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Explaining Resistance to Digital Transformation through a Systematic Theory Review of Organizational Identity, Political Interests, Capability Disruption, and Change Sequencing

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Abstract

Digital transformation frequently encounters organizational resistance, yet resistance is often treated as a unitary response to technological change. This systematic theory review examines whether that apparent unity conceals theoretically distinct mechanisms. A transparent theory-focused review identified 85 records, removed 23 duplicate manifestations, screened 62 unique records, retained 40 reports for article-level assessment, and distinguished 32 substantive mechanism-evidence units from eight sources used for definition, review methodology, or reporting. Comparative synthesis organized the substantive evidence around organizational identity, political interests, capability disruption, and change sequencing. The evidence indicates that similar observable responses—delay, opposition, workarounds, role defensiveness, centralization, or selective engagement—can originate from different underlying processes. Identity-based resistance concerns threatened continuity, professional meaning, or organizational prototypes; political resistance concerns altered jurisdiction, authority, control, and resource claims; capability-based resistance emerges where new demands exceed or displace available routines, expertise, and absorptive capacity; and sequencing problems arise when timing, pace, ordering, and capability development are misaligned. These mechanisms may coexist, but the available literature does not justify treating them as interchangeable or universally co-occurring. The review therefore supports a conditional multimechanism interpretation in which explaining resistance requires identifying the threatened object, contested interest, disrupted capability, and temporal configuration before selecting an organizational response.

Keywords Digital transformation, Organizational change, Dynamic capabilities, Organizational identity, Organizational resistance, Political interests

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Introduction

Digital transformation is better understood as organizational disruption and strategic response than as the installation of new technology alone. Vial's synthesis places structural change, organizational barriers, and strategic responses within the same transformation process, making resistance analytically relevant to the transformation itself rather than an

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external disturbance [1]. Yet the theoretical basis for explaining that resistance remains dispersed. A systematic review by Hanelt et al. showed that digital transformation research draws on multiple organizational-change perspectives while increasingly emphasizing continuous adaptation and ecosystem embedding [2]. This breadth is reinforced by multidisciplinary work linking transformation to changes in strategy, customer interaction, resources, capabilities, and organizational arrangements [3].

An important complication is that not every technology-enabled change alters the organization in the same way. Wessel *et al*. distinguish digital transformation from more conventional IT-enabled organizational transformation by showing how some transformations affect organizational identity and value logic rather than merely enabling established activity [4]. At a broader level, Plekhanov *et al*. identify shifts in organizational resources, boundaries, and power distributions across a large digital-transformation literature [5]. These distinctions make a single generic category of “resistance to digitalization” theoretically weak because the object being defended or disrupted can differ substantially across cases.

Conceptual precision is therefore necessary before resistance can be explained. Gong and Ribiere’s analysis of 134 definitions separates digital transformation from adjacent ideas such as digitization and digitalization and emphasizes organization-level change enabled by digital technologies [6]. Business and management research nevertheless remains distributed across partially connected streams [7], while integrative reviews continue to organize antecedents, processes, and outcomes through different theoretical lenses [8]. The resulting problem is not the absence of explanations, but their partial incompatibility. An identity account asks what valued meaning or continuity is threatened. A political account asks who gains or loses authority and control. A capability account asks what an organization or actor must newly be able to do. A temporal account asks whether change is occurring in an order and at a pace compatible with adaptation.

This review therefore asks how organizational identity, political interests, capability disruption, and change sequencing explain resistance to digital transformation, where their explanations overlap, and where they imply different interpretations of superficially similar behavior. The purpose is not to treat every delay or objection as multidetermined by default. It is to compare theoretically distinct mechanisms and determine when each interpretation is supported, contested, or bounded by context.

Theoretical Fragmentation in Digital Transformation Resistance Research

Existing digital-transformation reviews reveal different explanatory architectures. Vial organizes transformation around technological disruption, strategic responses, changes in value creation, structural alterations, barriers, and organizational outcomes [1]. Hanelt *et al*. foreground organizational change and show that digital transformation often involves continuous adaptation extending beyond the focal firm [2]. Plekhanov *et al.* differentiate technological, organizational-core, organizational-periphery, and environmental layers, drawing attention to changing resource and power relations [5]. Nadkarni and Prügl similarly integrate antecedents, processes, and outcomes across different levels of analysis [8]. These syntheses are complementary in important respects, yet they do not make resistance theoretically uniform.

Four explanatory problems recur within this fragmentation. First, transformation may threaten established organizational or professional identities by changing what the organization is understood to be or what constitutes legitimate expertise. Second, transformation can redistribute authority, information access, decision rights, and control, creating conflicts of interest that should not be interpreted simply as fear of technology. Third, transformation may invalidate established routines or require capabilities that are absent, immature, externally dependent, or unevenly distributed. Fourth, timing and order can make otherwise viable change appear unacceptable or unworkable when strategic commitment precedes capability formation, automation precedes role redesign, or several changes compete for adaptation capacity.

