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Enhancing Sustainable Competitive Advantage through Digital HRM in India's Emerging Digital Economy

Nathiya. V*
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Abstract

The rapid digital transformation that India is experiencing has transformed the nature of jobs by necessitating constant upskilling and acquisition of good digital skills by employees as a way of staying afloat in the evolving work place. Digital Human Resource Management (Digital HRM) has become a necessary instrument in sustainability of employee development, flexibility, and long-term employability as shown by the changing employment patterns. This paper discusses how the critical aspects of digitalization such as Technology Integration, Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy and Digital Competency affect employee sustainability and organizational performance in the digital economy of India. The quantitative research design was used and a structured questionnaire was given to employees of different sectors. Regression and structural equation model were used to analyze the data and determine the importance of digital HRM dimensions in determining sustainable outcomes of employees. The results indicate that Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy, and Technology Integration were found to be significant predictors of Sustainable Competitive Advantage, whereas Digital Competency albeit important was not found to have a direct statistics impact in the regression model. The findings highlight the need to become digital ready, embrace collaborative learning, and empower working conditions to facilitate employee sustainability. The research suggests that companies should intensify digital training programs, facilitate the culture of knowledge sharing, increase staff autonomy, and tactically adopt digital HRM solutions to develop a robust and future-driven workforce.

Keywords: Digital Human Resource Management, Technology Integration, Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy, Digital Competency, Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Introduction

The fast growing digital economy of India has changed the way organizations do business and the management of their employees. This change started with the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) reform in 1991 that opened India to international competition and welcomed multinational corporations (Barney, 1991). These transformations came in with new superior technologies, new management practices and necessity of more strategic Human Resource Management (HRM). The recent programs Digital India, Startup India, and Skill India and the growth of Aadhaar and UPI have only served to increase the pace of digital adoption, with tech-enabled processes in HR becoming the key to organizational success (Marler and Parry, 2021; Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016). Digital HRM is a key element of this environment as it integrates AI-driven recruitment, HR analytics, cloud-based systems, and digital learning platforms to increase efficiency and engagement of employees (Stone et al., 2015; Strohmeier, 2020). Digital HRM also helps organizations to make decisions in real-time, engage in continuous upskilling and enhance employee experience, which are major factors in maintaining competitiveness as organizations shift to digital and hybrid models (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003). Digital HR technologies start to take over in MSMEs to stream operations, multinational corporations compel the local companies to consider the global standards. Emerging digital positions and other data analysts and AI specialists indicate why greater digital skills are required (Agarwal and Prasad, 1998).

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The increased focus on organizational sustainability and employee wellbeing is another motivator to introduce transparent and technology-based HR systems (Guest, 2017; Saks, 2006). This paper is based on the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Human Capital Theory and discusses the contribution of Digital HRM practices such as technology integration, knowledge sharing, autonomy, and digital competency to the Sustainable Competitive Advantage. RBV focuses on the importance of valuable and inimitable resources to achieve competitiveness (Barney, 1991), whereas Human Capital Theory focuses on the significance of knowledge and skills of the employees (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). This study provides a guiding practice in the creation of future-proofing HR practices that will resonate with the current digital transformation in India.

1. Objectives of the Study

To examine how Digital HRM practices contribute to the attainment of sustainable competitive advantage in the changing digital economy of India.

To formulate strategic recommendations to organizations on how to effectively utilize Digital HRM practices in creating and sustaining long-term competitive advantage.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Digital Human Resource Management (DHRM)

Digital Human Resource Management encompasses the implementation of such technologies in the area of AI-driven recruitment, HR analytics, and cloud-based HR systems to increase HR efficiency and strategic value. According to Bondarouk and Brewster (2016), DHRM is an innovative approach that allows precision and time efficiency of HR procedures. Marler and Parry (2021) underline that digital tools aid in making decisions based on data and enhance the experience of employees. Online learning gives rise to long-term ability growth (Amabile, 1996). According to Strohmeier (2020), self-service HR platforms improve self-sufficiency and digital capability. Nonetheless, digital resistance and stress are also some of the challenges in the process of technology adoption. Accelerating digitalization in India creates the need to review the role DHRM plays in generating long-term benefit (Guest, 2017).

