



# Entrepreneurs as strategic transformation managers: Exploring micro-foundations of digital transformation in small and medium internationalisers

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Digital transformation  
International entrepreneurs  
Micro-foundations  
Small internationalisers  
Theory of Planned Behaviour  
SMEs

## ABSTRACT

This paper is set to explore the role of individual-level behaviours and actions in the digital transformation of international SMEs. This is particularly important since little is known regarding the extent to which entrepreneurs and decision-makers manage the digitalisation process. Thus, building on the theory of planned behaviour, this research focuses on individual-level micro-foundations in the digital transformation of small and medium internationalisers. The paper benefits from a mixed-method synthesis. First, through a systematic review of literature, we identified twenty-seven factors in four inclusive categories. Then, they have been narrowed down to the top seven individual-level micro-foundations, using Intuitionistic Fuzzy Delphi based on Normalised Hamming Distance. Subsequently, Intuitionistic Fuzzy Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory analysis is applied to disentangle the causality and effectuality as well as conceptual framework to depict their interrelationships. Our findings contribute to the digital transformation research by developing six prepositions that explore the relationships between SMEs' micro-foundations at the individual level.

## 1. Introduction

The wave of digitalisation and emergence of game-changing technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, 3D printing, the internet of things, and nanotechnology has been transforming the competitive landscape of all industries (Denicolai et al., 2021; Strange & Zucchella, 2017). Indeed, the technological revolution (so-called the fourth industrial revolution or industry 4.0) has challenged firms from two perspectives. First, the disruptive digital business offerings by new entrants (e.g., new streaming subscriptions against traditional media providers) have changed the behaviour and the expectations of customers (Lähteenmäki et al., 2022; Wrede et al., 2020). Second, advanced technologies and innovative initiatives significantly challenged firms to not only change the way they formulate their offerings but also manage how their employees work in and react to the new digital-oriented workplace (Favoretto et al., 2022; Selimović et al., 2021). This led to

a dramatic wave of shifting from traditional to technology-centred business models over the last two decades (Hinterhuber & Nilles, 2021; Kotarba, 2018). In this vein, Verhoef et al. (2021, pp. 1) define firms' digital transformation as 'a change in how a firm employs digital technologies, to develop a new digital business model that helps to create and appropriate more value for the firm'. That is, literature (e.g., Li, 2020; Nambisan & Luo, 2021) highlights that digital transformation is crucial for firms to gain a competitive advantage and remain successful in national and international markets.

Researchers have explored digital transformation from different perspectives. For instance, Dittes and Smolnik (2019) explain the extent to which firms take advantage of social media platforms to transform into the digital work environment and increase the performance of their employees. In another vein, Nasiri et al. (2020) highlight that supply chain firms enhance their digital transformation journey with smart technologies to achieve performance. However, digital transformation

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.08.051>

Received 13 January 2022; Received in revised form 22 August 2022; Accepted 25 August 2022

Available online 12 September 2022

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research suffers from various gaps and shortcomings. Accordingly, [Cenamor et al. \(2019\)](#) argue that prior studies have predominantly disentangled the extent to which large firms adopt digital technologies. When it comes to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), literature has an extensive focus on high-tech or digital start-ups irrespective of the scope of their operations (e.g., [Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020](#)). However, there is limited research that explores the antecedents of digital transformation in non-digital and international SMEs. Although the adaptation of digital-oriented strategies is an intricate process, this investigation is particularly crucial for small and medium internationalisers since they can overcome their liability of newness and smallness and compete with larger counterparts ([Hagen et al., 2019](#)). Digital transformation has been also considered a strategic decision of de-internationalised SMEs which can assist them to develop new digital capabilities and renew their business models as necessary for their subsequent re-internationalisation ([Yu et al., 2022](#)).

Nonetheless, extant research has disentangled the dimensions of digital transformation at different levels: some studies build on country level characteristics to explore the role of country infrastructure and technological readiness (e.g., [Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021](#)) while others focused on firm-specific capabilities (e.g., [Warner & Wäger, 2019](#)). However, there is scant research that sheds light on the role of micro-foundations in the digital transformation of international SMEs. Defined as ‘the underlying actions on individual and group levels that shape strategy and organisation’ ([Bojesson & Fundin, 2021](#)), digital transformation literature has employed micro-foundations to underly the role of the human dimensions ([Manfreda & Štemberger, 2018](#); [Tabrizi et al., 2019](#)). Indeed, it has been argued that the development of human resource management and change management capabilities is determinantal ([Sousa & Rocha, 2019](#); [Thite, 2022](#)) since managers and employees can accept or reject new digital strategies depending on their impact on their working circumstances ([Van Steenberghe et al., 2018](#); [Yeow et al., 2018](#)). When it comes to small and medium internationalisers, micro-foundations are highly linked to the actions and behaviour of senior managers (e.g., CEO/entrepreneur) who are often the central decision-makers at the individual level ([Jafari-Sadeghi, Amoozad Mahdiraji, et al., 2021](#)). Notwithstanding the decisive role of senior managers in international SMEs, there has been limited empirical understanding of behaviours and actions toward the digital transformation process.

Accordingly, this research builds on the underpins of the theory of planned behaviour ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) and aims to explore and examine the key managerial micro-foundations that constitute the successful digital transformation of small and medium internationalisers. The relative research questions are: “RQ<sub>1</sub>. what are the most pertinent managerial behaviours and actions towards for digital transformation of international SMEs?” and “RQ<sub>2</sub>. what are the (cause vs effect) nature and the interrelationship among identified micro-foundations?” To address these research questions, this paper employs a mixed method consisting of a systematic literature review (SLR) and a multi-layer decision-making approach by considering intuitionistic fuzzy sets (IFs). Initially, the list of key managerial behaviours toward successful digital transformation mentioned by other scholars has been extracted from the SLR. Then, a Delphi method has been performed amongst SME entrepreneurs to screen the prominent factors. To consider the uncertainty of the environment in the Delphi stage, IFs have been used in this regard. After, the causal relationship amongst the screened key managerial behaviours toward successful digital transformation has been analysed and designed via an intuitionistic fuzzy DEMATEL approach. Eventually, an initial conceptual model revealing the relationship amongst the critical factors has been illustrated.

This paper provides various contributions to the literature. First, we address largely ignored individual-level exploration of digital transformation. We discuss that international entrepreneurs play the role of strategic transformation managers who can drive SMEs towards successful digitalisation. Second, the contribution of this research offers

novel measures that expand the antecedents of the theory of planned behaviour by the development of seven individual-level micro-foundations pertinent to digital transformation. Third, our findings contribute to the conceptualisation of digital transformation in international entrepreneurship research by developing six prepositions and proposing a conceptual model that reveals the relationship between behaviours and actions of international entrepreneurs during the transformation process.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section explores the micro-foundations that contribute to the digital transformation of international SMEs. This is followed by a discussion regarding the details of the employed method for the data collection and analysis. Further, we discuss the main findings of this research and argue our subsequent theoretical contributions and practical implications. Eventually, the concluding section summarises the research, discusses the research limitation and proposes future lines of studies.

### 1.1. Micro-foundations toward digital transformation

In the business literature, the concept of digital transformation has been used to highlight the disruptive and transformational impacts of digitalisation and advanced technologies on human life, and business activities in particular ([Matt et al., 2016](#); [Nambisan, 2017](#)). In this vein, [Warner and Wäger \(2019\)](#) argue that the term digital transformation is not necessarily dedicated to high tech and innovative companies, but rather includes firms of any size and operating in any industry. For instance, small and entrepreneurial firms can rely on advanced technologies to explore and exploit novel opportunities either within or outside of national boundaries. In the service sector, [Mimoun et al. \(2017\)](#) highlight that although it is risky and expensive, technological innovation can significantly contribute to market expansion. It is particularly pertinent to international operations of firms as digitalisation and internet-based platforms transform the labour divisions and work patterns to optimise the cross-border value creation processes. That is, [Castellani et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that ‘digital and global transformations tend to overlap and to reinforce one another, significantly changing the geography of innovation compared to the past’.

Extant research highlights that digital transformation strategies have been undertaken by firms due to several reasons (e.g., [Matt et al., 2015](#); [Vial, 2019](#)). They include firm-level factors including dynamic capabilities and the ability of firms to adopt new technologies in their operations ([Rezaei, Jafari-Sadeghi, Cao, & Amoozad Mahdiraji, 2021](#); [Hamburg, 2019](#)) to the corporate-level external determinants such as the intensity of competition in the market ([Scott, 2007](#)) or even country-level factors like the availability of required infrastructures ([Jafari-Sadeghi, Garcia-Perez, et al., 2021](#)). However, literature has shown an increasing interest among scholars to explore micro-level studies on technological innovation and digitalisation ([Albats et al., 2018](#); [Felin et al., 2012](#)). Studies on micro-foundations are then designed to explore the role of cultural differences among individuals ([Ferraris et al., 2022](#); [Lin & Berg, 2001](#)), their collaborations ([Albats et al., 2018](#); [O’Kane et al., 2017](#)) as well as communications and motivations ([Barnes et al., 2002](#); [Plewa et al., 2013](#)). Notwithstanding, the micro perspectives of digital transformation and technological innovation in small and medium internationalisers yet remained under-explored.

