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Digital Transformation Fatigue in Organizations: A Management Viewpoint on Initiative Overload, Employee Resistance, and Declining Strategic Focus

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Abstract

Many organizations are now several years into continuous digital transformation, yet the managerial mood surrounding transformation has changed. What was once framed as renewal, modernization, and strategic reinvention is increasingly experienced as another wave of pressure. Employees, middle managers, and business units are often asked to absorb new systems, new routines, new data practices, and new operating models before earlier initiatives have stabilized. This article argues that digital transformation has reached a point where fatigue itself must be treated as a serious management concern. Digital transformation fatigue refers to a state of organizational exhaustion that emerges when digital change becomes excessive, fragmented, and insufficiently connected to strategic purpose. It is not simply resistance to technology or a temporary decline in motivation. Rather, it reflects the cumulative effect of initiative overload, employee resistance, and declining strategic focus. When these forces interact, organizations may continue launching digital projects while losing the energy, attention, and coherence required to benefit from them. The objective of this viewpoint article is to define and diagnose digital transformation fatigue as a distinct management problem. The article argues that fatigue is often self-inflicted because managers expand the transformation agenda faster than the organization can meaningfully absorb it. It also shows why employee resistance should not be dismissed as irrational opposition, but should be read as a signal that the pace, volume, or meaning of transformation has become mismanaged. The article therefore shifts attention from technology adoption alone to the managerial conditions under which digital change remains sustainable. The article concludes that digital transformation fatigue is real, diagnosable, and manageable. Organizations do not need less ambition, but they do need more disciplined prioritisation, stronger transformation governance, greater employee involvement, and clearer strategic anchoring. The central managerial lesson is that sustainable digital transformation depends not on adding more initiatives, but on orchestrating organizational energy, focus, and commitment. Recognising fatigue is therefore not a retreat from transformation, but a condition for making transformation effective.

Keywords Digital transformation fatigue, Initiative overload, Employee resistance, Change exhaustion, Strategic focus, Management viewpoint

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Introduction

The central irony of contemporary digital transformation is that it has become both unavoidable and increasingly exhausting. Digital transformation is now widely understood as a broad organizational process involving strategy, structures, capabilities, routines, and value creation rather than only the adoption of information technology [1]. Yet, as

transformation has become a standard managerial agenda, many organizations have accumulated waves of projects, platforms, agile programs, analytics initiatives, and operating model redesigns. The result is that transformation may remain rhetorically urgent while employees and managers become practically depleted.

Digital transformation fatigue can be defined as a condition in which organizational members become weary, cynical, or disengaged because digital change is experienced as continuous, overlapping, and weakly prioritised. Existing research has already shown that digital transformation requires sustained strategic renewal and dynamic capabilities rather than one-off implementation [2]. However, the same ongoing character that makes transformation strategically necessary can also create fatigue when renewal becomes unmanaged accumulation. In this sense, fatigue is not a contradiction of digital transformation, but a risk produced by its contemporary managerial form.

This viewpoint argues that digital transformation fatigue is not a passing mood or a temporary morale problem. It is a structural management problem that emerges when organizations overload themselves with too many digital initiatives, neglect the human cost of continuous change, and lose strategic coherence in the pursuit of multiple digital agendas. Research on digital transformation has repeatedly emphasised its multidisciplinary, organization-wide character, involving customers, processes, business models, technologies, and capabilities [3]. Precisely because transformation crosses so many domains, it can become exhausting when managers fail to distinguish what is strategically essential from what is merely digitally fashionable.

The article develops this argument by examining three interlinked drivers of fatigue: initiative overload, employee resistance and change exhaustion, and declining strategic focus. These drivers are not separate problems but mutually reinforcing mechanisms that reduce transformation effectiveness. Reviews of digital transformation literature show that strategy and organizational change remain central yet difficult elements of transformation, especially when technology initiatives outpace organizational alignment [4]. The article therefore proceeds from a central viewpoint, then defines fatigue as a management problem, and finally diagnoses its drivers before proposing practical recommendations.

Central Viewpoint

The central viewpoint of this article is that digital transformation fatigue is often a self-inflicted management failure. Organizations create fatigue when they interpret transformation as a mandate to continuously launch more initiatives rather than as a disciplined process of strategic choice, sequencing, and organizational absorption. The distinction between digital transformation and narrower IT-enabled organizational change matters here because transformation implies deeper shifts in value creation, coordination, and organizational identity [5]. When leaders blur this distinction, they can mistake activity for progress and overload for ambition.