2.2 Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA)

Sustainable Competitive Advantage is the superior performance over the long term that is based upon resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). The RBV places human capital and innovation and digital capabilities as the basis of long-term power. HR practices are very critical towards developing motivated, skillful and innovative workforce that increases organizational resilience (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003). Prahalad and Hamel (1990) emphasize that firms in digital economies can outperform their competitors because of the core competencies that are based on learning and technology.

2.3 India's Digital Economy

The digital economy in India is growing through liberalisation and the rapidity in the use of digital technologies. Digital work, platform work, and algorithmic models transform the workforce (Marler and Parry, 2021). The focal areas that DHRM facilitates the alignment and value creation are the digital recruitment, constant learning, and analytics (Agarwal and Prasad, 1998).

2.4 Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and HRM

The India digital transformation takes place at the Digital Public Infrastructure. Systems like Aadhaar, UPI and DigiLocker are being used to improve access and lower the barriers to transactions, which provide smooth HR functions including digital onboarding, payroll and learning (Stone et al., 2015). In the case of HRM, DPI enhances the digital use, as it guarantees interoperability and accessibility that can lead to broader strategic workforce capabilities.

2.5 MSMEs and Digital HRM

Nowadays, cloud solutions are embraced by Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises to decrease the number of administrators, as well as to enhance productivity (Strohmeier, 2020). The digital HR tools facilitate the compliance, recruitment, sharing of information and training, which helps the MSMEs develop competitive advantage despite the limited resources (Agarwal and Prasad, 1998).

2.6 DEI and Digital HRM

Diverse workplaces promote innovation and performance (Roberson, 2019). Digital HRM enhances DEI through the facilitation of unbiased recruitment algorithms, monitoring using analytics, and flexible work arrangements (Saks, 2006). Online learning systems assist in the minimization of skills gap and the guarantee of a wider involvement in a variety of workforce categories.

2.7 Sustainability and ESG in HRM

Sustainability incorporates economic performance and employee wellbeing coupled with social responsibility. HRM has been a key component in bringing sustainability through ethical practices, skill building, and wellbeing (Guest, 2017). Digital HRM helps to be sustainable because it minimises paperwork through digital onboarding and e-learning and allows tracking the wellbeing of the workforce and inclusion with the use of data (Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016).

3. Hypothesis of the study

H1: There is a strong effect of Technology Integration, Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy, and Digital Competency collectively on Sustainable Competitive Advantage

H2: Technology Integration is positively significant on Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

H3: Knowledge Sharing is positively significant on Sustainable Competitive Advantage

H4: Autonomy is positively significant on Sustainable Competitive Advantage

H5: Digital Competency is positively significant on Sustainable Competitive Advantage

4. Research Methodology

The research design presented in this study is a quantitative and cross-sectional study that investigates the association between Digital HRM practices and employee sustainability in the digital economy in India. Quantitative method enables systematic quantification, testing of hypothesis and determination of important predictors. The target group includes the employees of digitally transforming businesses in the IT, manufacturing, services, education, and digital startups. The respondents that will be selected are through convenient sampling which is applied on the respondents that actively utilize digital HR systems, which include: HR portals, AI tools, digital learning platforms, and virtual communication

systems. A total of 378 employees will provide sufficient statistical power to regression and SEM analysis. The data is derived using a structured questionnaire containing validated questions used in other earlier researches on a 5 point Likert scale. The questionnaire is administered through Google Forms and other online platforms so that more industries could be represented in it.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

5.1 Multiple Regressions (Stepwise Method)

Multiple Regression (Stepwise Method) determines the most important variables to predict dependent variable by automatically including or eliminating independent variables depending on their statistical contribution. The approach keeps the variables that enhance the explanatory power of the model and removes those variables that do not do so, leading to the creation of an efficient regression model which emphasizes the most important factors.