According to [Scuotto et al. \(2020\)](#), micro-foundations strive to understand the crucial role of collective and individual behaviour of actors involved in the process of digitalisation and technology transfer. In this regard, [Tabrizi et al. \(2019\)](#) shed the light on human factors and highlight that the reaction of employees can be determinantal. Whether consciously or not, they might resist the technological changes if they feel that digitalisation will threaten their jobs, hence digital transformation can be an ineffective strategy (*idem*). On the other hand, managers can translate the transformation process as an opportunity to develop the capabilities and skills of human resources alongside with the needs of highly competitive international markets. Therefore, we build

on the wealth of theory of planned behaviour to predict and explain the micro-foundations digital transformation in international SMEs.

The theory of planned behaviour is introduced by Ajzen (1991) to explain the psychological and social dimensions of an individual's behaviour. Stressing the role of cognitive capacity, the theory highlights that individuals decide to engage in behaviour based on their positive or negative perceptions (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001). Indeed, the theory of planned behaviour leads to a comprehensive framework that constitutes the formation of intention toward a particular behaviour (Mohammed et al., 2021; Verma & Chandra, 2018). It consists of three elements including perceived behavioural control by individuals, their attitude towards the behaviour as well as subjective norms (Ajzen, 2015; M. Wu et al., 2020). As such, this theory has been chosen as the theoretical background of this research since it provides a pertinent behavioural perspective of digital transformation. Therefore, we explore the impact of entrepreneurs' behaviour in four different dimensions, each refers to a particular capability of international entrepreneurs which impacts the successful digital transformation of small and medium internationalisers.

To begin with, one of the most important factors that drive small firms to transform to digital-centred operations is the technology management capacities of their decision-makers. Referring to the role of technological capabilities, Bergek et al. (2008) highlight that firms can leverage heterogeneous but a wide range of technical resources related to information and knowledge, design, process and product to make positive changes and gain higher performance. However, Zawislak et al. (2012) argue that technological capabilities are not limited to technical mastery capabilities only, rather they refer to the broader firms' capacities to deploy and expand their core capabilities so that they can effectively adapt and combine various technological resources and mobilise them throughout the firm. In small firms, technological capacities are often tailored to the managerial attitude and capabilities toward the employment of the technologies (Camilleri, 2018; Elbeltagi et al., 2013). They can include the level of digital literacy among employees (and managers), providing transparent access to all digital platforms throughout the firm, or commitment towards connecting all remote, branch, and mobile offices to the central office for analytics, etc (e.g., Ferraris et al., 2019; Heavin & Power, 2018). That is, well developed technological capabilities among central decision-makers will lead SMEs to transform their business environment toward more technology-based operations, regardless of their size (micro vs small) or the age of business life (baby business, start-up, or established) (Jafari-Sadeghi, Amoozad Mahdiraji, Bresciani, & Pellicelli, 2021; Salisu & Abu Bakar, 2019; Wang, Lo, Zhang, & Xue, 2006).

Another crucial dimension for the SMEs' digital transformation at the individual level is associated with the knowledge management capabilities of central decision-makers. Knowledge management refers to the methodical practices that influence the creation, acquisition, sharing and managing the data, information, and knowledge to meet the organisational and individual objectives within the firms (Abubakar et al., 2019; Schumann & Tittmann, 2015; Rezaei et al., 2022). In this vein, the literature highlights that firms' ability to explore and exploit knowledge makes them more likely to become innovative and adopt new technologies (e.g., Asim & Sorooshian, 2019; Hervás-Oliver et al., 2021). Further, the transformation of the knowledge into specialised and valuable knowledge can assist firms to employ novel technologies and convert/expanding their processes and offerings (Choy et al., 2006; Mardani et al., 2018). From the technological perspective, knowledge management capabilities are associated with the practices, processes, and systems employed to store, maintain and analyse knowledge (Hock-Doepgen et al., 2021; Lee & Choi, 2003), which are necessary to gain competitive advantages (Crupi et al., 2020; Del Giudice et al., 2015). At SMEs, knowledge management can be significantly linked with the behaviour of managers such as their attitude towards the information about technological changes in the marketplace, the tendency on working in partnership with international stakeholders towards

technical knowledge acquisition, etc (Biancone et al., 2022; Darroch, 2005; Ferraris et al., 2019).

The other two individual-level micro-foundations of the digital transformation in SMEs refer to capabilities in regards to 'entrepreneurial and innovation' as well as 'leadership and management' skills. The former explains the extent to which entrepreneurial orientation encourages SME managers to develop various capabilities such as innovativeness, risk-taking and proactiveness (Covin & Miller, 2014; Wales et al., 2021) and gain competitive advantages from the digital transformation journey (Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Weber et al., 2022). For instance, innovative tendencies promote practices that constitute a significant change in the workplace as well as responsibilities (Croonen et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2018). Similarly, the risk-taking characteristic of SMEs' top managers favours the digital transformation process by allowing the exchange of novel ideas and initiatives (Jiang et al., 2019; Porfirio et al., 2021) and reducing uncertainty in case of ambiguous digital strategy goals (Ritala et al., 2021). On the other hand, digital transformation processes are deemed to be an increasing challenge that requires high levels of leadership and management capabilities (Zeike et al., 2019). In this regard, Westerman et al. (2014) highlight that firms need to build high levels of leadership and management capabilities to successfully drive the process of digital transformation. In the context of digitalisation, leadership capabilities can be described as "leaders' ability to create a clear and meaningful vision for the digitalisation process and the capability to execute strategies to actualise it" (Larjo-vuori et al., 2016, pp. 1144). Such capabilities include (but are not limited to) techniques towards potentiating the employees' performance (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022) by leveraging digitalisation, analytical skills and change management capabilities towards workforce optimisation, etc.

Therefore, this research builds on four inclusive dimensions of micro-foundations to explore digital transformation in small and medium internationalisers. They include 'technology management capacities', 'knowledge management capabilities', 'entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities' and 'leadership and management capabilities'.

## 2. Methodology

To analyse the key managerial micro-foundations nurturing digital transformation from the perspective of SMEs entrepreneurs, three research objectives were considered including (i) extracting the most relevant managerial micro-foundations, (ii) identifying the critical micro-foundations resulting in digital transformation in SMEs, and eventually, (iii) analysing the relationship amongst the micro-foundations and presenting a basic conceptual model from the entrepreneurs' point of view. To achieve these research objectives, several research methodologies are applied. However, considering (i) the qualitative type of key managerial micro-foundations, and (ii) the limitation to access numerical data, statistical-oriented methods are not applicable. Consequently, Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) methods should be performed (Razavi Hajiagha et al., 2022). MCDM methods and models are usually employed to (i) identify and determine the importance/weights (e.g. Delphi Fuzzy, Best-Worst Method (BWM), etc.), (ii) analyse the relationship amongst the elements (e.g. DEMATEL, ISM, etc.), and (iii) evaluate the alternatives and determine their score (e.g. TOPSIS, SAW, etc.), (iv) satisfy multiple objectives in decision-making (MODM) (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2022). As the research objectives indicate, extracting the most relevant managerial micro-foundations, identifying the critical micro-foundations, and comprehending the relationship amongst the micro-foundations are investigated in this research. To this aim, a mixed methodology has been designed and scheduled including a systematic literature review (SLR), Delphi approach, and Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) for each objective, relatively. On the other hand, as the managerial micro-foundations are mainly qualitative and difficult to measure via precise values and numbers, uncertainty approaches have

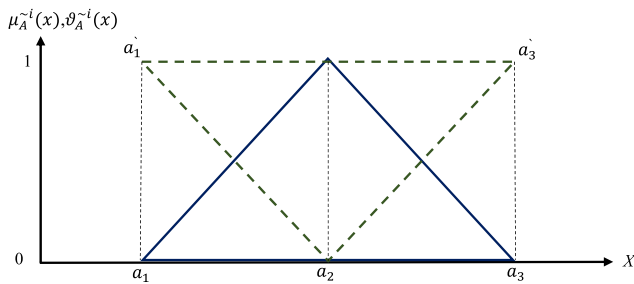


Fig. 1. Membership and non-membership functions for a TIFN.

been included in this research by the authors. As a result, instead of applying the Delphi method, a modified Intuitionistic Fuzzy Delphi (IFD) has been developed and instead of employing deterministic DEMATEL, an Intuitionistic Fuzzy version (IFDEMATEL) has been

designed. Before exploring the details of the designed methodology, some basics, definitions, and operators of IFs are presented. It is notable that, there are many approaches to uncertainty while using MCDM methods including Pythagorean Fuzzy, Fermatean Fuzzy, Hesitant Fuzzy, Intuitionistic Fuzzy, etc. Nonetheless, as in this research, the experience, knowledge, skills, etc. of the entrepreneurs were employed as the most valuable input, and IFs were applied by the authors to reflect the expert's opinion in a more realistic fashion.

