequate. Tourism organisations were no exception to this; the



2. Digital Addiction and Its Organizational Consequences

The issue of digital addiction has become a significant concern in the context of employee well-being, particularly within digitalised work environments where screen time is pervasive and digital devices have become predominant in work processes. As Young (1998) defined, internet addiction may be considered a psychological disorder arising from excessive online engagement. This concept has since evolved to encompass social media dependency, compulsive online communication, and work-related digital overexposure. Andreassen (2015) posits that digital addiction can result in diminished attention spans, cognitive overload, inadequate time management and impaired interpersonal skills. In the context of tourism organisations, the repercussions are especially evident. The nature of the sector necessitates emotional presence and high social interaction. However, as digital platforms become increasingly pervasive in the realm of communication, the space for authentic human connection is gradually diminishing. Bauman (2013) introduces the concept of "crowded loneliness" to describe this paradox: individuals may be surrounded by people and hyper-connected via digital tools, yet still experience feelings of isolation and emotional disconnection. In their 2023 study, Skogli and Weierød explored this phenomenon through their concept of Workers' Experience with Digital Communication (WEDC). The findings of the study indicated that remote work was associated with increased emotional fatigue, mental distancing, and feelings of detachment, particularly among individuals who lacked autonomy or social support. This underscores the dual nature of digitalisation, which, while concomitantly enhancing efficiency, concomitantly engenders the risk of alienation and emotional burnout, unless judiciously managed through leadership.

3. Leadership Styles and Digital Competencies

Leadership is a pivotal factor in determining the impact of digitalization on employees and organizational culture. Avolio and Kahai (2003) were the first to introduce the concept of e-leadership, which extends traditional leadership theories into virtual contexts. E-leaders must cultivate trust in the absence of physical presence, provide psychological support via virtual channels, and maintain team cohesion despite geographic and temporal dispersion. In their study on telecommuting, Liao et al. (2024) demonstrated the moderating role of digital leadership. While the efficacy of remote work in predicting job performance was not a direct outcome of the study, the analysis did demonstrate a significant enhancement in performance outcomes through the fostering of a sense of structure, direction, and belonging through digital leadership. These findings emphasise that digital leadership entails more than merely the utilisation of technological tools; it also encompasses the consideration of the emotional needs of remote employees. As Strielkowski et al. (2022) further emphasised, sustainable and resilient leadership models are of particular necessity in the post-pandemic business world. The study posits that leadership must evolve in tandem with digital transformation, incorporating sustainability values, ethical considerations, and emotional intelligence. This is of particular pertinence to tourism organisations that are undertaking digital transformation processes whilst endeavouring to preserve service quality and staff morale.

4. Organizational Communication, Belonging, and Psychological Safety

In the context of virtual workplaces, effective communication, satisfaction with communication, and perceived organisational respect have been identified as fundamental elements for employee engagement and commitment. Bartel et al. (2012) posited that physical isolation is associated with diminished feelings of inclusion and organisational identification. The relationship between perceived respect and physical proximity is of particular importance in the tourism sector, where service quality is often dependent on the internal climate of emotional connection and collaboration. Akkirman and Harris (2005) investigated whether communication satisfaction levels differ between physical and virtual office workers. Contrary to prevailing expectations, the study revealed no significant differences, suggesting that effective communication systems and strong leadership can mitigate the impact of physical distance. This finding suggests that the efficacy of virtual work is not contingent on the nature of the work itself, but rather on the manner in which it is managed and supported by leadership. Grant et al. (2013) conducted a study that explored the psychological dimensions of remote work. The study identified factors such as trust, management style and technological fluency as critical for balancing work-life integration. Gibson and Gibbs' (2006) research also demonstrated that psychological safety in communication, as opposed to mere access to tools, emerged as the most reliable predictor of innovation and collaboration in distributed teams. Collectively, these findings underscore the significance of emotionally intelligent, inclusive, and responsive leadership in cultivating a sense of belonging in digitalized work environments.