These mechanisms concern different causal objects. Identity explanations center on continuity and meaning; political explanations on contested interests and jurisdiction; capability explanations on the ability to perform, absorb, coordinate,

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or reconfigure; and sequencing explanations on temporal relations among commitments, roles, capabilities, and implementation. Their empirical manifestations can overlap. Delay, for example, may express identity protection, strategic bargaining, insufficient competence, or a rational response to premature implementation. A theory review must therefore preserve these rival interpretations rather than aggregate them into a single list of barriers.

Systematic Theory Review Method

The review was designed as a systematic theory review rather than a descriptive inventory of digital-transformation barriers. Literature review methodology requires alignment between the review question, search strategy, analytical method, and intended contribution [9]. Theory-advancing review articles additionally require comparison, critique, and conceptual integration rather than accumulation of findings [10]. Accordingly, the review combined transparent search and selection procedures with theory identification, mechanism coding, boundary analysis, and comparative synthesis.

Protocol and Research Questions

The protocol specified three linked questions: which theoretical mechanisms explain resistance to digital transformation; which empirical or conceptual observations discriminate among organizational identity, political interests, capability disruption, and sequencing explanations; and under what organizational, occupational, institutional, or temporal conditions do these explanations converge or diverge. Systematic-review research in management shows that transparent searching alone is insufficient when synthesis procedures remain underspecified [11]. The protocol therefore fixed both selection decisions and the comparative-theory dimensions before final integration. Explicit execution rules were also used to separate substantive review evidence from sources serving definition, methodology, or reporting functions [12].

The evidence unit was an article or theoretically substantive study capable of informing at least one of the four mechanisms, a relevant rival explanation, a boundary condition, or a cross-mechanism relationship. Journal prestige was not used to determine evidence eligibility. Assessment of whether evidence contributed to the review question was analytically separate from the bibliography's journal-selection criterion.

The distinction among the review question, evidence unit, mechanism code, and reference policy is summarized below.

Table 1 presents theory-focused review decisions separating evidence eligibility, mechanism coding, and manuscript citation policy.

Table 1. Theory-focused review decisions separating evidence eligibility, mechanism coding, and manuscript citation policy

Review decision	Article-specific operational rule	Identity-related information retained	Political-interest information retained	Capability information retained	Sequencing information retained
Review object	Organizational resistance associated with substantive digital transformation	Threatened continuity, membership, role meaning, professional identity	Jurisdiction, authority, control, resource or role claims	Readiness, routines, expertise, absorptive or dynamic capability	Timing, pace, order, duration, temporal coupling

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Evidence unit	Article or substantive study contributing a mechanism, rival explanation, or boundary condition	Organizational/professional identity evidence	Executive, managerial, occupational or algorithmic-control evidence	Firm-, process-, team- or professional-capability evidence	Longitudinal/process/change-time evidence
Mechanism coding	Code only what the source directly reports or theoretically argues	Meaning and continuity mechanism	Interest and control mechanism	Ability and reconfiguration mechanism	Temporal configuration mechanism
Boundary coding	Preserve conditions limiting interpretation	Organizational type, profession, institutional setting	Formal role structure, expertise, task, governance arrangement	Sector, firm history, complementary resources	Stage, pace, path dependence, prior commitments
Appraisal logic	Evaluate design-to-claim fit rather than journal prestige	Strength of evidence for identity interpretation	Strength of evidence for political interpretation	Strength of evidence for capability interpretation	Strength of evidence for temporal interpretation
Final citation policy	Cited sources restricted to 2017–2023 Q1 journals	Eligible evidence still judged on substantive merit	Same	Same	Same

Database and Journal Search

Search and verification were executed on 30 September 2026 using an accessible scholarly-web search environment indexing publisher, DOI, repository, and bibliographic records. No claim is made that subscription Scopus or Web of Science databases were searched. Methodological guidance for management reviews emphasizes documenting actual search decisions and avoiding a reconstructed account that differs from execution [13].

Four mechanism-oriented discovery routes were used. The first combined digital transformation with resistance, organizational identity, and organizational change. The second combined digital transformation with CDO, CIO, role conflict, power, politics, middle management, and algorithmic control. The third combined digital transformation with capability disruption, readiness, routines, dynamic capabilities, and skills. The fourth combined digital transformation with sequence, sequencing, temporal processes, stages, and organizational change. These searches returned 45 discovery records. Exact-title and DOI verification of 40 candidate scholarly records generated a further 40 record manifestations, producing 85 records before deduplication.

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Twenty-three duplicate records or alternate manifestations were removed. Sixty-two unique records consequently entered title-and-abstract screening.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible evidence had to contribute directly to explaining digital transformation through at least one focal mechanism, a competing explanation, a cross-mechanism relationship, or a review-design requirement. Studies of related technologies, including artificial intelligence and algorithmic management, were retained only where their organizational mechanisms were relevant to the review and their narrower technological context could be preserved explicitly. Records were excluded when they fell outside the locked 2017–2023 period used for this execution, were non-eligible publication forms, lay outside organization and management scope, or lacked sufficient theoretical or mechanistic relevance.