Digital transformation fatigue also reflects the managerial tendency to underestimate the human consequences of repeated change. Successful organizational change requires attention to leadership behaviour, employee sensemaking, commitment, and implementation conditions, not only formal plans and technical systems [6]. When employees face successive digital projects without meaningful involvement or clear evidence of benefit, resistance becomes predictable rather than deviant. From this perspective, resistance is often a rational response to a transformation agenda that has exceeded organizational capacity.

The performance risk is that fatigue converts transformation from a source of renewal into a source of stagnation. Digital transformation research increasingly describes transformation as an ongoing process of strategy, capability building, and organizational redesign [7]. Yet ongoing change becomes counterproductive when firms lose the ability to prioritise and integrate what they are changing. The viewpoint advanced here is therefore deliberately managerial: organizations must manage the energy, attention, and coherence of transformation as seriously as they manage technology investment.

Digital Transformation Fatigue as a Management Problem

Digital transformation fatigue differs from general change fatigue because it is tied to the specific intensity, simultaneity, and ambiguity of digital change. General change fatigue may arise from restructuring, leadership turnover, or repeated organizational reforms, but digital transformation fatigue is shaped by the layering of platforms, data systems, automation, analytics, new customer interfaces, and new ways of working. Research mapping the current state of digital transformation shows that the field spans business models, processes, culture, capabilities, and organizational outcomes [8]. This breadth helps explain why fatigue can become systemic rather than localized.

The problem is not technology itself, but the way technology is managed as an expanding transformation portfolio. Digital transformation requires firms to manage scope, value co-generation, organizational redesign, and strategic implications rather than treating each initiative as an isolated project [9]. Fatigue develops when managers lack a portfolio view and allow digital initiatives to multiply without clear trade-offs. In that condition, employees experience transformation as a permanent state of unfinished work.

Digital transformation fatigue should also be understood as a warning signal about organizational capacity. Studies of transformation projects show that implementation requires learning, adaptation, and alignment across multiple levels of the firm [10]. If new initiatives are introduced before prior projects are stabilized, the organization may appear active but become less capable of absorbing change. Fatigue therefore indicates that the pace and volume of transformation have exceeded the organization's capacity to convert initiatives into routines, value, and strategic advantage.

The three root causes examined in the remainder of the article are initiative overload, employee resistance and change exhaustion, and declining strategic focus. Digitalization strategies require deliberate managerial choices about where and how digital technologies should reshape operations, offerings, and competitive positioning [11]. When those choices are weak, initiative overload fragments resources, employee resistance reveals exhaustion, and declining focus undermines strategic coherence. Digital transformation fatigue is therefore not merely an employee attitude; it is a managerial diagnosis of transformation that has become excessive, poorly sequenced, and strategically diluted.

Figure 1 presents the core diagnostic model of digital transformation fatigue as a management problem produced by initiative overload, employee resistance and change exhaustion, and declining strategic focus.