Synthesis of Findings

The extant literature on the subject converges on a clear insight: namely, that digitalization brings both operational advantages and psychosocial vulnerabilities. Whilst digital tools offer expediency, scalability, and remote accessibility, they also disrupt traditional modes of communication, increase the risk of emotional detachment, and reshape organisational culture in complex ways. In sectors such as tourism, which are inherently social and interaction-heavy, these effects are even more pronounced. The role of leadership emerges as a critical mediating force in this transformation. The extant literature suggests that digital leadership, characterised by adaptability, empathy, trust-building, and communication fluency, is imperative for sustaining employee well-being and organisational effectiveness in virtual environments. Leaders who recognise the psychological costs of digital dependency and crowded loneliness are better equipped to



develop inclusive strategies that foster belonging, mitigate burnout, and support sustained engagement in digitalised workspaces.

Result, Discussion and Recommendations

In the tourism industry, concepts such as "Loneliness in a Crowd," "Digital Addiction," and "Leadership" have increased even more meaning due to the effects of digitalization. It can be viewed here that digitalization has mixed effects on workers. First-ly, issues such as digital addiction and loneliness in a crowd can affect the productivi-ty, work-life balance, and mental health of the employees who are engaged in the tourism sector. Digitalization, especially in people-related industries like tourism, re-quires employees to be online at all times and use digital means to perform their jobs. Digitalized companies can also implement distant working habits, and this can lead to social exclusion, feelings of loneliness, and increased digital addiction among employ-ees.

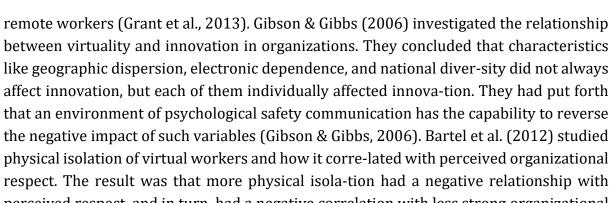
Loneliness among many has gained more evidence, especially post-pandemic and in the wake of remote work and digitalization processes. In a sector like tourism, with high human interaction, employees can be physically present in crowded places but feel isolated emotionally with the rise in online communication. It becomes difficult for employees to juggle their work and personal life under this state. Further, the need to be continuously online can also accelerate digital addiction, preventing employees from maintaining a normal social life while fulfilling their responsibilities.

Digital Addiction is now a concern since employees began performing their work using only digital devices and mediums of communication. In the case of the tourism industry, digitalization, particularly through social media, online reservation systems, and digital advertising, might compel workers to remain connected all the time. This keeps employees within reach even after working hours, experiencing the feeling of "being always reachable." Digital addiction may have negative impacts on personal health and reduce productivity. Furthermore, managing in a time of digitalization and achieving an equally healthy work-life balance for employees is now one of the biggest managerial challenges. The problem is best addressed by means of leadership. Strong leadership is required to reduce the feeling of isolation among employees, allow them to control digital addiction, and achieve a balance between work and life. Workers' confidence, proper use of virtual means, and leadership that keeps the well-being of workers at the forefront of its agenda can be helpful in addressing these issues. To be successful in virtual environments, leaders need to have the ability to deal with virtual teams efficiently. Eleadership is strictly required here. In highly developing and transforming sectors such as the tourism sector, leaders are required to catch up with digitalization, manage virtual teams, and empathize with employees' well-being. By helping employees cope with digital addiction and isolation, leaders not only enhance workplace productivity and employee satisfaction, but also contribute to the creation of a sustainable work environment.

Skogli & Weierød (2023) examined the association between home office work and web-based digital communication experience (WEDC), exploring variables like transformational leadership, work pace autonomy and decision control, burnout, social support, and working hours. The research found that home office use was positively associated with WEDC, and gender and mental distance influenced digital communication experiences. The study concluded that home office use would mitigate burnout, and gender impacted WEDC negatively, and autonomy and mental distance significantly impacted WEDC (Skogli & Weierød, 2023). Strielkowski et al. (2022) talked about the impact of COVID-19 on leadership abilities and organizational adaptation. The study emphasized business leadership and economic policy after the pandemic and digitalization. The research used the concept of designing new leadership styles that complement sustainability goals and emphasized the significance of leadership styles based on digitalization and sustainability in resolving pandemic issues (Strielkowski et al., 2022). Liao et al. (2024) carried out a study that explored the impact of telecommuting on work performance within the context of digital leadership. Their study showed that digital leadership greatly impacts telecommuting performance but that telecom-muting had an indirect effect on job performance. The study reflected the critical na-ture of digital leadership in coordinating work-life relationships along with reducing negative remote work repercussions, such as loneliness and dependency on digital media (Liao et al., 2024).