PRISMA 2020 informed transparent reporting of record movement and exclusion arithmetic, but it was not treated as a quality-assessment instrument [14]. From 62 unique screened records, 22 were excluded: five because they fell outside the period, seven because they were non-eligible source forms, four because they were outside the organizational scope, and six because their theoretical connection to the focal mechanisms was insufficient. Forty reports were retained for article-level assessment, with no retained report failing retrieval. Eight of those reports served construct-definition, methodological, or reporting functions only. The final substantive synthesis therefore contained 32 mechanism-evidence units.

Because the theoretical analysis depended on separating substantive mechanism evidence from sources retained only for definition and review execution, the report-level and evidence-unit stages remain visually distinct in the selection flow **(Figure 1).**

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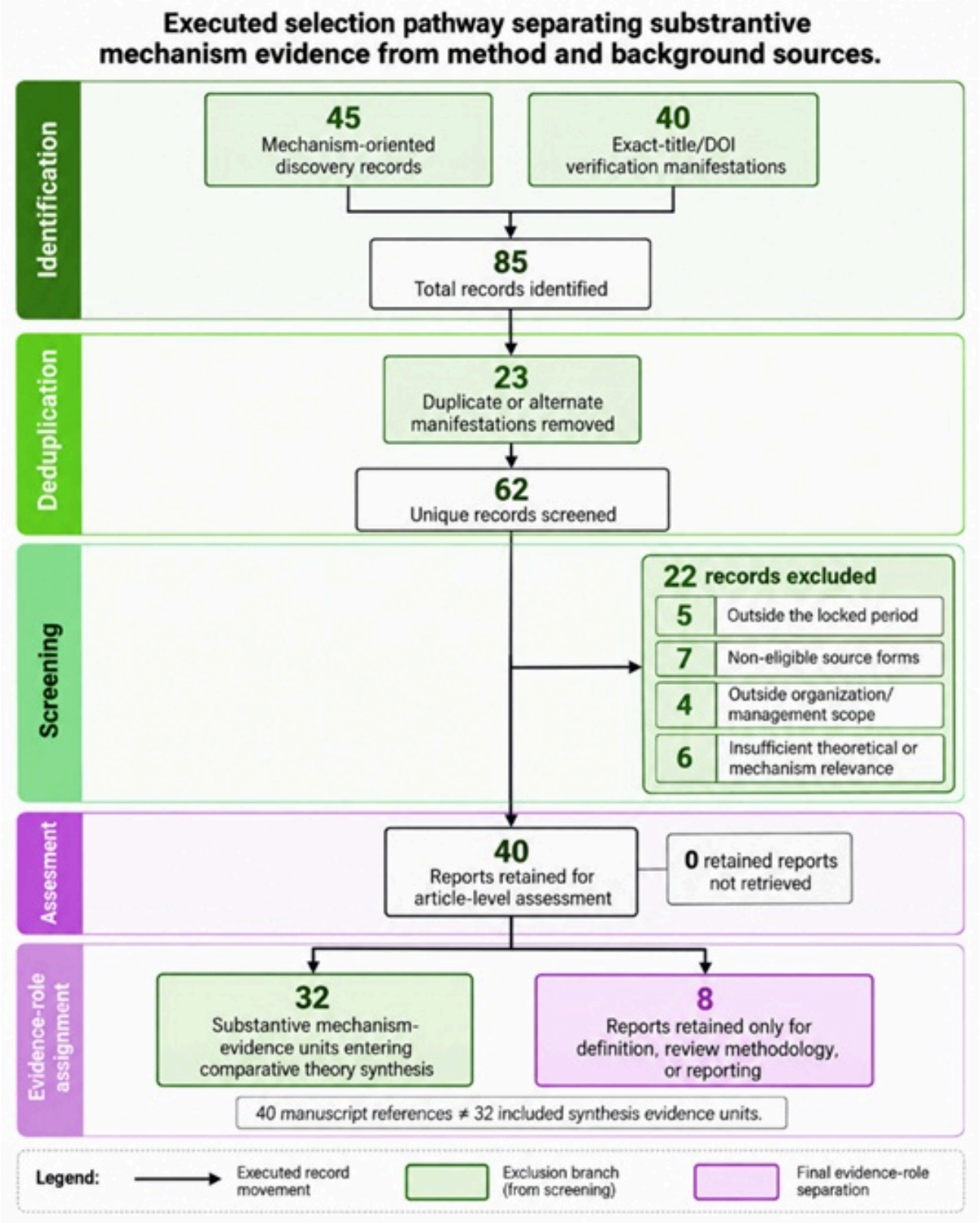


Figure 1. Executed selection pathway separating substantive mechanism evidence from method and background sources

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Theory Identification and Coding

Theory identification proceeded through mechanism-sensitive coding rather than assigning each article to a single disciplinary label. The coding matrix captured focal construct, organizational level, actors, mechanism, mediators or moderators, temporal design, main finding or argument, contradictory or null evidence, alternative explanation, stated limitation, applicability boundary, and permitted claim. Coding also separated what sources directly established from the synthesis developed in this review.