**Definition 1.** Atanassov in 1988 coined a new format for fuzzy set known as intuitionistic fuzzy presented as  $A = \{x, \mu_A(x), \theta_A(x)\}$ . Where, (A) was an intuitionistic fuzzy set (IFS),  $x$  was a member, and  $\mu_A(x)$  was the membership function of  $x$  (membership probability of  $x$ ), and  $\theta_A(x)$  was the non-membership function of  $x$  (non-membership degree of element  $x$ ). Note that  $\mu_A(x)$  and  $\theta_A(x) \rightarrow [0,1]$  and  $\mu_A(x) + \theta_A(x) \leq 1$ . Furthermore,  $\pi_A(x)$  presents the degree of hesitation or intuitionistic index of  $x$  where  $\pi_A(x) = 1 - \mu_A(x) - \theta_A(x)$  (Hashemi et al., 2016).

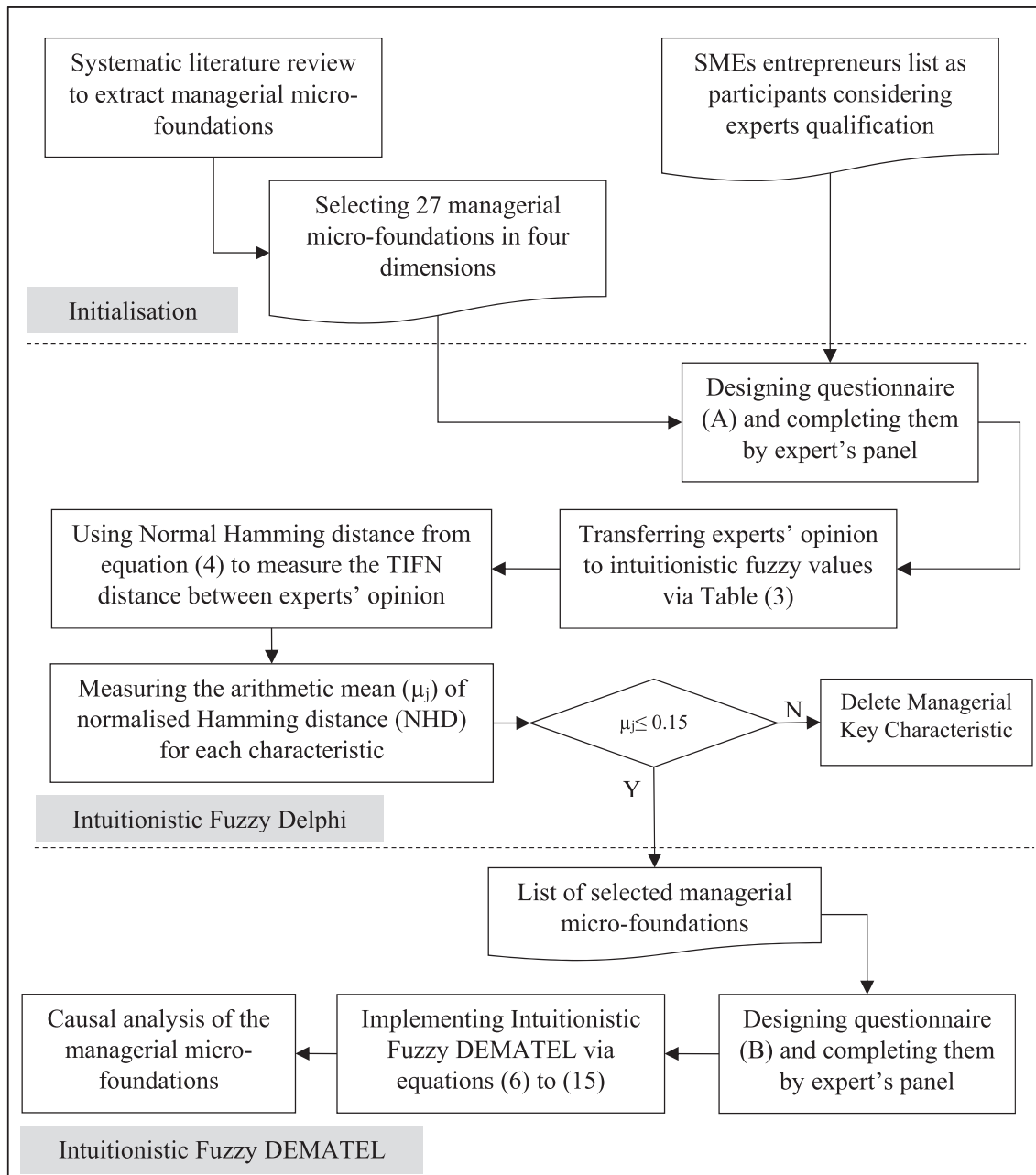


Fig. 2. Summary of the research procedure.

**Table 1**  
Identified managerial micro-foundations toward digital transformation.

Category	Code	Managerial characteristic	Reference
Technology Management Capabilities	TMC <sub>1</sub>	Developing digital literacy to create their analytics	Ferraris et al. (2019)Byrd and Turner (2000) Salisu and Abu Bakar (2019)
	TMC <sub>2</sub>	Adapting technology at the workplace to meet a variety of needs during analytics tasks	
	TMC <sub>3</sub>	Commitment towards connecting all remote, branch, and mobile offices to the central office for analytics	
	TMC <sub>4</sub>	Utilising open system network mechanisms to boost analytics connectivity	
	TMC <sub>5</sub>	Providing transparent access to all digital platforms and applications	
Knowledge Management Capabilities	KMC <sub>1</sub>	Commitment towards well-developed financial reporting systems	Ferraris et al. (2019)Darroch (2005)
	KMC <sub>2</sub>	Being sensitive to information about technological changes in the marketplace	
	KMC <sub>3</sub>	Being sensitive to the science and technology profile of human capital	
	KMC <sub>4</sub>	Working in partnership with international stakeholders towards technical knowledge acquisition	
	KMC <sub>5</sub>	Obtaining information from specialised market surveys	
	KMC <sub>6</sub>	Using of specific techniques or technology to disseminate knowledge	
	KMC <sub>7</sub>	Commitment towards disseminating the latest (digital) knowledge at the workplace	
	KMC <sub>8</sub>	Capacity towards being responsive towards knowledge	
Entrepreneurial and Innovation Capabilities	EIC <sub>1</sub>	Willingness and capability to undertake risk	Sousa and Rocha (2019)Covin and Miller (2014)Ritala et al. (2021)
	EIC <sub>2</sub>	Capacity toward creativity and innovativeness	
	EIC <sub>3</sub>	Ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities	
	EIC <sub>4</sub>	Capacity toward resource management to address opportunities	
	EIC <sub>5</sub>	Ability to develop and/or create national and international network ties	
	EIC <sub>6</sub>	Capacity to develop novel opportunities for the colleagues through leveraging coaching and mentoring skills and other techniques	
Leadership and Management Capabilities	LMC <sub>1</sub>	Skills and ability for developing the employees' performance	Sousa and Rocha (2019)Zeike et al. (2019)
	LMC <sub>2</sub>	Capabilities and techniques towards potentiating the employees' performance	
	LMC <sub>3</sub>	Capacity to Integrate and manage the employees' cultural differences	
	LMC <sub>4</sub>	Decision-making and responsibility skills	
	LMC <sub>5</sub>	Analytical skills and change management capabilities towards workforce optimisation	
	LMC <sub>6</sub>	Communication capacities towards boosting the employees' commitment	
	LMC <sub>7</sub>	Ability to develop and manage strategic deals and alliances	
	LMC <sub>8</sub>	Ability to manage projects with high performance	

**Definition 2.** Intuitionistic fuzzy numbers (IFN) are classified into different versions, including triangular, trapezoidal, etc. (Hajiagha et al., 2015). Here, the authors have employed triangular intuitionistic fuzzy numbers (TIFN) for further process. A TIFN is an IFS in the set of real numbers ( $\mathbb{R}$ ), with the membership and non-membership functions of  $\mu_A^i(x)$  and  $\vartheta_A^i(x)$ , respectively and demonstrated as follows (Garg & Rani, 2021).

$$\mu_A^i(x) = \begin{cases} \frac{x - a_1}{a_2 - a_1} & a_1 \leq x \leq a_2 \\ \frac{a_3 - x}{a_3 - a_2} & a_2 \leq x \leq a_3 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

both less than 0.5 when  $\mu_A^i(x) = \vartheta_A^i(x)$  for all  $\times$  elements of ( $\mathbb{R}$ ) (Pathade et al., 2020). Consequently, a TIFN for A is presented as TIFN(A) = ( $a_1, a_2, a_3; a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i$ ), where the first three values reveal the membership, and the later three illustrate the non-membership degrees. The schematic version of a TIFN has been designed as in Fig. 1 (Mahdiraji, Zavadskas, et al., 2020).

