Promoting the role of the leader in implementing digital transformation in state agencies

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Abstract: ***Digital transformation is a central strategy aimed at modernizing, enhancing the efficiency of state management, and promoting socio-economic development. The Prime Minister issued Directive No. 34/CT-TTg on September 16, 2024, requiring ministries, sectors, and localities to build digital transformation plans while identifying shortcomings in implementing previous digital transformation programs. This indicates that some leaders still need to regard it as a central task. The Directive also emphasizes the leader's critical role in managing and allocating resources to effectively implement digital transformation and better meet the needs of citizens and businesses. This article analyses several challenges facing leaders in digital transformation and proposes solutions to enhance effectiveness.***

Keywords: *Digital transformation; promoting roles; the leader; state agencies; digital government.*

1. Introduction

The term “leader” has existed for a long time, reflecting a natural demand in both the natural world and human society for the role that provides direction, leadership, and coordination of collective operations. In the state's administrative system, a leader is regarded as a legal institution, representing the highest position and authority in leadership and management (Mai, 2020). A leader is an individual who holds the highest leadership position in an organization and is responsible for managing and directing its operations.

In the context of Vietnam's state administrative agencies, the leader in Vietnam's state administrative agencies include positions such as the Prime Minister, Ministers, Heads of ministerial-level agencies, General Directors, Department Heads, Chairpersons of People's Committees at all levels, Department Directors, and the leader of specialized offices or divisions under the People's Committees. They are responsible for leading and managing organizational resources such as human, finances, physical assets, and information while being

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accountable for the organization's performance and compliance with the laws.

In the context where digital transformation has become an inevitable requirement for all public or private organizations, improving operational efficiency, ensuring process transparency, and enhancing the quality of public services to meet the increasing expectations of citizens is a top priority and the primary driving force for state agencies to pursue digital transformation. To succeed in this process, the leader operates this process and defines the vision and strategy, guiding and motivating the entire workforce while managing the digital transformation process.

2. The role of the leader in digital transformation in state agencies

2.1. Requirements for the head's role in digital transformation

In Vietnam, the National Digital Transformation Program was officially launched on June 3, 2020, with the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 749/QD-TTg approving the "National Digital Transformation Program to 2025 with a vision to 2030." This program aims to make Vietnam a digital nation, pioneering the application of digital technologies to develop a digital government, economy, and society.

For over four years of implementation under government directives, ministries, sectors, and local governments have steadily achieved specific successes in digital transformation. The specialized data transmission network is connected to all four administrative levels in state agencies. It continues to expand, providing a stable and secure infrastructure for information systems supporting the digital government. 71.43% of ministries, sectors, and localities have implemented data centers for digital transformation using cloud computing technology. Additionally, nine companies nationwide provide data center services, with 43 data centers hosting 571,000 servers and 54.7 million physical cores. The fixed broadband speed reached 104.08 Mbps, an increase of 31.9% compared to the same period in 2022, ranking fourth in Southeast Asia (Chau, 2024).

According to the United Nations' E-Government Development Index (EGDI) survey (2024), Vietnam rose to 71 out of 193 countries, improving 15 positions compared to 2022. This marks the first time Vietnam has been ranked in the "very high" EGDI group, achieving its highest position since joining the United Nations' IGDI assessment in 2003. This achievement reflects the strong efforts and determination of Vietnam's political system to successfully implement a national digital transformation, where the role of leaders is decisive.

At the Government Standing Meeting on digital transformation with Ministers, Department Heads, and Chairpersons of People's Committees of provinces and centrally governed cities on July 19, 2024, the Minister of Information and Communications asserted that leadership plays a decisive role in the success of digital transformation, a revolution characterized predominantly by change and technology, accounting for 70% and 30%, respectively. In Vietnam, "after four years of digital transformation, the technology elements for implementation are ready, with some initial successes highly encouraging. Now, leaders at all levels, particularly Ministers and Chairpersons of Provincial People's Committees, play a key role in the national digital transformation" (Hung, 2024).

Additionally, international studies and lessons on digital transformation highlight the significant contributions of organizational leaders to its success. A notable study by McKinsey emphasizes the critical role of top leaders in improving the success rate of this process. The research found that organizations with proactive leadership are 1.6 to 1.8 times more likely to succeed than those without solid leadership. The success rate increases by 3.1

times if the digital transformation process has a clear plan and the leader is directly committed (Shooter, 2020). This further underscores the importance of solid leadership and strategic planning in effectively executing digital transformation efforts in organizations.