Identity coding concerned changes in collective self-understanding, member prototypes, occupational meaning, legitimate expertise, and role continuity. Political-interest coding concerned jurisdiction, authority, resource allocation, control, executive-role relations, and managerial involvement. Capability coding concerned readiness, routines, expertise, absorptive capacity, dynamic capability, process logic, and capacity to evaluate or use new digital systems. Sequencing coding concerned temporal order, pace, emergence, path dependence, and dependencies among strategy, implementation, roles, and capability building.

Comparative Theory Synthesis

The comparative synthesis examined each theoretical family through the same questions: what is treated as threatened or disrupted; which actors and organizational levels are implicated; what observable response the mechanism can generate; which rival explanation could produce the same response; and which contextual or methodological boundary restricts inference. This design prevents a theory from appearing stronger merely because its literature uses broader terminology.

The comparison also preserves evidentiary asymmetry. Identity research contains rich qualitative evidence about meaning and continuity but often derives from highly specific organizational or professional settings. Political-interest evidence offers direct observations of executive roles, managerial involvement, and control conflicts, yet much of it concerns distinctive role configurations rather than organization-wide resistance. Capability research is relatively extensive, especially through dynamic-capability lenses, but capability development cannot automatically be interpreted as the inverse of resistance. Sequencing is theoretically well established in strategic-change research but has fewer studies explicitly treating temporal configuration as a mechanism of digital-transformation resistance.

Table 2 presents theoretical objects that distinguish four explanations of resistance to digital transformation.

Table 2. Theoretical objects that distinguish four explanations of resistance to digital transformation

Explanatory family	Primary threatened or disrupted object	Central actors or level	Characteristic process	Surface responses that may appear	Rival explanation that must be tested	Main evidence boundary
Organizational identity	Continuity of organizational meaning, membership prototype, professional role, legitimate expertise	Organization, profession, employee, member group	Identity misalignment, ambiguity, defensive identity work	Distancing, symbolic defense, rejection, selective engagement	Capability deficit or genuine operational risk	Strongly context- and occupation-dependent
Political interests	Authority, jurisdiction,	Executives, middle	Bargaining, centralization,	Opposition, delay,	Insufficient expertise or	Often tied to specific

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	control, resources, role position, strategic involvement	managers, professions, governed workers	role conflict, control redistribution	separation, escalation, protection of discretion	unclear role capability	governance or role arrangements
Capability disruption	Routines, skills, readiness, absorptive capacity, dynamic capability, evaluative competence	Individual, process, firm	Mismatch, displacement, learning, reconfiguration, external acquisition	Workarounds, dependence, implementation failure, selective use	Identity protection or strategic interest defense	Capability measures and routes vary widely
Change sequencing	Temporal relation among commitments, capability building, role redesign, implementation and renewal	Organization and change process	Premature commitment, delayed adaptation, path dependence, incompatible pace	Stop–start implementation, reversal, overload, apparent reluctance	Independent identity, political or capability problem	Direct DT-specific temporal evidence remains comparatively limited

Results

The 32 substantive evidence units were heterogeneous in theory, design, sector, and level of analysis. This heterogeneity precluded meaningful quantitative pooling and made prevalence claims inappropriate. The synthesis instead identified recurring mechanisms and examined whether findings within each family were directionally consistent, contradictory, or contingent. The evidence did not support a universal resistance sequence. It supported distinguishable explanatory pathways whose observable manifestations frequently overlapped.

Organizational Identity

The strongest direct evidence for an identity mechanism comes from longitudinal research in a high-reliability organization. Poláková-Kersten *et al.* show that digital transformation can conflict with an established organizational identity anchored in reliability, generating threat perceptions and self-protective behavior [15]. Resistance in such a setting cannot be interpreted adequately as low readiness because established practices may possess positive identity and safety meanings. The mechanism is therefore misalignment between what transformation requires the organization to become and what actors understand the organization must remain.

Identity disruption also appears at the level of organizational membership. Jarvenpaa and Selander show that digital scaling in national sections of Amnesty International produced member-prototype ambiguity, making transformation partly a problem of redefining who legitimately represents the organization [16]. The evidence broadens identity beyond corporate branding: transformation can alter the categories through which membership and organizational distinctiveness are understood.

At the occupational level, Strich *et al.* demonstrate that substitutive AI decision systems can challenge employees' professional role identities when valued judgment is displaced and employees have limited ability to override the system [17]. Pachidi *et al.* similarly show that algorithmic systems can alter established regimes of knowing, thereby changing

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which knowledge practices are recognized as legitimate [18]. These findings are narrower than organization-wide digital transformation, but they clarify how apparently technical redesign can acquire identity significance once it changes the basis of expertise.

An institutional perspective provides an important boundary. Digital transformation occurs within established rules, meanings, and organizational arrangements that can stabilize existing identities while also making new forms possible [19]. Identity-based resistance should therefore be inferred only when evidence concerns threatened meaning, continuity, membership, or expertise. Opposition arising primarily from resource loss, role conflict, insufficient skill, or poorly timed implementation requires another explanation.