H1: There is a strong effect of Technology Integration, Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy, and Digital Competency collectively on Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Table 2 Model Summary

Model	R	R Sq	Adjusted R Sq	Std. Er of the Est
1	.796 ^a	0.634	0.633	2.59185
2	.808 ^b	0.653	0.651	2.52533
3	.812 ^c	0.659	0.656	2.50919

a. Predictors: (Const), Know_Sharing

b. Predictors: (Const), Know_Sharing, Autonomy

c. Predictors: (Const), Know_Sharing, Autonomy, Technology

By using stepwise regression analysis (Table 2), the effect of Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy, Technology Integration, and Digital Competency on Sustainable Competitive Advantage was studied. In Model 1, Knowledge Sharing was the strongest predictor of competitive advantage with the model accounting 63.4% of the variation. The Autonomy in Model 2 added an extra contribution to the explained variance, which was 65.3%. The addition of Technology Integration to Model 3 made it even better to 65.9 which had a small yet significant contribution to the explanatory power. Digital Competency was not incorporated in the stepwise process since it was not making a significant contribution, which implies that its impact might be indirect or conditional on other Digital HRM variables than independent predictors.

Table 3 ANOVA

Mod		Sum of Sq	Df	Mean Sq	F	Significance
1	Regression	4372.356	1	4372.356	650.871	.000b
	Residual	2525.855	376	6.718		
	Total	6898.212	377			
2	Regression	4506.730	2	2253.365	353.342	.000c
	Residual	2391.481	375	6.377		
	Total	6898.212	377			
3	Regression	4543.487	3	1514.496	240.547	.000d
	Residual	2354.724	374	6.296		
	Total	6898.212	377			

a. Dependent Variable: SCA

b. Predictors: (Const), Know_Sharing

c. Predictors: (Const), Know_Sharing, Autonomy

d. Predictors: (Const), Know_Sharing, Autonomy, Technology

Findings of the ANOVA indicate that all three of the regression models have significant predictive power on Sustainable Competitive Advantage. Model 1 validates that Knowledge Sharing itself is a good predictor. In Model 2, further addition of Autonomy increases the explanatory power of the model. The best predictive model, Model 3 that incorporates Knowledge Sharing, Autonomy, and Technology Integration, shows that the two variables in combination render the best wholesome account of Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

Table 4 Co-efficients

Model		Unstandardized Co-efficients		Standardized Co-efficients	t	Significance
		B	Std. Err	Beta		
1	(Const)	-3.598	2.273		-1.583	.114
	KS	.720	.057	.615	12.519	.000
	Auto	.341	.085	.156	4.027	.000
	Tech	.154	.064	.114	2.416	.016

a. Dependent Variable: SCA

Table 4 shows that Knowledge Sharing is the highest predictor of Sustainable Competitive Advantage and it was found that the more the knowledge is shared, the more the competitiveness of the organization is improved. The meaningful positive influence also goes to autonomy, thus the importance of empowering employees in decision making. Technology Integration has a moderate contribution meaning that the use of digital tools further adds to the competitiveness. In general, Knowledge Sharing is the main factor contributing to Sustainable Competitive Advantage of Indian organizations with the assistance of Autonomy and Technology Integration.

Excluded Variable: Digital Competency was not included in the stepwise regression since it was not statistically significant in predicting Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

$$\text{Sustainable Competitive Advantage} = -3.598 + 0.720 (\text{Knowledge Sharing}) + 0.341(\text{Autonomy}) + 0.154 (\text{Technology})$$

5.2 Structural Equation Modeling

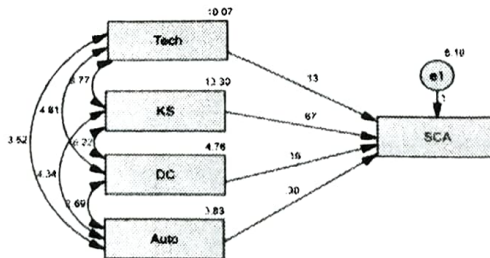


Figure 1 Structural Equation Path Model

The relationships between exogenous and endogenous variables are illustrated in figure 1. The researcher employed their model to assess the hypothesized structure, employing the maximum likelihood method for analysis. The validity of the model was confirmed both architecturally and experimentally.