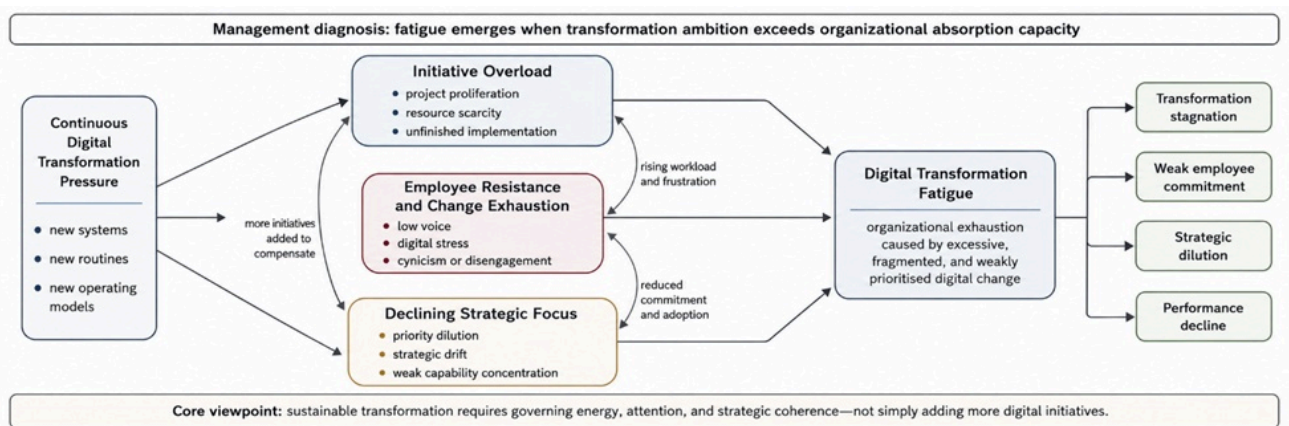


Figure 1. Diagnostic Model of Digital Transformation Fatigue as a Management Problem

Initiative Overload

Initiative overload is one of the clearest managerial pathways through which digital transformation fatigue emerges. It occurs when organizations launch multiple digital projects across functions, platforms, customer interfaces, analytics systems, and operating models without sufficient prioritisation or sequencing. Digital transformation research has shown that organizations often treat transformation as a wide portfolio of simultaneous activities, but breadth can become dysfunctional when initiatives compete for the same managerial attention and implementation capacity [12]. In this

condition, employees do not experience transformation as strategic renewal; they experience it as a growing queue of demands.

The problem is intensified when digital initiatives are framed as urgent but not clearly connected to one another. Organization design research suggests that digital transformation requires structural alignment, decision clarity, and coordination mechanisms across units [13]. When these conditions are missing, each initiative generates new meetings, reporting requirements, training sessions, data requests, process changes, and performance expectations. The visible symptom is project proliferation, but the deeper problem is the absence of managerial discipline over the transformation agenda.

Initiative overload also creates a false impression of progress. Because many projects are active, managers may assume that the organization is transforming quickly, even when benefits are delayed, duplicated, or diluted. Research on digital transformation tensions shows that established companies must manage competing pressures between experimentation, scaling, stability, and strategic direction [14]. If every digital opportunity becomes a project, the organization may become busy without becoming more capable.

The managerial consequence is initiative gridlock: projects remain open, teams become stretched, and strategic benefits are postponed because attention is spread too thinly. Digital transformation should involve value creation and renewal, but overload converts it into a capacity problem in which even good projects lose momentum [15]. **Table 1** categorises the sources and symptoms of initiative overload in digital transformation. This diagnostic view is important because overload is not simply about the number of projects; it is about the mismatch between transformation ambition, organizational capacity, and strategic prioritisation.

Table 1. Initiative Overload in Digital Transformation: Sources, Manifestations, and Organizational Consequences

Dimension	Explanation	Typical Manifestations	Organizational Consequences
Project proliferation	Too many digital initiatives are launched simultaneously across functions and business units.	Multiple platform upgrades, analytics projects, automation programs, customer interface redesigns, and agile pilots run in parallel.	Resource scarcity, duplicated work, implementation delays, and rising employee frustration.
Weak prioritisation	Managers do not clearly distinguish essential transformation initiatives from optional or fashionable projects.	Projects are approved because they appear innovative, urgent, or technologically attractive.	Strategic ambiguity, diluted investment, and limited measurable value.
Competing resource demands	Digital projects draw on the same employees, data specialists, managers, and operational teams.	Key staff are assigned to several initiatives while continuing normal work responsibilities.	Burnout, slower delivery, quality problems, and reduced commitment.
Fragmented governance	Initiatives are managed locally without strong portfolio-level oversight.	Business units pursue disconnected digital agendas with inconsistent metrics and timelines.	Coordination failure, incompatible systems, and weak organizational learning.
Unfinished implementation	New initiatives are launched before earlier projects are embedded into routines.	Employees face repeated training, changing tools, and shifting workflows.	Transformation fatigue, cynicism, and poor adoption.

Benefit dilution	Expected gains are spread across too many small or poorly integrated initiatives.	Benefits are difficult to measure or are claimed rhetorically rather than operationally.	Declining confidence in transformation and reduced strategic credibility.
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Employee Resistance and Change Exhaustion

Employee resistance is often misread as irrational opposition to technology, but in fatigued organizations it is frequently a rational response to excessive, unclear, or poorly supported change. Research on leaders' impact on organizational change shows that employee reactions are shaped by trust, communication, leadership behaviour, and perceived legitimacy of change [16]. When digital initiatives arrive repeatedly without sufficient explanation or involvement, employees may resist not because they reject improvement, but because they no longer believe the process is credible. Resistance therefore functions as a signal of depleted confidence.