Akkirman & Harris (2005), compared levels of communication satisfaction of vir-tual and actual office workers, highlighting the impact of virtual communication on job satisfaction. There was no difference between the two groups in terms of communica-tion satisfaction, rejecting the null hypothesis that virtual workers are less satisfied due to limited social contacts. The results suggested that variations in the samples might have influenced these results (Akkirman & Harris, 2005). Contreras et al. (2020) discussed revolutionary changes in working styles due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and companies accelerating digital transformation processes. The authors emphasized the importance of successful e-leadership in adapting to new work environments. Their study argued that organizations with successful e-leadership might make tele-working an opportunity for greater productivity and sustainability, although tradition-al leadership might be difficult in virtual settings. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) explored the impact of digitalization on organizational processes and leadership. They explained how digitalization affects working environments and the role of leaders in creating digital culture. The study highlighted that the leaders must develop relationships with multiple stakeholders and work in complex contexts while addressing ethical concerns in virtual environments (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

Grant et al. (2013) conducted a research on the influence of remote e-working on well-being, performance, and work-life balance. The research showed dominant themes including the management practices and the role of trust in the success of tel-ework. It also highlighted that over-working and lack of recovery time affected well-being negatively, whereas management style and trust significantly affected the success of



the negative impact of such variables (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Bartel et al. (2012) studied physical isolation of virtual workers and how it corre-lated with perceived organizational respect. The result was that more physical isola-tion had a negative relationship with perceived respect, and in turn, had a negative correlation with less strong organizational identification. The research highlighted the lesser-explored physical distance and status perception role in virtual workers' organ-izational identification (Bartel et al., 2012).

In conclusion, the issues of loneliness among crowds, addiction to digital media, and leadership as a result of digitalization in tourism organizations constitute a major area for the future of tourism organizations. In order to address these issues, effective leadership is required to create good relationships among employees, utilize digital technologies in a healthy way, and have a work-life balance. It is crucial here that leaders foster a healthy and effective work culture during the virtual age for long-term organization success. Based on this inference, the following recommendations can be made to address the challenges of loneliness among individuals, virtual addiction, and tourism industry leadership induced by digitalization:

1. Developing Strategies to Combat Digital Addiction: Policies need to be drafted that would remind workers not to remain connected with digital tools after work hours. Strategies need to be designed that would draw boundaries between work life and personal life, thereby avoiding digital addiction. Digital detox programs can be organized at intervals to reduce digital addiction at work. The programs can make the employees let go of technology and develop a healthier work-life balance.

2. Methods to Cope with Loneliness in Crowds: In order to beat the loneliness introduced by digitalization, there must be face-to-face events and social meetings held occasionally. In such events, workers will have chances to create a more profound sense of rapport between themselves. In workplaces, social events can relax the em-ployees from feelings of loneliness. Events such as art therapy, team building activi-ties, and team games can create healthier rapport between the workers.

3. Effective Digital Leadership Practices: Leaders need to inspire employees to interact with each other through virtual tools but manage this interaction with a healthy balance. Second, leaders should also communicate well on virtual platforms to guide employees in how to overcome loneliness and digital addiction. Leaders need to de-velop their ability of managing virtual teams to become successful in guiding virtual spaces. Leaders should be trained on digital leadership, which will equip them with knowledge on how to assist employees in balancing their work and life.

4. Employee Well-being Support Practices: The employees' mental health has been all the more important due to the effects of digitalization. Therefore, psychological support and counseling services should be provided for the employees. Flexible work-ing times and blended work patterns can be implemented to help the employees maintain a worklife balance. The patterns can reduce digital addiction and the feeling of being lonely in a crowd.

5. Communication and Engagement-Enhancing Strategies: Platforms can be de-signed to enable employees to interact in a healthy way in the virtual world. Such platforms can maintain a balance between work and social interactions. To boost soli-darity among employees in the virtual world, team projects and teamwork should be encouraged. Increasing social relationships among employees can reduce feelings of loneliness.

As a summary, leaders and managers need to take an active part in addressing the leadership, digital addiction, and loneliness in the crowd challenges that come with digitalization. Good leadership can offer employees the capacity to operate in a healthy and productive environment in the digital space, thereby ensuring the sustainable success of organizations.

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