**Definition 3.** Assume two TIFNs as A and B with the membership and non-membership functions of TIFN(A) = ( $[(a_1, a_2, a_3); \mu_A], [(a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i)]; \vartheta_A$ ) and TIFN(B) = ( $[(b_1, b_2, b_3); \mu_B], [(b_1^i, b_2^i, b_3^i)]; \vartheta_B$ ). Considering the abovementioned definitions, the main four mathematical operators for TIFNs, are presented in equation (3) (Hashemi et al., 2016; Mahdiraji et al., 2021).

$$\begin{aligned} A + B &= ([[(a_1, a_2, a_3); \mu_A], [(a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i)]; \vartheta_A] + [[(b_1, b_2, b_3); \mu_B], [(b_1^i, b_2^i, b_3^i)]; \vartheta_B]) = [(a_1 + b_1, a_2 + b_2, a_3 + b_3); \min(\mu_A, \mu_B)], [([(a_1^i + b_1^i, a_2^i + b_2^i, a_3^i + b_3^i)]; \max(\vartheta_A, \vartheta_B))] \\ A - B &= ([[(a_1, a_2, a_3); \mu_A], [(a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i)]; \vartheta_A] - [[(b_1, b_2, b_3); \mu_B], [(b_1^i, b_2^i, b_3^i)]; \vartheta_B]) = [(a_1 - b_1, a_2 - b_2, a_3 + b_1); \min(\mu_A, \mu_B)], [([(a_1^i - b_1^i, a_2^i - b_2^i, a_3^i - b_1^i)]; \max(\vartheta_A, \vartheta_B))] \\ A \times B &= ([[(a_1, a_2, a_3); \mu_A], [(a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i)]; \vartheta_A] \times [[(b_1, b_2, b_3); \mu_B], [(b_1^i, b_2^i, b_3^i)]; \vartheta_B]) = [(a_1 \times b_1, a_2 \times b_2, a_3 \times b_3); \min(\mu_A, \mu_B)], [([(a_1^i \times b_1^i, a_2^i \times b_2^i, a_3^i \times b_3^i)]; \max(\vartheta_A, \vartheta_B))] \\ A \tilde{\wedge} B &= ([[(a_1, a_2, a_3); \mu_A], [(a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i)]; \vartheta_A] \tilde{\wedge} [[(b_1, b_2, b_3); \mu_B], [(b_1^i, b_2^i, b_3^i)]; \vartheta_B]) = [(a_1 \tilde{\wedge} b_1, a_2 \tilde{\wedge} b_2, a_3 \tilde{\wedge} b_3); \min(\mu_A, \mu_B)], [([(a_1^i \tilde{\wedge} b_1^i, a_2^i \tilde{\wedge} b_2^i, a_3^i \tilde{\wedge} b_3^i)]; \max(\vartheta_A, \vartheta_B))] \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

$$\vartheta_A^i(x) = \begin{cases} \frac{a_2 - x}{a_2 - a_1} & a_1^i \leq x \leq a_2^i \\ \frac{x - a_2}{a_3 - a_2} & a_2^i \leq x \leq a_3^i \\ 1 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

Note that  $a_1^i \leq a_1 \leq a_2 \leq a_3 \leq a_3^i$ , and obviously  $\mu_A^i(x)$  and  $\vartheta_A^i(x)$  are

Considering the basics, definitions, and main operators of intuitionistic fuzzy numbers and specially TIFNs, the research methodology has been illustrated in Fig. 2. The details of each step have been elaborated after the figure.

**Table 2**  
Experts' profile.

Expert No.	Gender	Age groups	Education	Area	Experience (yrs)
E01	M	30 s	PG	Industry Expert	5+
E02	M	30 s	PG	Industry Expert	10+
E03	M	40 s	DBA	Officials	15+
E04	M	50 s	DBA	Officials	30+
E05	F	30 s	MBA	Officials	5+
E06	F	50 s	PHD	Academician	20+
E07	M	40 s	MBA	Industry Expert	15+
E08	F	30 s	PG	Industry Expert	5+
E09	F	50 s	PHD	Academician	25+
E10	M	30 s	MBA	Officials	10+

2.1. Phase 1. Initialisation

To extract the most relevant managerial key micro-foundations, we have searched relevant keywords in popular databases including ScienceDirect, Scopus, Proquest, etc. As discussed in the literature review section, the most frequent and most cited key micro-foundations nurturing digital transformation were selected for further investigation in this manuscript. These micro-foundations (27) were classified into four categories/capabilities as previously discussed in Section 2. Table 1 presents micro-foundations toward SMEs' digital transformation.

After, the SME entrepreneurs based on their education, age, experience, accessibility, time for participation, expertise, etc. were selected and participated in this research. The country of origin for all experts in this research is limited to Iran as an emerging economy. This might impact the robustness of the results, which has been discussed in the limitation and future recommendation section. The expert profile is presented in Table 2.

The above experts participated in two rounds of this research. First, for selecting the most relevant managerial micro-foundations toward digital transformation by completing the IFD questionnaire (questionnaire A). Here, a briefing was set for the experts individually (e.g., face-to-face, Ms-Teams, Skype, etc.), and then the completed questionnaires were gathered from the SMEs entrepreneurs within the next two weeks after the briefing session. The SME entrepreneurs mentioned that nearly-two hours were required to complete Questionnaire A. Second, for extracting the causal relationship amongst the managerial micro-foundations nurturing digital transformation via questionnaire B. The same approach was adopted for briefing and gathering the completed questionnaires.

2.2. Phase 2. IFD

The IFD approach in this article has been designed by the authors, via a combination of intuitionistic operators and transforms. There are many limitations between classical Delphi and Fuzzy Delphi including time-consuming, requiring at least two rounds of data gathering, the possibility of change in participants in different rounds, etc. (Mahdiraji, Hafeez, et al., 2020). Moreover, the classical version of the Delphi method is not considering uncertainty in its analysis (Hajiagha et al., 2021). Thus, the authors have proposed a new version of IFD that has been designed and employed to extract and identify the most relevant managerial micro-foundations toward digital transformation in SMEs. The following steps have been applied in this regard.

2.3. Stage 1. Data gathering

First, the list of extracted managerial micro-foundations presented in Table 1, is used as an input for questionnaire A. In this questionnaire, the

**Table 3**  
Linguistic terms and their TIFNs value (Guha & Chakraborty, 2010).

Linguistic term	TIFN value
Extremely Important	(0.9, 1, 1; 0.7, 0.2)
Very Important	(0.7, 0.9, 0.9; 0.7, 0.2)
Important	(0.5, 0.7, 0.7; 0.7, 0.2)
Moderately Important	(0.3, 0.5, 0.5; 0.7, 0.2)
Unimportant	(0.1, 0.3, 0.3; 0.7, 0.2)
Very Unimportant	(0, 0.1, 0.1; 0.7, 0.2)
Extremely Unimportant	(0, 0, 0; 0.7, 0.2)

SME entrepreneurs are asked to determine the importance of each managerial characteristic toward digital transformation. The experts are allowed to select the following linguistic terms to determine the importance of each managerial key characteristic. Table 3 presents the linguistic terms and also the intuitionistic fuzzy values for each term.

2.4. Stage 2. Selection

After all questionnaires (code A) were gathered, the normalised difference of TIFNs between two experts' opinions ( $k \in L$ ) regarding each managerial characteristic (j) was measured via Hamming distance by formula 4 as follows (Fahmi et al., 2017). Assume that A and B are two TIFNs with the membership and non-membership functions of  $TIFN(A) = [(a_1, a_2, a_3); \mu_A; \vartheta_A]$  and  $TIFN(B) = [(b_1, b_2, b_3); \mu_B; \vartheta_B]$  (Liang et al., 2014).

$$d_j^{k,k+1}(\tilde{A}, \tilde{B}) = \frac{1}{6} (|(1 + \mu_A - \vartheta_A) \times a_1 - (1 + \mu_B - \vartheta_B) \times b_1| + |(1 + \mu_A - \vartheta_A) \times a_2 - (1 + \mu_B - \vartheta_B) \times b_2| + |(1 + \mu_A - \vartheta_A) \times a_3 - (1 + \mu_B - \vartheta_B) \times b_3|) \tag{4}$$

where  $d_j^{k,k+1}(\tilde{A}, \tilde{B})$  presents the normalised Hamming distance of two TIFN values between expert k and k + 1 for each managerial characteristic (j). The above formula is repeated for all possible pairs of comparison for each managerial characteristic. As 10 SME entrepreneurs participated in this research, the above formula was repeated 45 times for each managerial characteristic ( $C \binom{n}{2} = \frac{n \times (n-1)}{2} = \frac{10 \times 9}{2} = 45$ ).

Subsequently, the average normalised Hamming distance (NHD) (Abdullah et al., 2021) of each criterion amongst all experts was measured via the following formula.

$$\mu_j(NHD) = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^L d_j^{k,k+1}(\tilde{A}, \tilde{B})}{L} \tag{5}$$

In case the  $\mu_j$  for each managerial characteristic was above 0.15, it is deleted from the initial list mentioned in Table 1; otherwise, selected for further investigation in the IFDEMATEL stage. This threshold value (0.15) was adopted by the researchers to select the key micro-foundations with the highest consensus amongst the SME entrepreneurs.

2.5. Phase 3. IFDEMATEL

In this article, the intuitionistic fuzzy DEMATEL has been scrutinised (adopted from Govindan et al. 2015; Ocampo and Yamagishi, 2020; Wu et al., 2020; Hajiagha and Kandi, 2021). The following steps were employed on the completed questionnaires (Questionnaire B) completed by the entrepreneurs of SMEs.