Change exhaustion becomes especially visible when employees are asked to absorb digital transformation while maintaining existing performance targets. Studies on organizational change management success show that implementation depends on readiness, participation, leadership, communication, and the alignment of change with organizational realities [17]. If these conditions are weak, digital transformation becomes an additional burden rather than a meaningful improvement. Employees may comply formally while disengaging psychologically.

Digital stress further deepens the fatigue problem because digital transformation changes not only tasks, but also employees' sense of competence and control. Research on digital transformation stress demonstrates that digital change can generate psychological strain when employees lack resources, support, or confidence in adapting to new technologies [18]. Resistance, cynicism, and burnout should therefore be interpreted as managerial information rather than merely behavioural obstacles. Organizations that ignore this information risk turning transformation into a source of disengagement and retention pressure.

Declining Strategic Focus

Declining strategic focus occurs when digital transformation becomes a collection of initiatives rather than a coherent strategic direction. Firms may pursue artificial intelligence, automation, platforms, analytics, digital customer experience, agile work, and ecosystem coordination at the same time, yet fail to clarify which capabilities matter most for competitive advantage. Research on digital transformation indicates that transformation requires strategic alignment between technologies, organizational capabilities, and value creation logic [1]. Without that alignment, digital activity expands while strategic clarity contracts.

The loss of focus is often subtle because it is hidden behind the language of innovation. Managers may believe that a broad digital agenda demonstrates ambition, but ambition without prioritisation can fragment resources and weaken execution. Digital transformation research in business and management has shown that the field includes many themes, from business models to organizational processes and performance outcomes [8]. This variety is useful for scholarship, but dangerous for management when organizations try to pursue every theme at once.

Strategic focus also declines when managers treat digital transformation as an end in itself rather than a means of strengthening a competitive position. The digital transformation canvas literature emphasises the need to guide transformation through coherent choices about value, processes, technology, organization, and stakeholders [19]. When firms lack such anchoring, digital initiatives may become disconnected from the business model they are supposed to strengthen. The result is not only fatigue, but also strategic drift.

A fatigued organization may therefore continue investing in digital transformation while becoming less certain about what transformation is meant to achieve. Research on digital transformation and organization design shows that effective transformation requires integration between digital strategy and organizational architecture [13]. **Table 2** summarises the indicators and outcomes of declining strategic focus. The table frames strategic focus decline as a diagnosable pattern in which unclear priorities, fragmented initiatives, and weak capability concentration undermine performance.

Table 2. Declining Strategic Focus in Digital Transformation: Indicators, Root Causes, and Impact on Performance

Indicator	Root Cause	Management Signal	Impact on Performance
Too many strategic priorities	Digital transformation is treated as a broad mandate rather than a disciplined strategic choice.	Leaders describe many priorities but cannot identify the few that matter most.	Resources are diluted and execution becomes inconsistent.
Weak connection to business model	Digital initiatives are not clearly tied to value creation, revenue logic, or operating advantage.	Projects are justified by technological novelty rather than strategic contribution.	Transformation produces activity but limited competitive benefit.
Fragmented capability development	Digital projects build isolated tools rather than cumulative organizational capabilities.	Different units develop separate systems, metrics, and practices.	Learning remains local and scaling becomes difficult.
Shifting executive attention	Leadership attention moves rapidly between digital themes and trends.	Priorities change before previous initiatives mature.	Employees lose confidence and transformation momentum declines.
Inconsistent performance metrics	Projects use different success criteria without a shared transformation logic.	Teams report progress through activity measures rather than value measures.	Benefits become difficult to compare, govern, or sustain.
Strategic drift	The organization continues transforming without a clear destination.	Managers cannot explain how digital initiatives reinforce positioning.	Competitive coherence weakens and transformation fatigue increases.

Managerial Recommendations

The first managerial recommendation is to govern digital transformation as a portfolio rather than as a collection of independent projects. Portfolio governance requires managers to decide which initiatives to stop, slow, sequence, combine, or scale, not only which initiatives to launch. Evidence on repetitive reorganizations and change fatigue shows that repeated change without clear stabilization can generate uncertainty and exhaustion [20]. Managers should therefore treat initiative reduction as a legitimate transformation practice, because fewer initiatives may create more value when they receive adequate attention and implementation support.