Political Interests

Political explanations become visible when transformation reallocates jurisdiction and organizational control. Tumbas et al. show that chief digital officers engage in institutional work to establish and legitimize an emerging digital role, including strategies that bridge, graft onto, or distance themselves from established organizational domains [20]. The relevant mechanism is not simply executive reluctance; it is the negotiation of a new jurisdiction inside an existing authority structure.

Large-sample evidence shows why centralization itself should not automatically be read as resistance. Firk et al., using 913 US and European firms across 7,318 firm-year observations, find that organizational urgency and coordination requirements are associated with the presence of a centralized Chief Digital Officer role [21]. Centralization may therefore constitute a response to transformation complexity. Its political consequences depend on how the role intersects with established authority.

That intersection can become conflictual. Lorenz and Buchwald's dyadic investigation of Chief Information Officer–Chief Digital Officer relationships shows that expected complementarity may be undermined by role overlap, divergent role orientations, and conflict that pushes the two functions apart [22]. Digital transformation can thus generate resistance through contested jurisdiction even among actors who support transformation in principle.

Middle managers present a particularly important counterexample to a simple threat narrative. Van Doorn *et al.* show that digital automation can either diminish or expand middle-manager strategic involvement depending on which tasks are automated and on managers' expertise and organizational embeddedness [23]. Political effects are therefore conditional: automation may threaten status in one configuration while freeing capacity for more strategic participation in another.

The political terrain extends below the executive hierarchy. Kellogg *et al.* characterize algorithms as creating new contested forms of workplace control, in which visibility, evaluation, direction, and discipline are redistributed [24]. Research on organizational change likewise indicates that top and middle managers do not operate through fixed "top-down" and "bottom-up" roles; role combinations shape employee support for change [25]. AI-management research further emphasizes that algorithmic autonomy, learning, and opacity create governance questions that organizations must actively manage [26]. Together, these findings position political resistance as conflict over control and role consequences rather than a synonym for negative attitude toward technology.

Capability Disruption

Capability explanations address whether actors and organizations possess, can develop, or can access what transformation demands. Lokuge *et a*l. conceptualize organizational readiness for digital innovation as multidimensional rather than a single stock of technology or skill [27]. Resistance can therefore emerge where transformation commitments exceed preparedness in processes, resources, managerial support, or organizational orientation.

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Dynamic-capability research suggests that the response to such disruption is itself developmental. Warner and Wäger describe digital transformation as an ongoing process of strategic renewal in which sensing, seizing, and transforming capabilities are repeatedly reconfigured [28]. Yeow et al. similarly show that alignment with a new digital strategy requires the reconfiguration of existing organizational capabilities rather than instantaneous conformity to a strategic decision [29]. A capability deficit may consequently be temporary, path dependent, and responsive to sequencing.

Organizations also obtain capability through different routes. Hanelt *et al.* show that digital mergers and acquisitions can provide access to digital resources and support digital innovation, although acquisition should not be equated with successful integration [30]. Matarazzo *et al*. find that capability development shapes how SMEs translate digital transformation into new forms of customer value [31]. Soluk and Kammerlander show that family-owned Mittelstand firms develop transformation pathways through distinctive sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration processes shaped by their organizational context [32]. Industrial-firm research likewise links digital transformation to dynamic capability development rather than technology procurement alone [33].

Internal transformation capacity is not unlimited. Siachou *et al.* emphasize the conditioning role of absorptive capacity and strategic interdependence in whether traditional organizations can transform through their own resources [34]. This finding matters because dependence on external complements can be misread as resistance when the underlying problem is that the organization cannot yet absorb or integrate the required knowledge.

Capability disruption also reaches organizational routines and professional judgment. Baiyere *et al*. show that digital transformation can alter the underlying logic of business process management rather than merely automate existing processes [35]. In healthcare, Lebovitz *et al.* demonstrate that professionals vary in how they engage opaque AI when making critical judgments, indicating that effective capability includes the capacity to evaluate, contest, and contextualize digital outputs [36]. Raisch and Krakowski's automation–augmentation paradox further cautions against treating digitalization as pure substitution: the same technology can automate some activities while increasing the importance of complementary human capabilities elsewhere [37].

Political and capability interpretations can therefore produce similar surface responses. A manager who resists automation may be protecting jurisdiction, may lack the expertise needed for a redesigned role, or may confront both conditions. The distinction depends on what changes when authority, expertise, resources, or support conditions change.

Table 3 presents discriminating political-interest and capability-disruption interpretations of similar resistance behavior.