2.6. Stage 1. Defuzzification

Each completed questionnaire has been transferred to TIFNs through Table 3 Subsequently, the TIFNs were transferred to crisp values by different operators known as the expected value (EV). Scholars have

developed different operators in this section (e.g., Keshavarzfar & Makui, 2015; Ocampo & Yamagishi, 2020). The authors have applied the following formula to create crisp values from TIFNs, known as  $Z_{ij}^k$ , for each expert. Remark that  $k$  is the  $k^{\text{th}}$  SMEs entrepreneur, where  $k = \{1, \dots, L\}$ , and  $L$  is 10 in this research as the total number of SMEs entrepreneurs who participated in the survey to complete the questionnaires in two stages. Remark that there are other approaches in analysing IF-DEMATEL as presented by Govindan et al. 2015, Ocampo and Yamagishi, 2020, Wu et al., 2020, and Hajiagha and Kandi, 2021. Nevertheless, as in the previous phase (IF-Delphi and Hamming normalisation), the uncertainty was considered and investigated via a novel approach, the authors preferred to simplify the IF-DEMATEL phase by using the expected value (EV) instead of other approaches.

$$EV \approx z_{ij}^k = \frac{1}{6} \times (a_1 + (4 \times a_2) + a_3) \tag{6}$$

By using the formula (6), the relationship matrix of critical managerial key micro-foundations for each SME entrepreneur results as follows.

$$Z_{ij}^k = \begin{bmatrix} z_{11}^k & \dots & z_{1n}^k \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ z_{m1}^k & \dots & z_{mn}^k \end{bmatrix} \forall k \in L \tag{7}$$

Next, the average value of each cell in each decision matrix is measured via arithmetic mean, as follows. Note that,  $Z_{ij}$  denotes the average crisp value of row (i) and column (j).

$$z_{ij} = \frac{1}{L} \sum_{k=1}^L z_{ij}^k \forall i,j \in m,n \tag{8}$$

2.7. Stage 2. DEMATEL

In the MCDM era, a wide range of methods are available to address different research objectives, such as (i) measuring the importance of each characteristic by the best-worst method (BWM) (e.g., Mahdiraji et al., 2020), analytical hierarchical process (AHP), ANP (e.g., Singh et al., 2021), etc.; (ii) ranking different options by Technique for Order of Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution (TOPSIS), *ELimination et Choix Traduisant la REalite* (ELECTRE), Preference Ranking Organisation Method for Enrichment of Evaluations (PROMETHEE) (e.g., Amoozad Mahdiraji et al., 2020), etc.; and (iii) analysing the cause and effect relationship among the micro-foundations by Decision Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory (DEMATEL) (e.g., Hajiagha & Kandi, 2021), etc. In this research, the causal relationship amongst the managerial micro-foundations toward digital transformation has been considered via IFDEMATEL. First, the normalised direct-relation matrix was formulated by implementing equations (9) and (10). Remark that (s) denotes the normalisation index, and  $N$  represents the normalisation matrix (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021).

$$s = \frac{1}{\max_{1 \leq i \leq n} \sum_{j=1}^n Z_{ij}}, ij = 1, 2, \dots, n \tag{9}$$

$$N = s.Z_{ij} \tag{10}$$

Subsequently, the total relationship matrix, known as TRM or T, results from equation (11).

$$T = N + N^2 + N^2 + \dots = \sum_{i=1}^{\infty} N^i = N \times (I - N)^{-1} \tag{11}$$

According to the TRM (T matrix), for each row and column, the sum was measured where  $(R_i)$  and  $(D_j)$  reveal the direct and indirect impact of each component (i,j) via equations (12) and (13). Note that,  $t_{ij}$  values resulted from the TRM and equation (11). Furthermore, the values of the TRM illustrate the relationship among the managerial micro-

Table 4  
Intuitionistic Fuzzy Delphi results for managerial micro-foundations.

Code	Managerial micro-foundations	$\mu_j(NHD)$
TMC <sub>1</sub>	Developing digital literacy to create their analytics	0.14611
TMC <sub>2</sub>	Adapting technology at the workplace to meet a variety of needs during analytics tasks	0.20444
TMC <sub>3</sub>	Commitment towards connecting all remote, branch, and mobile offices to the central office for analytics	0.15444
TMC <sub>4</sub>	Utilising open system network mechanisms to boost analytics connectivity	0.18778
TMC <sub>5</sub>	Providing transparent access to all digital platforms and applications	0.15889
KMC <sub>1</sub>	Commitment towards well-developed financial reporting systems	0.22778
KMC <sub>2</sub>	Being sensitive to information about technological changes in the marketplace	0.26556
KMC <sub>3</sub>	Being sensitive to the science and technology profile of human capital	0.16944
KMC <sub>4</sub>	Working in partnership with international stakeholders towards technical knowledge acquisition	0.21111
KMC <sub>5</sub>	Obtaining information from specialised market surveys	0.13778
KMC <sub>6</sub>	Using of specific techniques or technology to disseminate knowledge	0.19444
KMC <sub>7</sub>	Commitment towards disseminating the latest (digital) knowledge at the workplace	0.16000
KMC <sub>8</sub>	Capacity towards being responsive towards knowledge	0.26000
EIC <sub>1</sub>	Willingness and capability to undertake risk	0.15222
EIC <sub>2</sub>	Capacity toward creativity and innovativeness	0.11667
EIC <sub>3</sub>	Ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities	0.10611
EIC <sub>4</sub>	Capacity toward resource management to address opportunities	0.19556
EIC <sub>5</sub>	Ability to develop and/or create national and international network ties	0.20944
EIC <sub>6</sub>	Capacity to develop novel opportunities for the colleagues through leveraging coaching and mentoring skills and other techniques	0.19167
LMC <sub>1</sub>	Skills and ability for developing the employees' performance	0.14556
LMC <sub>2</sub>	Capabilities and techniques towards potentiating the employees' performance	0.18222
LMC <sub>3</sub>	Capacity to Integrate and manage the employees' cultural differences	0.23111
LMC <sub>4</sub>	Decision-making and responsibility skills	0.18056
LMC <sub>5</sub>	Analytical skills and change management capabilities towards workforce optimisation	0.20444
LMC <sub>6</sub>	Communication capacities towards boosting the employees' commitment	0.14833
LMC <sub>7</sub>	Ability to develop and manage strategic deals and alliances	0.19333
LMC <sub>8</sub>	Ability to manage projects with high performance	0.11778

foundations nurturing digital transformation. In this regard, the values of TRM above the threshold value were considered significant relationships. The threshold value is usually determined by the scholars or the average value of the  $t_{ij}$ , known as  $\bar{t}$ .

$$R_i = \sum_{j=1}^n t_{ij} \forall i \in m \tag{12}$$

$$D_j = \sum_{i=1}^n t_{ij} \forall j \in n \tag{13}$$

After, the net effect ( $E_i$ ) and the overall value ( $P_i$ ) of each managerial key characteristic was measured from the following equations.

$$P_i = \{R_i + D_j | i = j\} \forall i \in m \tag{14}$$

$$E_i = \{R_i - D_j | i = j\} \forall i \in m \tag{15}$$

The maximum value of ( $P_i$ ) presents the most important characteristic for overall relationships. The positive or negative ( $E_i$ ) value denotes the cause or reliable nature of the characteristic on the decision-making matrix (Hajiagha & Kandi, 2021). Positive  $E_i$  reveals the causes, and negatives represent the effects (Garg & Rani, 2021). Ultimately, the network diagram indicates the causal relationship between the managerial micro-foundations toward digital transformation.

**Table 5**  
Selected managerial micro-foundations from IFD.

Code	Managerial micro-foundations
<b>TMC<sub>1</sub></b>	Developing digital literacy to create their analytics
<b>KMC<sub>5</sub></b>	Obtaining information from specialised market surveys
<b>EIC<sub>2</sub></b>	Capacity toward creativity and innovativeness
<b>EIC<sub>3</sub></b>	Ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities
<b>LMC<sub>1</sub></b>	Skills and ability for developing the employees' performance
<b>LMC<sub>6</sub></b>	Communication capacities towards boosting the employees' commitment
<b>LMC<sub>8</sub></b>	Ability to manage projects with high performance

**3. Results and discussion**

As indicated in Fig. 2, we report the results and findings of our study in this section. To answer the first research question (RQ1) this research strives to identify the most pertinent managerial behaviours and actions for the digital transformation journey of international SMEs. In this regard, through a systematic literature review in phase one, we explored a total of twenty-seven micro-foundations in four general categories of 'Technology Management Capabilities', 'Knowledge Management Capabilities', 'Entrepreneurial and Innovation Capabilities', and 'Leadership and Management Capabilities' (Table 1).

Subsequently, in phase two, we identified the most pertinent factors by employing IFD. In doing so, after measuring the NHD and the arithmetic mean for each managerial characteristic, the  $\mu_j(NHD)$  for each is presented in Table 4 using formulas (4) and (5).

Accordingly, our analysis led to the selection of the seven most critical and relevant micro-foundations nurturing digital transformation from SME entrepreneurs' perspectives. As bolded and underlined in the last column of Table 4 and indicated in Table 5, they include (1) developing digital literacy to create their analytics, (2) obtaining information from specialised market surveys, (3) capacity toward creativity and innovativeness, (4) ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities, (5) skills and the ability for developing the employees' performance, (6) communication capacities towards boosting the employees' commitment, and (7) ability to manage projects with high performance.