Table 5 Measurement of Goodness of Model Fit

INDICES	VALUES	
CMIN	10.524	
DF	4	
Chi-Square /df	2.63	between 1-5 (Kline, 2016)
GFI	0.956	>0.90 (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2019)
AGFI	0.952	>0.90 (Brown, 2015)
NFI	0.997	>0.90 (Kline, 2016)
CFI	0.996	> 0.95(Hu & Bentler, 1999)
TLI	0.911	>.90 (Byrne,1994)
RMSEA	0.069	<0.08 (Coughlan, J., & Mullen,D, 2008)

According to table 5,overall this model is a good fit. The Chi-square/df value of 2.63 falls within the acceptable range (1–5), confirming model adequacy. The incremental and absolute fit indices—GFI (0.956), AGFI (0.952), NFI (0.997), CFI (0.996), and TLI (0.911)—all exceed the recommended thresholds, demonstrating strong model fit. Additionally, the RMSEA value of 0.069 is below the acceptable limit of 0.08, indicating a reasonable error of approximation. Together, these indices confirm that the proposed structural model fits the data well.

Table 6 Standardized Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

Hypothesis	Paths			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
H ₂	Sus_Competitive Adv	<---	Tech	0.134	0.065	2.071	0.038	Supported
H ₃	Sus_Competitive Adv	<---	KS	0.672	0.065	10.347	***	Supported
H ₄	Sus_Competitive Adv	<---	Auto	0.303	0.088	3.465	***	Supported
H ₅	Sus_Competitive Adv	<---	DC	0.158	0.101	1.556	0.12	Not Supported

Interpretation of Structural Model Results

H₂: Technology Integration → Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Technology Integration shows a significant positive effect on Sustainable Competitive Advantage ($\beta = 0.134, p = 0.038$). This indicates that organizations leveraging digital tools, AI-enabled systems, and technology-driven HR processes are more capable of improving efficiency, responsiveness, and strategic alignment, thereby enhancing long-term competitive performance. Hence H₂ is supported.

H3: Knowledge Sharing → Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Knowledge Sharing has the strongest and most significant influence on SCA ($\beta = 0.672, p < 0.001$). This suggests that when employees actively exchange information, collaborate digitally, and utilize organizational knowledge systems, it greatly enhances innovation, problem-solving, and collective capability—leading to superior and sustainable advantages. Hence H3 is supported.

H4: Autonomy → Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Autonomy also exhibits a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.303, p < 0.001$). This implies that empowering employees through digital self-service platforms, flexible decision-making, and reduced hierarchical control boosts motivation, creativity, and ownership, all of which contribute meaningfully to sustained competitive strength. Hence H4 is supported.

H5: Digital Competency → Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Digital Competency shows a positive but statistically insignificant effect on Sustainable Competitive Advantage ($\beta = 0.158, p = 0.12$). This indicates that while digital skills are important, the current competency levels do not directly create competitive advantage—possibly due to uneven skills, early digital transformation stages, or indirect contributions through innovation or performance. Thus, its direct impact on SCA, H5 is not statistically supported.

Table 7 Correlations matrix (Latent variables)

Paths			Estimate
Technology	<-->	Autonomy	.566
Autonomy	<-->	Knowledge Sharing	.607
Autonomy	<-->	Digital Competency	.630
Technology	<-->	Knowledge Sharing	.758
Knowledge Sharing	<-->	Digital Competency	.782
Technology	<-->	Digital Competency	.695

The analysis of the correlation shows that all the key variables in the digital HRM environment have strong positive correlations. Technology Integration demonstrates significant relations with Autonomy, Knowledge Sharing, and Digital Competency, indicating that the higher the use of digital tools, the more employees are empowered, the more they share knowledge, and the more powerful their digital competence. Autonomy is also positively correlated with Knowledge Sharing and Digital Competency, i.e. empowered employees are more likely to share their knowledge and develop their digital competence. Knowledge Sharing and Digital Competency have the highest relationship level, as it is stated that the knowledge sharing is often associated with greater digital competency. Altogether, the results indicate that these digital HRM dimensions are strongly interconnected, and the enhancement of one dimension is likely to improve other ones.