Table 3. Discriminating political-interest and capability-disruption interpretations of similar resistance behavior

Observable response	Political-interest interpretation	Capability-disruption interpretation	Observation that helps discriminate	Principal boundary
Delayed implementation	Actor protects jurisdiction, resources, or discretion	Required expertise, routines, infrastructure, or complements are not yet available	Delay persists after capability support is supplied versus diminishes with support	Strategic delay may also reflect sequencing
Workaround or selective use	Formal system redistributes control in ways users contest	System exceeds users' evaluative or operational competence	Users can operate system but reject imposed control versus cannot reliably evaluate/use it	Identity meaning may also matter
Centralization of digital authority	Senior leaders consolidate control over transformation	Organization concentrates scarce	Authority concentration exceeds expertise	Centralization can be temporary

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		digital expertise for coordination	requirement versus tracks scarce capability	
CIO–CDO or role conflict	Overlapping jurisdiction and strategic ownership are disputed	Responsibilities are unclear because required digital capabilities span functions	Conflict continues despite role-capability clarification versus declines after capability differentiation	Dyadic evidence may not generalize
Expert override or reluctance to defer to algorithms	Professionals protect discretionary authority	Professionals judge system output as opaque or difficult to validate	Resistance tracks authority loss versus uncertainty about reliability and interpretation	Professional identity can connect both
External acquisition or partnership	Actors seek control over scarce digital resources	Organization lacks internal capability and obtains complementary capacity externally	Governance bargaining dominates versus learning/integration constraints dominate	Both mechanisms may coexist

Change Sequencing

Temporal explanations become necessary when the same substantive change produces different reactions depending on when and in what order it occurs. Chanias *et al.* show that digital-transformation strategy making in a pre-digital organization can emerge iteratively rather than through a fully specified master plan [38]. Strategic commitments, experimentation, interpretation, and organizational learning may therefore develop together. A transformation sequence that presumes stable objectives and capabilities from the outset can create apparent resistance simply because organizational learning has not yet caught up with commitment.

Strategic-change research gives this temporal argument a broader foundation. Kunisch *et al.* show that timing, pace, sequence, and duration are constitutive dimensions of strategic change rather than neutral background variables [39]. For digital transformation, the implication is that identity, political, and capability mechanisms can be amplified or reduced by temporal configuration. Role redesign introduced after automation, for example, may create a different response from role redesign developed jointly with the affected actors; capability investment made after a system mandate may generate a different trajectory from capability formation preceding implementation.

Change research also cautions against treating sequencing as a universal recipe. Stouten *et al.* show that successful organizational change reflects combinations of practices rather than an isolated intervention that works independently of context [40]. Sequencing therefore explains resistance only when the timing or ordering among interdependent changes is itself consequential. It should not become a residual label for every unsuccessful implementation.

Across the evidence, sequencing is best understood as a conditioning mechanism. It can expose capability gaps prematurely, intensify political conflict by reallocating authority before new roles are stabilized, or deepen identity threat when transformation is announced before a credible continuity narrative develops. Conversely, a different order may create time for learning, negotiation, and identity reconstruction. The literature supports these conditional relations more strongly than it supports any single optimal transformation sequence.

Cross-Theory Integration

The four explanatory families are most useful when treated as discriminating mechanisms rather than alternative labels for the same phenomenon. Identity threat, jurisdictional conflict, and insufficient organizational readiness can all generate

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delay or opposition, yet they imply different causal objects and therefore different interpretations [15, 22, 27]. Identity explanations concern continuity and meaning; political explanations concern control and distributive consequences; capability explanations concern whether required action is presently feasible; sequencing explanations concern whether otherwise defensible changes have been ordered or paced incompatibly.

This distinction also reveals equifinality. Selective use of a new system may defend professional identity, protect discretionary authority, reflect inadequate evaluative capability, or represent a rational response to implementation before complementary arrangements exist. Observed behavior alone therefore provides weak evidence about the underlying resistance mechanism. Diagnosis requires evidence about what changes when meaning, authority, support, expertise, or timing changes.

Interactions nevertheless matter. Identity threat can intensify when capability disruption undermines previously valued expertise. Capability problems can become political when scarce expertise confers control over transformation decisions. Political conflict can delay capability investment, while premature implementation can turn manageable skill gaps into visible organizational failure. These relations justify integration without implying that all mechanisms are active in every transformation.

A Multimechanism Theory of Digital Transformation Resistance

The synthesis supports a multimechanism interpretation in which digital-transformation resistance emerges when transformation disrupts one or more distinct organizational relationships: continuity between existing and future identity, alignment between interests and redistributed control, fit between transformation demands and available capability, and temporal compatibility among commitments, learning, role redesign, and implementation. Capability renewal, altered process logics, and temporal ordering are particularly interdependent, but the reviewed evidence does not establish a universal sequence or fixed interaction magnitude [28, 35, 39].

The theory therefore treats resistance as mechanism-dependent organizational response. The same response can be generated by different mechanisms, while the same mechanism can generate different responses across contexts. This produces a practical discriminating principle: before interpreting resistance, analysis should identify the object under threat, the actors whose interests change, the capability whose absence or displacement constrains action, and the temporal relation among the affected changes.

A mechanism should also remain analytically separable when another explanation can be removed without eliminating it. Additional training may resolve a capability problem while leaving a jurisdictional conflict unchanged. Participation in role redesign may reduce political opposition while an underlying professional-identity threat remains. Delaying implementation may give capability development time to catch up but will not necessarily resolve disagreement over who controls the resulting system.