To address the second research question, this study aims to explore the cause-effect nature of identified micro-foundations and synthesise their interrelationships, leading to framing the respective conceptual model. In doing so, the IFDEMATEL questionnaire (code B) was sent to the experts and completed and gathered within two weeks. Then the opinion of SME entrepreneurs regarding managerial micro-foundations toward digital transformation was transferred to TIFN values using Table 3. Then by using formulas (6) to (11) the TRM resulted as follows in Table 6.

The bolded and underlined cells are those consisting of values higher than the threshold value (0.315) and should be included as important relationships between two managerial micro-foundations. By employing formulas (12) to (15), the causes, effects, and the importance of each managerial characteristic nurturing digital transformation resulted in Table 7.

The bolded and underlined cells in the fourth column illustrate the causes and the rest with negative values present the effects. The last column also demonstrates the importance of each characteristic in

**Table 6**  
TRM for managerial micro-foundations nurturing digital transformation.

TRM (T)	LMC <sub>8</sub>	KMC <sub>5</sub>	EIC <sub>3</sub>	EIC <sub>2</sub>	LMC <sub>1</sub>	LMC <sub>6</sub>	TMC <sub>1</sub>
<b>LMC<sub>8</sub></b>	0.1287	0.1843	0.2123	0.1046	0.1090	0.1514	0.1706
<b>KMC<sub>5</sub></b>	<b>0.4096</b>	0.2007	<b>0.3424</b>	0.2099	0.2011	0.3091	<b>0.4077</b>
<b>EIC<sub>3</sub></b>	<b>0.3592</b>	0.2428	0.2283	0.1878	0.1829	0.3055	<b>0.3323</b>
<b>EIC<sub>2</sub></b>	<b>0.4935</b>	<b>0.4687</b>	<b>0.5346</b>	0.2427	<b>0.4025</b>	<b>0.4324</b>	<b>0.5283</b>
<b>LMC<sub>1</sub></b>	<b>0.3803</b>	<b>0.3287</b>	<b>0.4524</b>	0.2800	0.1855	0.2959	<b>0.3739</b>
<b>LMC<sub>6</sub></b>	<b>0.3269</b>	0.2982	<b>0.4058</b>	0.2399	<b>0.3505</b>	0.2172	<b>0.3610</b>
<b>TMC<sub>1</sub></b>	<b>0.4468</b>	<b>0.3903</b>	<b>0.5286</b>	<b>0.3949</b>	<b>0.3691</b>	<b>0.4129</b>	<b>0.3408</b>

nurturing digital transformation. As result, Fig. 3 highlights the causality and effectuality of selected factors.

As depicted in Fig. 3, cause factors have positive Ei values and are positioned above the horizontal line whereas effect factors refer to those with negative Ei values (below the horizontal line). Thus, our findings highlight that the selected individual-level micro-foundations in the categories of technology management (TMC<sub>1</sub>) is a cause factor while the one in the category of knowledge management (KMC<sub>5</sub>) is an effectual factor. However, the micro-foundations in the categories of entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities, as well as leadership and management capabilities, were found to be divergent. That is, although the capacity of entrepreneurs toward creativity and innovativeness (EIC<sub>2</sub>) is a causal factor, their ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities (EIC<sub>3</sub>) is identified as an effectual factor. Similarly, LMC<sub>1</sub> and LMC<sub>6</sub> represent causality whereas LMC<sub>8</sub> highlights the effectuality. Moreover, the distance of factors from the vertical line (on the left-hand side of the figure) shows their importance and priority. The more distant the factor (e.g., TMC<sub>1</sub>) is positioned, the higher priority they have. LMC<sub>8</sub> is also found to have the least important among the selected micro-foundations.

Eventually, considering the cause and effects (Fig. 3) alongside the TRM matrix (Table 6), the causal model illustrating the relationship amongst the managerial micro-foundations nurturing digital transformation is presented in Fig. 4.

According to Fig. 4, among seven selected micro-foundations, the digital literacy and knowledge of international entrepreneurs (TMC<sub>1</sub>) are found to be the central characteristic that has a co-association with all other factors. Defined as a capability that incorporates a set of skills, which enable individuals to understand and work with new digital technologies (Stordy, 2015), it is legitimate to consider digital literacy as an essential element in the digital transformation journey of firms. That is, digital literacy help managers to better understand the transformation process, and be prepared to address its challenges (Cetindamar Kozanoglu & Abedin, 2021). Indeed, digital literacy enables SME decision-makers to win the "hearts and minds" of individuals and make a positive impact on other characteristics of digital transformation so that they will beat their rivals who consider employees like a machine (Westerman, 2016). Another important factor in this construct refers to the level of managers' innovativeness (EIC<sub>2</sub>) which is directly or indirectly (via other factors) linked with other micro-foundations. This explains that ever-evolving technologies push SME managers to leverage innovative initiatives to not only explore and exploit business opportunities but also find a better communication channel to increase employees' commitment toward the digitalisation process.

**Table 7**  
Causes, effects and the importance of managerial micro-foundations.

Managerial micro-foundations	D(i)	R(i)	E(i)	P(i)
<b>LMC<sub>8</sub></b>	1.0609	2.5452	-1.4843	3.6061
<b>KMC<sub>5</sub></b>	2.0805	2.1136	-0.0331	4.1941
<b>EIC<sub>3</sub></b>	1.8387	2.7044	-0.8657	4.5431
<b>EIC<sub>2</sub></b>	3.1028	1.6597	<b>1.4431</b>	4.7625
<b>LMC<sub>1</sub></b>	2.2968	1.8005	<b>0.4963</b>	4.0973
<b>LMC<sub>6</sub></b>	2.1995	2.1245	<b>0.0750</b>	4.3239
<b>TMC<sub>1</sub></b>	2.8833	2.5146	<b>0.3687</b>	5.3979



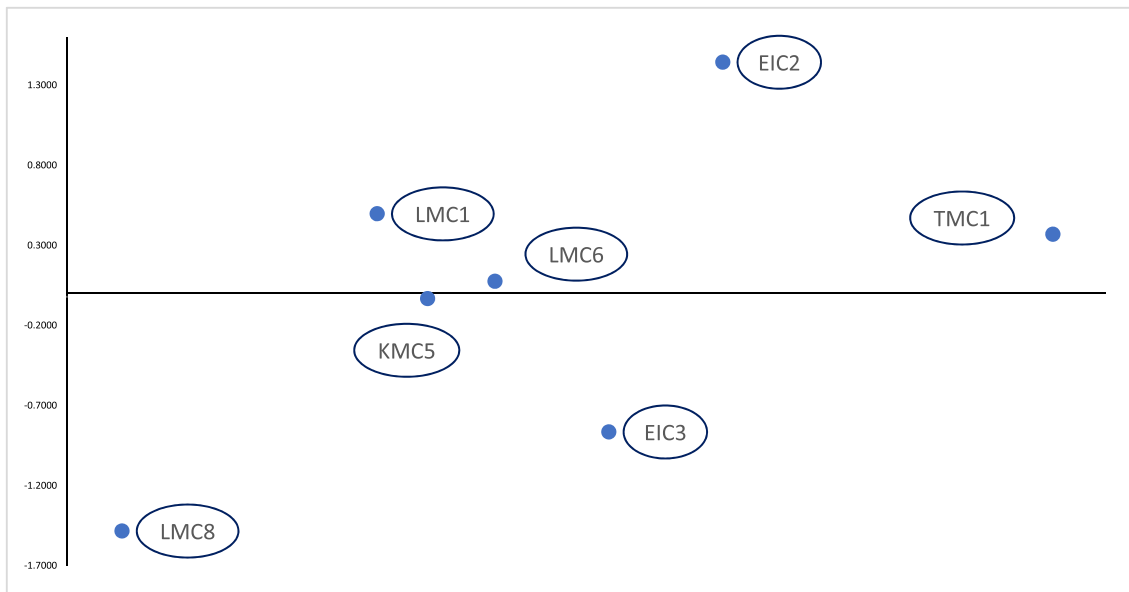


Fig. 3. The network diagram of causes and effects.

Notwithstanding, given that  $TMC_1$  has a correlation with the other six factors, we exclude it from the model but consider it as a control variable since it can influence other predictors. Indeed,  $TMC_1$  is held constant throughout the research to assess the relationship between other factors in a more simplified model. Fig. 5 depicts the revised conceptual framework of managerial micro-foundations toward the digital transformation of international SMEs.

According to Fig. 5, we identified six unique relationships among the managerial actions and behaviours that contribute to their digital transformation decision. The first relationship suggests that SMEs' managers' capacity for creativity and innovativeness ( $EIC_2$ ) influence their ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities ( $EIC_3$ ). This can be linked with personal innovativeness, by which individuals are highly eager for technological and digital innovations (Abubakre et al., 2022). Hence, in line with Mancha and Shankaranarayanan (2021), we stress that digital innovator managers are more likely to take

the risk of transformation from non-digital to digital business models and explore new business opportunities. On the other hand, our findings highlight that managers' innovativeness enhances their communication capacities towards boosting the employees' commitment ( $LMC_8$ ). Given that innovator managers are characterised as highly reliant on information (Esfahani & Reynolds, 2021), they take advantage of communication to diffuse information to influence others to accept and adopt digital innovations (Robson & Robinson, 2013). Accordingly, the first two prepositions build on the entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities ( $EIC$ ) as well as leadership and management capabilities ( $LMC$ ) to highlight that:

**Proposition 1.** In the digital transformation process of international SMEs, managers' creativity and innovativeness have a positive association with their ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities.