6. Findings

The study presents a great deal of empirical support that Digital Human Resource Management (DHRM) plays a central strategic role of Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) in the dynamic digital economy in India. The four dimensions of DHRM Technology Integration, Knowledge Sharing,

Autonomy, and Digital Competency Knowledge Sharing was the most predictive of SCA in both regression and SEM analyses, confirming the opinion that knowledge is a key intangible asset in the digital era. Companies that facilitate open communication, collaborative learning, and online knowledge sharing platforms can boost innovativeness and productivity, which result in economic long-run value. The positive influence was also large in autonomy, which showed that it has a positive impact on increasing the agility in the workforce, creativity, and performance, which is in line with the objective of the Indian government to establish a high-skilled, innovation-driven economy. Technology Integration The impact of Technology Integration was moderate and meaningful on SCA and aligns with the national digital programs like Digital India, NeGP, and AI for All, which enhance efficiency and lower costs of operations through automation, analytics, and AI-powered HR practices.

Even though, Digital Competency was not a direct predictor of SCA, there were also strong correlations with other DHRM dimensions, which implies that it plays an indirect role in the technology adoption process by facilitating the flow of knowledge and contributing to the autonomy and innovativeness culture. Interdependences of all four dimensions indicate that the creation of digitally supportive organizational environment enhances productivity, flexibility, and future preparedness in general. Therefore, the evidence suggests that DHRM is partially beneficial to the competitiveness of firms as well as the overall digitization of India in the form of providing skilled and innovation-driven workforce that suits Industry 4.0 and the new knowledge economy.

7. Suggestions

To enhance Sustainable Competitive Advantage within the fast-growing digital economy sector in India, organizations need to redefine Digital HRM as an economic enabler and not merely as an HR mechanism. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) (e.g. Aadhaar-based verification, UPI-enabled salary payments and cloud-based compliance systems) should help companies save administrative time, cut HR transaction costs, and make the labour market more efficient. The HR role must play an active role in enhancing the growth of the GDP in India through increased labour productivity, decreased skill gaps and increased digitally skilled labour force that will be consistent with the national agendas of Make in India, Digital India, and Skill India. High emphasis on DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) and ESG (Environmental Governance and Social) in digital HR systems may assist organisations to attract international investors, increase transparency, and social sustainability, which are among the major drivers in the current knowledge economy. MSMEs, who are also major employment and economic contributors, are also supposed to be encouraged to use cost-effective cloud-based HRM solutions to overcome resource constraints and become a part of the digital value chain in India. To mitigate the skills shortage, ensure innovation and equip the workforce with new digital jobs in AI, automation and data analytics, organisations also need to invest in digital learning ecosystems strategically. In the future, Digital HRM will be required to adapt to platform-based models of work, integration of gig workforce, remote labour markets and global digital exchanges of talent, which are defining the future of the digital economy in India. Such measures will not only enable organizations to enhance their internal competitiveness but also help India in achieving a high-value, and innovation-based digital economy.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, Digital HRM is a major contributor to the pace at which India can become an innovation-based digital economy, through increased efficiency in the labour force, digital competency and data-driven decision making. Due to the growth of the digital ecosystem via DPI, MSME digitalization and the increased involvement of MNCs, Digital HRM also matches the advances in technology with human capital and contributes to national priorities like increased labour productivity and decreased skill gaps. The combination of DEI and ESG indicators in online HR systems also improve openness

and inclusive development and support the competitiveness of India in the world. Digital HRM can be a strategic driver by equipping organizations to work on platforms, through gig talent, and the future digital jobs, that can contribute to organizational sustainability as well as the long-term economic change of India.

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