These distinctions generate the boundary structure summarized in **Table 4.**

Table 4. Discriminating conditions and boundary implications of the multimechanism account of digital-transformation resistance

Diagnostic condition	Identity mechanism indicated when…	Political-interest mechanism indicated when…	Capability-disruption mechanism indicated when…	Sequencing mechanism indicated when…	Discriminating implication

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Object primarily affected	Valued organizational or professional meaning is destabilized	Authority, jurisdiction, resources, discretion, or control are redistributed	Required routines, skills, absorptive capacity, or evaluative competence are insufficient	Interdependent changes occur in incompatible order, pace, or timing	Identify what changes before classifying behavior as resistance
Response to additional resources or training	Threat may persist despite improved competence	Conflict may persist because interests remain misaligned	Resistance should diminish when the binding capability constraint is relieved	Improvement depends on whether capability becomes available before the dependent change	Training is not a universal remedy
Response to greater participation	May support identity reconstruction	May alter bargaining and perceived control	Helps only when participation also improves usable capability	May improve sequencing when affected actors shape timing	Participation has mechanism-specific effects
Response to role clarification	Helps when role meaning becomes coherent	Directly reduces jurisdictional ambiguity if ambiguity is causal	Insufficient where expertise or routines remain absent	Helps when role ambiguity results from premature ordering	Role clarity distinguishes authority conflict from capability shortage
Response to slower implementation	Useful only if additional time enables meaning reconstruction	May delay rather than resolve distributive conflict	Can allow learning and complementary capability formation	Directly relevant when pace itself is the constraint	Delay can be corrective or merely postponing
Persistence after apparent technical problems are solved	Supports an identity interpretation when meaning remains threatened	Supports a political interpretation when control consequences remain	Weakens a pure capability explanation	Supports temporal explanation only if unresolved dependencies remain	Residual resistance helps discriminate mechanisms
Evidence presently insufficient	Prevalence across sectors and identity forms	Generality beyond specific roles and governance arrangements	Comparative effectiveness of alternative capability-building routes	Direction and strength of mechanism-by-sequence interactions	Future studies should test discriminating predictions rather than count generic barriers

The framework does not imply that these diagnostic observations constitute experimental tests. They are discriminating implications derived from the comparative synthesis and should be evaluated directly in future longitudinal and multilevel research.

Discussion

The synthesis changes the interpretation of digital-transformation resistance in three ways. First, it moves analysis away from treating resistance as an undifferentiated negative attitude. Digital transformation can redistribute organizational

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resources and power, alter managerial involvement, and simultaneously automate and augment work; these processes create legitimate theoretical alternatives to a simple reluctance explanation [5, 23, 37].

Second, the review separates unwillingness from inability. A capability-constrained organization may appear resistant even when actors endorse transformation, while politically motivated resistance may remain after technical competence is improved. Conversely, actors protecting an organizational or professional identity may possess both the authority and capability to implement change yet contest what the transformation asks them or the organization to become.

Third, resistance may contain information about transformation design. Objections can reveal unresolved role boundaries, underestimated complementary-capability requirements, or temporal dependencies that implementation plans have ignored. This does not make resistance intrinsically beneficial. It means that suppressing observable opposition before identifying its mechanism can remove a signal without correcting the condition that produced it.

For managers, the implication is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. Capability problems call for learning, complementary resources, or redesign; political conflicts require attention to authority and distributive consequences; identity threats require engagement with continuity and legitimate expertise; temporal misfit requires reconsideration of pace and ordering. Interventions should follow mechanism identification rather than the generic classification of actors as resistant.

Future Research Agenda

Future research should test whether the four mechanisms can be empirically distinguished before examining their interactions. Longitudinal studies could observe whether resistance changes following capability investment, authority redistribution, identity reconstruction, or altered implementation timing. Such designs would provide stronger evidence than cross-sectional measures that combine materially different reasons for opposition.

A second priority is cross-level analysis. Professional identity may originate at the individual or occupational level while political authority is allocated organizationally and capability dependencies extend across external partners. Research should examine when a mechanism migrates across levels—for example, when individual expertise loss becomes collective jurisdictional conflict.

A third priority concerns temporal configuration. Studies should compare transformations in which capability building precedes commitment with those in which implementation precedes capability formation, and distinguish temporary adaptation strain from persistent resistance. Research should similarly test whether early participation reduces political conflict, identity threat, both, or neither.

These unresolved relationships produce an evidence-synthesis architecture in which the four mechanisms remain separate until discriminating evidence supports a cross-mechanism connection.

Figure 2 presents similar resistance behaviors diverge when the threatened object, contested interest, capability deficit, and temporal misfit differ.