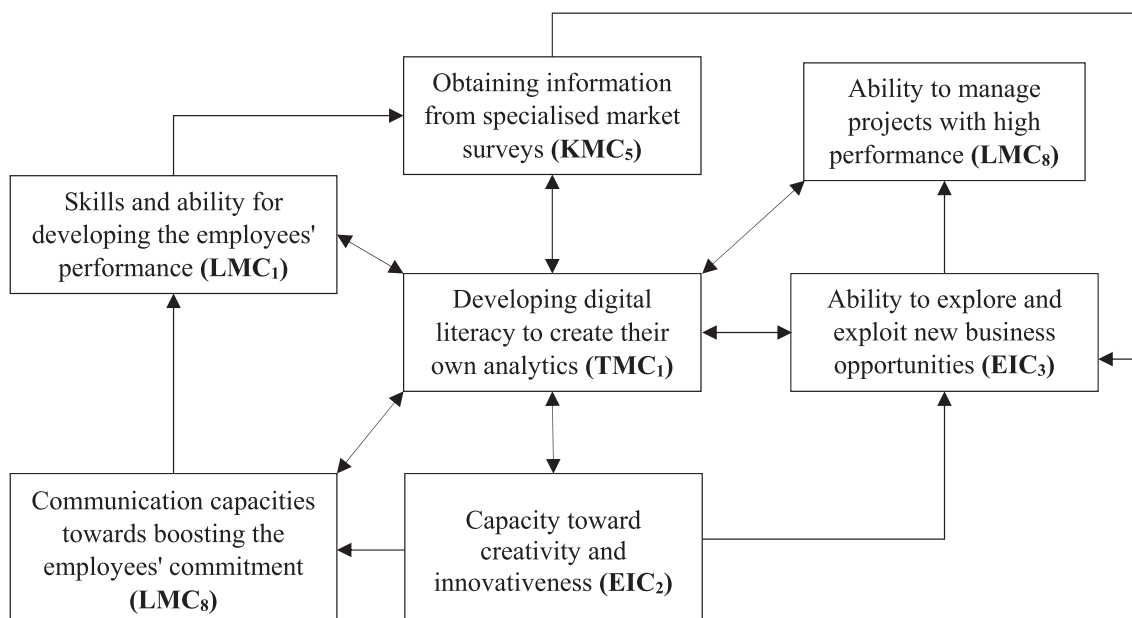


Fig. 4. The identified causal relationship model.

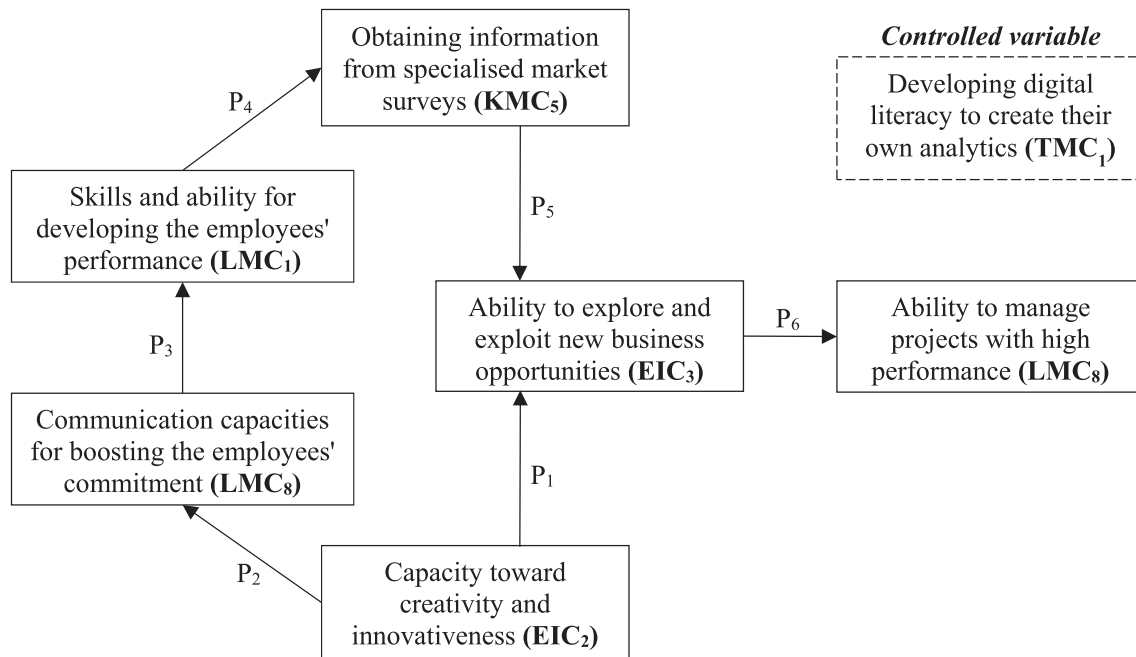


Fig. 5. The (revised) proposed model of managerial micro-foundations for the digital transformation of international SMEs.

**Proposition 2.** In the digital transformation process of international SMEs, managers’ creativity and innovativeness enhance their communication capacities towards boosting the employees’ digitalisation commitment.

Further, our analysis stresses that SME managers are more likely to develop skills that assist the digital performance of employees (LMC<sub>1</sub>) by building on the proper communication capacities (LMC<sub>8</sub>). We argue that, in the digitalisation journey, SMEs need to assure that their employees are aware and ready for this fundamental change in their working environment. That is, managers’ transparent communication not only facilitates awareness and readiness among employees at all levels but also assists in improving performance in the digitalised workplace. Therefore, we shed the light on the importance of leadership and management capabilities (LMC) to propose that:

**Proposition 3.** In the digital transformation process of international SMEs, managers’ communication capacities enhance their ability for developing the employees’ performance.

Moreover, the findings of this research highlight the role of managers’ leadership capabilities in their knowledge management capacities. In this regard, we found that managers with a higher ability to boost the digital performance of their employees (LMC<sub>1</sub>) are more likely to employ digital tools to conduct market research and collect specialised market information (KMC<sub>5</sub>). That is, following [Hervé et al. \(2020\)](#), we argue that digitalisation provides an opportunity for SME managers to enable employees to conduct advanced market surveys and overcome their liability of foreignness and newness in the foreign markets. Subsequently, in line with the literature (e.g., [Khin & Lim, 2018](#)), our findings confirm that higher market knowledge contributes to better exploration and exploitation of business opportunities. As such we propose that:

**Proposition 4.** In the digital transformation process of international SMEs, managers’ ability for developing the employees’ performance has a positive association with obtaining information from specialised market surveys.

**Proposition 5.** In the digital transformation process of international SMEs, managers’ ability for obtaining information from specialised market surveys enhances their capacity to explore and exploit new

business opportunities.

The final preposition focuses on the relationship between entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities and leadership and management capacities. In this regard, we found that managers who excel to take advantage of the business opportunities (EIC<sub>3</sub>) have high project management capabilities to undertake the digital transformation process (LMC<sub>8</sub>). This is particularly legitimate for small internationalisers, in which managers are central decision-makers for innovative projects. Therefore, their ability to identify hidden business opportunities during the transformation phase contributes to the maximisation of the performance in delivering digitalisation projects. Thus, the final preposition suggests that:

**Proposition 6.** In the digital transformation process of international SMEs, managers’ ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities has a positive association with their capability to manage projects with high performance.

#### 4. Contributions and implications

The outcomes of our study make additions to the digital transformation studies from different points of view. From the theoretical perspective, the novelty of this research explicitly considers digital transformation from the largely ignored individual-level exploration. While the extant research stresses mainly firm-level capabilities (e.g., [Warner & Wäger, 2019](#)) and country-level characteristics (e.g., [Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021](#)), it does not consider the extent to which humans influence the digital transformation unambiguously. As such, the first contribution of this research highlights that more attention needs to be paid to the function of central decision-makers and their competencies in the digital transformation journey of firms. Indeed, this research complements [Sousa and Rocha’s \(2019\)](#) debate in which they argue that digitalisation is dependent on the change management and human response to the transformation rather purchase of new technology. That is, our findings suggest that entrepreneurs play the role of ‘strategic transformation’ managers who can drive firms towards successful digitalisation. This is particularly pertinent to entrepreneurial SMEs that shift to digital-centred operations to leverage it against their lack of knowledge and experience ([Ratten et al., 2016](#); [Sadeghi & Biancone,](#)

2018), as well as the liability of smallness and newness to the foreign markets (Hagen et al., 2019).

Second, the findings of this research offer a novel construct to measure digital transformation at the individual level that explores managers' behaviours and actions contributing to this process. Indeed, we expand the antecedents of the theory of planned behaviour by the development of seven micro-foundations in four categories including manager's capability in technology management, knowledge management, entrepreneurial and innovation management, as well as leadership and managerial capacities. In this regard, our findings support Cetindamar et al. (2021) debate that digital literacy is important for understanding and actualisation the digitalisation opportunities. However, we found unique measures that stress the necessity of top managers and central decision-makers to develop entrepreneurial and leadership skills for the successful digital transformation of international SMEs.