Although Vietnam has achieved noteworthy accomplishments in the initial four years of its digital transformation journey, numerous issues and challenges remain for the next phase. Directive No. 34/CT-TTg, issued by the Prime Minister on September 16, 2024, comes when timely direction is needed to advance the process, leveraging prior achievements, and addressing existing problems. The Directive aims to enhance state management efficiency, improve the quality of public services, and promote the development of the digital economy in Vietnam. It also emphasizes the need for leaders of state agencies to take greater responsibility in directly leading and taking comprehensive responsibility for developing and implementing digital transformation projects.

2.2. The role of the leader in implementing digital transformation

In the booming digital age, digital transformation has become essential for state agencies to enhance operational efficiency and better serve the public. The role of leaders in this process is critically important. Leaders are operators and visionaries, guiding and motivating their entire workforce while managing and leveraging resources to fulfill the agency's functions and responsibilities. The critical roles of state agency leaders in the digital transformation process can be summarized as follows:

First, the leader must define a clear vision and specific digital transformation strategy for their organizations. This involves more than slogans or rallying calls; it requires crafting a detailed roadmap of the organization's future post-transformation. The vision must clarify core values, such as transparency, efficiency, and a citizen-centric approach. Leaders must also outline concrete long-term goals. To achieve this, they must develop a detailed digital transformation roadmap divided into phases, with specific objectives for each stage. Additionally, identifying the necessary resources, such as human, financial, and technological, for each phase is crucial.

Second, the leader must strive to unify the entire organization around digital transformation goals. Leaders can foster consensus and commitment across the team by consistently communicating and providing employee feedback opportunities. Digital transformation culture extends beyond technology; it revolutionizes mindset and work methods. Leaders should inspire and encourage innovation within the workforce, creating a space where employees feel empowered to think boldly, take action, and experiment with new ideas. Organizing digital innovation competitions or internal hackathons (events where employees creatively tackle unique challenges) provides excellent opportunities to stimulate innovation and embrace technological trends. Furthermore, recognizing and celebrating pioneering employees in the transformation process will inspire and motivate the organization. Leaders should establish policies that incentivize and acknowledge team efforts, creating a positive and productive work environment.

Third, the leader must accept risks and refrain from penalizing failures during the pilot phase. This is an effective way to build an open and dynamic workplace, a prerequisite for fostering innovation. They must also promote a culture of collaboration and knowledge-sharing within the organization. Encouraging interdisciplinary teamwork and assembling cross-functional teams for digital projects can enhance creativity and optimize resource utilization.

Fourth, the leader should set an example by adopting digital technology at work. When

leaders proactively use new digital tools such as management software, virtual meetings, and digital platforms, they can significantly motivate their teams to embrace the transformation. Regularly organizing training sessions to raise digital awareness and sharing information about the latest technologies will help staff stay updated and integrate into the digital transformation culture. Monitoring the transformation process is also a critical task for leaders. After defining the vision and strategy, they must closely oversee the implementation. This involves tracking project progress and managing resources flexibly and efficiently. Leaders should utilize modern project management software and hold regular progress review meetings with stakeholders to provide timely support and address emerging issues.

Fifth, unexpected situations cannot be avoided in the digital transformation journey. Leaders must identify problems quickly and organize emergency meetings to gather team feedback, thus finding timely solutions. Transparent communication is vital; leaders must frequently update staff and address their concerns about the reasons for and benefits of digital transformation. Conducting training sessions and providing detailed guidance on implementing new technologies can reduce apprehension and build employee confidence.

3. Challenges faced by the leader in implementing digital transformation

The leaders of state agencies at various levels play a crucial role in managing and organizing resources to implement digital transformation. However, in practice, digital transformation is a complex and challenging task, presenting certain obstacles for leaders during implementation, including:

Firstly, the challenge of digital human resources.

More high-quality human resources is a significant challenge for state agencies in digital transformation. At the macro level, "The National Project on Raising Awareness, Training, and Developing Human Resources for Digital Transformation by 2025, with a vision to 2030," approved by the Prime Minister in Decision No. 146/QD-TTg on January 28, 2022, identified training and developing high-quality human resources as a critical task to promote comprehensive digital transformation in state agencies and across society. However, the current supply of digitally skilled personnel remains limited, making it difficult to implement modern technological solutions in state management effectively.

In terms of state agencies in particular, the Project sets a goal that by 2025, 100% of leaders, officials, civil servants, and employees in state agencies and state-owned corporations will annually undergo training and professional development to update their knowledge of digital transformation, digital skills, and technology. Additionally, 100% of specialized digital transformation and IT staff must receive annual training, be assessed online through a national digital skills evaluation system, and possess core competencies for advancing digital transformation within their sectors and at various levels (Prime Minister, 2022).