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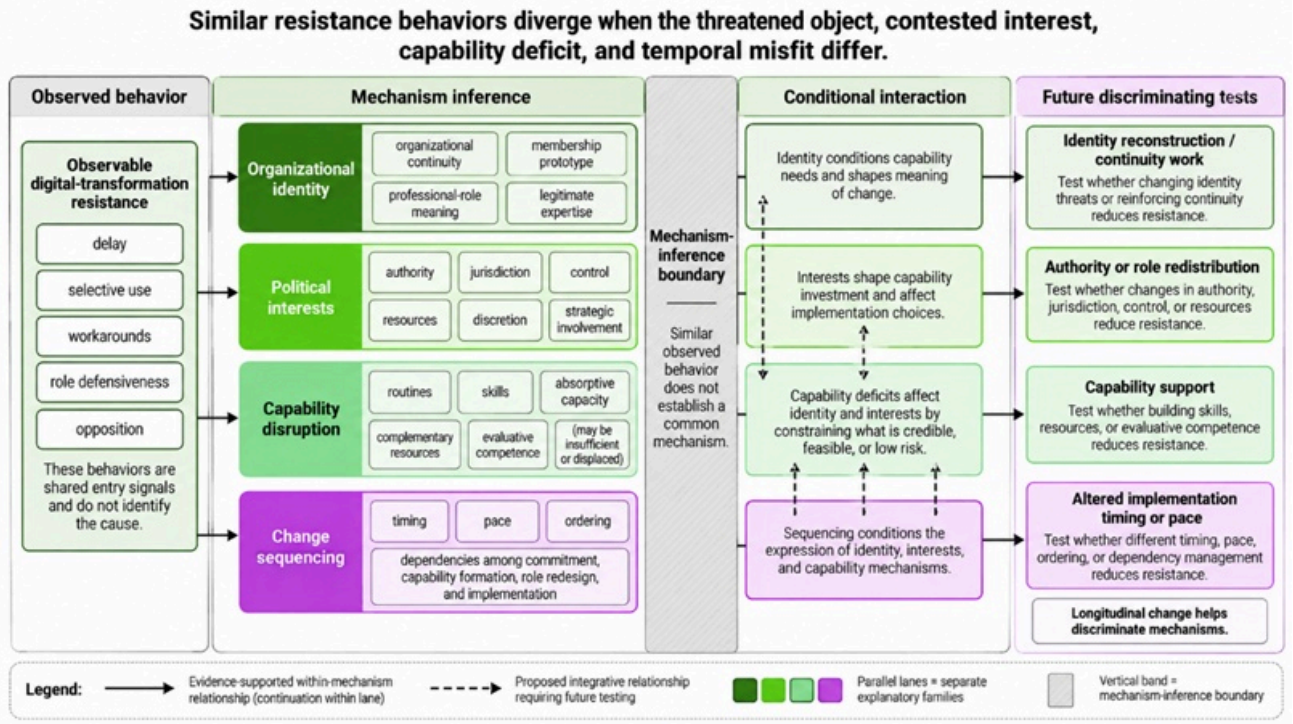


Figure 2. Similar resistance behaviors diverge when the threatened object, contested interest, capability deficit, and temporal misfit differ

Limitations

The review is bounded by its executed search environment and should not be described as an exhaustive census of all digital-transformation research. Searching used accessible scholarly-web, publisher, DOI, repository, and bibliographic records rather than authenticated Scopus or Web of Science exports. The cited evidence is restricted to 2017–2023, limiting coverage of literature published in 2024–2026.

A second limitation concerns evidence heterogeneity. The synthesis integrates systematic reviews, longitudinal cases, surveys, qualitative studies, conceptual work, and evidence from specific technologies such as algorithmic management and artificial intelligence. These sources illuminate mechanisms but do not justify pooled prevalence estimates or claims about which mechanism is most common.

Third, direct evidence is uneven across the four families. Capability and organizational-change literatures are relatively extensive, whereas some political evidence concerns specialized executive configurations and some identity evidence derives from highly distinctive organizational or professional settings. Sequencing is strongly grounded in strategic-change theory but remains less directly tested as a specific cause of digital-transformation resistance.

Finally, the proposed cross-mechanism relationships are theory-synthesis claims. The literature supports the constituent mechanisms and several plausible connections among them, but it does not yet establish a universal interaction structure, causal ordering, or optimal implementation sequence.

Conclusion

Resistance to digital transformation is most defensibly explained as a family of organizational responses whose underlying mechanisms must be distinguished before they are interpreted. The reviewed evidence supports four

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analytically different explanations. Transformation may threaten organizational or professional identity, redistribute authority and interests, exceed or disrupt available capabilities, or unfold in a temporally incompatible sequence.

These mechanisms can produce similar visible behavior, and they can interact, but neither overlap nor co-occurrence makes them interchangeable. Delay can be political, capability-based, identity-protective, or temporally rational. Opposition can reflect threatened meaning as readily as threatened authority. Apparent unwillingness can conceal an inability to perform or evaluate the new work.

The central implication is therefore conditional: explaining digital-transformation resistance requires identifying what is threatened, who gains or loses control, what capability is disrupted or missing, and how the timing and ordering of change shape those conditions. A multimechanism account becomes useful precisely when it preserves these differences rather than reducing resistance to a single organizational barrier.

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