Third, by integrating the theory of planned behaviour, we contribute to the conceptualisation of digital transformation in international entrepreneurship research. In this regard, we developed a total number of six prepositions that explore cause and effect relationships among antecedents considered as predicted by this theory. Accordingly, unlike common qualitative approaches, we take advantage of an expert-based quantitative method to propose a causal model that depicts the relationship among behaviours and actions of international entrepreneurs in their digitalisation journey. According to our model, digital literacy correlates with other factors, hence, was removed from the final framework. Given, its importance to the transformation process, we propose that literature can consider it as a control variable (as we did in this study).

When it comes to practical contributions, the findings of this research shed the light on the role of managers and central decision-makers in the digitalisation process in terms of how their actions and behaviours, and expectations interplay (Zimmermann et al., 2020) and shape strategy and organisation (Eisenhardt et al., 2010) of this transformation. In this regard, we identified a list of important micro-foundations (e.g., the ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities, and skills and the ability for developing the employees' performance) as well as those that have been considered less important by experts (e.g., commitment towards connecting all remote, branch, and mobile offices to the central office for analytics, and utilising open system network mechanisms to boost analytics connectivity). They will assist international entrepreneurs in better understanding the micro-foundations that they need to develop in order to make a successful shift to digital-oriented operations. For example, our results propose that managers invest in their digital literacy (TMC<sub>1</sub>) as it is the core capability and have a direct impact on other digitalisation skills. Moreover, developing innovativeness (EIC<sub>2</sub>) is another crucial micro-foundation to be invested in by SME managers, whereas project management skills (LMC<sub>8</sub>) can be given less priority in the professional development plan for the digital transformation. In a broader perspective, the findings of the Delphi analysis highlight that in the digitalisation journey the priority for professional development are respectively leadership and management capabilities, entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities and equally for technology and knowledge management capabilities.

Finally, from the methodological point of view, this paper benefits from an IFS in a multi-layer decision-making approach encompassing Delphi and DEMATEL in analysing managerial behaviours toward successful digital transformation. To the best knowledge of the authors, the employed approach especially by using normal Hamming distance in IFD and IFDEMATTEL is novel and could be applied by other scholars. The recommended approach is using only one round of data gathering for the IFD approach; thus, making the modified approach more applicable in real-world cases while the experts have limited time to participate in research and decision-making procedures.

## 5. Conclusion, Limitations, and future research

Given the increasing waves and cycles of digitalisation among businesses, the concept of digital transformation has been studied from various points of view. This paper focuses on the under-developed debates regarding the role of individual-level capabilities and strives to disentangle the micro-foundations of digital transformation among international SMEs. Hence, this research builds on the theory of planned behaviour we identified a total number of twenty-seven factors in four inclusive dimensions of micro-foundations such as technology management capacities, knowledge management capabilities, entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities and leadership and management capabilities. To address our research objectives, we employed a mixed-method analysis. The results of IFD assisted to narrow down the micro-foundations to the top seven individual-level factors. Further, Intuitionistic Fuzzy Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory analysis led to the identification of the cause-effect relationship among individual-level capabilities as well as exploration of a conceptual framework that highlights the interrelationships among them.

This study acknowledges several restrictions that may shed the light on the new lines of research for further investigation. First, the context of this research was limited to small enterprises that rely on the digital transformation process to go internationally or remain competitive in their current international journey. As such, we invite researchers to explore the digital transformation journey in other types of firms such as international new ventures or small multinationals. Second, from the geographical scope, the data collection was narrowed down to SMEs in Iran. According to the Global Innovation Index, Iran represents a middle-income emerging economy, which places 26th among 130 countries in the proportion of the hi-tech industries in the national production (Dutta et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, similar to Ferraris et al. (2020), future studies might make a cross-cultural comparison to challenge the validity of our results. For example, more investigation is required to compare and contrast digital transformation micro-foundations in other emerging economies (e.g., BRICS<sup>1</sup>). Also, future studies can go beyond emerging market economies and explore the topic in advanced countries (e.g., G7<sup>2</sup>).

Third, regarding the level of analysis, the current study relies on the theory of planned behaviour to explore micro-foundations at the individual level. This narrowed down the micro-foundations to four inclusive dimensions of technology management capacities, knowledge management capabilities, entrepreneurial and innovation capabilities and leadership and management capabilities. In this regard, a total of twenty-seven factors were identified, which were later limited to the top seven factors, which were related to the central decision-makers of SMEs. However, we call for more research to explore the micro-foundations of other types of human forces (e.g., middle managers, supervisors, normal employees, etc.) in the digital transformation journey.

Fourth, the sample for data collection of our expert-based mixed-method analysis was limited to a total number of ten entrepreneurs in international SMEs. The decision to recruit entrepreneurs in this research ensures that the respondent is the central decision-maker and the most knowledgeable person in the SMEs (Sadeghi et al., 2019). Bashan and Demirel (2019) and Singh et al. (2020) confirm that statistical approaches can be replaced by expert-based methods in case the size of the sample is too small and existing statistical research designs most likely fail to address the problem appropriately. On the other hand, the self-reporting process is most likely to increase biased and desirable responses. We, therefore, invite scholars to employ empirical analyses and examine the proposed relationships with larger samples and check whether reflected entrepreneurs' (experts') opinion is valid in the

<sup>1</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

broader context (generalisability test).

Finally, from the methodological point of view, as this paper is employing IFD and IFDEMATEL to deal with research objectives and uncertainty of the environment, other uncertainty approaches dealing with the hesitation of the experts have not been considered. Hence, other scholars could benefit from hesitant fuzzy, hesitant linguistic term sets, etc. for further investigation. Moreover, the results of this research are limited to IFD and DEMATEL methods for analysing the causal relationship amongst the factors. However, other methods including interpretive-structural modelling (ISM), structural equational modelling (SEM), etc. could be used in case the relevant data were available to investigate the causal relationship among the factors. Furthermore, intuitionistic fuzzy values have been defuzzified in the first stage of the IFDEMATEL method used in this manuscript. Nonetheless, to deal with more realistic and robust results, non-defuzzified approaches should be considered in future research. In addition, in case the membership and non-membership values used in this research (Table 3) change, the results and conceptual model might be affected. Thus, scholars in the future could investigate the robustness of the results by testing different membership and non-membership values.

**CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Vahid Jafari-Sadeghi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hannan Amoozad Mahdiraji:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gazi Mahabubul Alam:** Project administration. **Alberto Mazzoleni:** Project administration.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Appendix A**

See Table A1.

**Table A1**  
Questionnaire A-IF Delphi.

Capability	Code	Variable	Importance
Technological Capabilities	TC1	Developing digital literacy to create their analytics	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Important <input type="checkbox"/> Very Important <input type="checkbox"/> Important <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately Important <input type="checkbox"/> Unimportant <input type="checkbox"/> Very Unimportant <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Unimportant
	TC2	Adapting technology at the workplace to meet a variety of needs during analytics tasks	
	TC3	Commitment towards connecting all remote, branch, and mobile offices to the central office for analytics	
	TC4		

**Table A1 (continued)**

Capability	Code	Variable	Importance
Knowledge Capabilities	TC5	Utilising open system network mechanisms to boost analytics connectivity	
	KC1	Providing transparent access to all digital platforms and applications	
	KC2	Commitment toward a well-developed financial reporting system	
	KC3	Being sensitive to information about technological changes in the marketplace	
	KC4	Being sensitive to the science and technology profile of human capital	
	KC5	Working in partnership with international stakeholders toward technical knowledge acquisition	
	KC6	Obtaining information from specialised market surveys	
	KC7	Using of specific techniques or technology to disseminate knowledge	
Entrepreneurial Capabilities	KC8	Commitment toward disseminating the latest (digital) knowledge in the workplace	
	EC1	Capacity towards being responsive to knowledge	
	EC2	Willingness and capability to undertake risk	
	EC3	Capacity toward creativity and innovativeness	
	EC4	Ability to explore and exploit new business opportunities	
	EC5	Capacity toward resource management to address opportunities	
Managerial and Leadership Capabilities	EC6	Ability to develop and/or create national and international network ties	
	MC1	Capacity to develop novel opportunities for the colleagues through leveraging coaching and mentoring skills and other techniques	
	MC2	Skills and ability for developing the employees' performance	
	MC3	Capabilities and techniques towards potentiating the employees' performance	
	MC4	Capacity to Integrate and manage the employees' cultural differences	
	MC5	Decision-making and responsibility skills	
	MC6	Analytical skills and change management capabilities towards workforce optimisation	
	MC7	Communication capacities towards boosting the employees' commitment	
MC8	Ability to develop and manage strategic deals and alliances		
		Ability to manage projects with high performance	

## Appendix B

See Table B1.

**Table B1**  
Questionnaire B-IF DEMATEL.

Questionnaire	TC1	KC5	EC2	EC3	MC1	MC6	MC8
TC1	***						
KC5		***					
EC2			***				
EC3				***			
MC1					***		
MC6						***	
MC8							***

Please determine the impact of each row on each column by a 9-point Likert scale of linguistic terms (Very Very Low, Very Low, Low, Nearly Low, Moderate, Nearly High, High, Very High, Very Very High).

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