The second recommendation is to rebuild employee involvement and psychological safety around digital change. A systematic review of reactions to organizational change shows that employee responses depend on perceived fairness, trust, communication, participation, and the meaning attributed to change [21]. Organizations should involve employees earlier in diagnosing workflow problems, testing digital tools, and identifying adoption barriers. This is not merely a participatory gesture; it is a practical way to detect overload before it becomes resistance.

The third recommendation is to anchor transformation in a small number of strategic priorities and use those priorities to discipline digital investment. Research on digital literacy and employee participation in transformation shows that employees' ability to use digital technologies is central to effective adoption, but capability development must be

connected to meaningful organizational goals [22]. Research on technology-induced stress and resistance further suggests that countermeasures should address workload, communication, competence, and perceived usefulness rather than assuming that implementation problems are purely technical [23, 24]. Managers should therefore adopt a “less but better” approach: fewer initiatives, clearer sequencing, stronger employee voice, and sharper strategic focus.

Figure 2 illustrates the managerial revitalisation pathway for reducing digital transformation fatigue through portfolio governance, employee involvement, strategic anchoring, and disciplined sequencing.

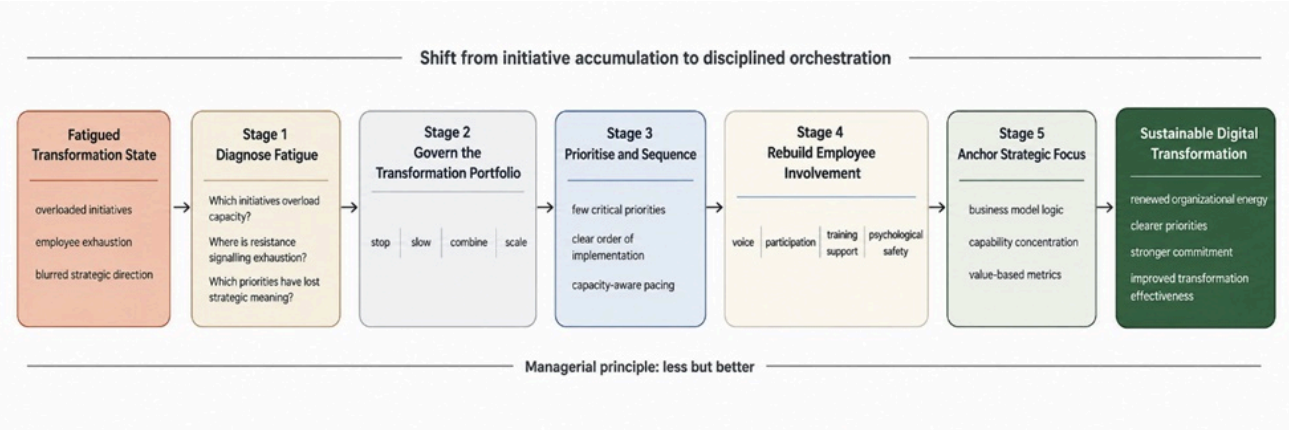


Figure 2. Managerial Revitalisation Pathway for Reducing Digital Transformation Fatigue

Conclusion

Digital transformation fatigue is real, diagnosable, and manageable. It emerges when organizations continue to expand transformation activity while neglecting the organizational energy required to absorb change. The problem is not digital transformation itself, but the managerial failure to govern its pace, volume, and strategic meaning. Recognising fatigue allows leaders to see exhaustion not as resistance to progress, but as evidence that transformation has become poorly orchestrated.

The three root causes examined in this article are initiative overload, employee resistance and change exhaustion, and declining strategic focus. Initiative overload stretches resources and attention, employee resistance reveals the human cost of unmanaged change, and declining strategic focus weakens the link between digital activity and competitive advantage. Together, these forces can turn transformation from a source of renewal into a source of stagnation. The practical lesson is that organizations must manage transformation capacity as carefully as transformation ambition.

The way forward is not to abandon digital transformation, but to make it more disciplined, humane, and strategically coherent. Managers should reduce unnecessary initiatives, sequence priorities, involve employees meaningfully, and anchor digital change in a clear competitive logic. Digital transformation fatigue should be owned as a management problem, not delegated to employees as an attitude problem. Sustainable transformation depends on the ability to preserve focus, energy, and commitment over time.

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