However, in practice, the training and development of digital human resources in state agencies still have many difficulties due to limitations in facilities and training programs that still need to meet the demand. Many officials and employees in state agencies need to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to adapt to rapidly changing technologies. State agencies must give more attention to developing high-quality digital human resources systematically and comprehensively, from the central to the local levels. Developing high-quality digital human resources in state agencies still needs to be improved, particularly in local areas. This is mainly due to the specific characteristics of the public sector environment, which fails to attract skilled digital professionals. Moreover,

the income and benefits for personnel in state agencies are much lower than those in private organizations and enterprises (Long, 2023).

State agencies' lack of digital human resources has resulted in a shortage of experts capable of performing data analysis, developing IT systems, and managing digital transformation projects. This affects the progress of digital transformation projects and limits innovation and the application of new technologies in state management.

In particular, Vietnam's digital economy, projected to grow significantly to USD 74 billion by 2030, may struggle to meet this goal without resolving the issue of digital human resources. Vietnam must train approximately 150,000 workers annually at the college level or higher by 2030, but currently, only 65,000 are being trained each year, fulfilling less than 50% of the demand (Anh, 2023). Addressing this issue requires close collaboration among state agencies, universities, and enterprises to build an ecosystem for digital human resource training and development that meets the increasing digital transformation requirements in Vietnam's state agencies.

From the perspective of digital transformation human resources in state agencies, the Ministry of Information and Communications, under the Project on Raising Awareness, Training, and Developing Human Resources for Digital Transformation by 2025, aims to train 1,000 digital transformation experts across various sectors, fields, and regions to serve as the core force driving digital transformation nationwide (An, 2023).

Secondly, the challenge of financial resources.

Finance is one of the significant challenges for leaders of state agencies at various levels in managing resources for successful digital transformation. Limited budgets for digital transformation directly affect the feasibility and progress of related projects and programs. Although the Government has approved and supported budgets for digital transformation projects, overall investment still needs to be increased to meet actual needs (Anh & Dong, 2023). Additionally, budget allocation faces specific challenges and delays, resulting in digital transformation projects needing to be adequately and comprehensively funded or implemented. This issue is particularly evident in state agencies at the local level and in rural areas, where a significant gap still exists.

Moreover, budget allocation for digital transformation should be prioritized in specific ministries, sectors, and localities. Many agencies have yet to fully recognize the importance of digital transformation and do not allocate reasonable budgets for these projects, reducing investment efficiency and prolonging the time required for implementation. For instance, Ho Chi Minh City allocated more than VND 1.8 trillion for digital transformation in 2024, accounting for 1.22% of the city's total budget. However, by June 2024, the disbursement rate for digital transformation investment projects was 0% (Tho, 2024).

Additionally, the need for appropriate financial mechanisms for public-private partnerships (PPP) in digital transformation remains a significant barrier. Many digital transformation projects require private sector involvement to mobilize sufficient financial and technological resources. However, current PPP mechanisms must be developed, hindering funding mobilization and impacting long-term, capital-intensive projects. For example, applying AI technologies to develop algorithms requires frequent transactions, and technologies like Big Data and mobile technology generate new financial services, such as investment analysis and mobile transactions. As such, a legal framework for managing high-frequency transactions and ensuring data security also poses challenges (Tam et al., 2022).

Many state agencies need more budgets to invest heavily in modern technology systems,

such as servers, information networks, and advanced data centers. This reality prevents the comprehensive development of technology systems, particularly amid increasing demands for digitalization and online public services. More investment in technological infrastructure has also delayed the implementation of digital transformation projects.

Thirdly, the challenge of technological infrastructure.

Technological infrastructure challenges are among the most significant barriers for leaders in state agencies at all levels in managing and coordinating resources for digital transformation. When technological infrastructure is consistent and well-developed across ministries, sectors, localities, and agencies, it helps provide online public services and exchange information.

According to the Ministry of Information and Communications, potential risks remain with overlapping investments and wasteful duplication between central and local governments in deploying national information systems. Data connectivity, exploitation, and sharing are also limited (Ministry of Information and Communications, 2024).

In localities, mainly rural and remote areas, limitations in telecommunications infrastructure and high-speed internet connectivity have slowed the digital transformation process. Some agencies need more robust server systems or data centers to implement complex technological applications.

Moreover, Vietnam's digital technical service industry is relatively limited compared to regional peers such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Infrastructure weaknesses for digital transformation, including sharing passive infrastructure such as fiber optics and transmission towers, have yet to be established or effectively managed (Tam et al., 2022).

Another challenge related to technological infrastructure is cybersecurity. Building a modern, consistent digital infrastructure requires financial investment and a skilled workforce to manage and operate it. However, the need for more highly qualified and experienced personnel in this field makes it difficult for many agencies and leaders to ensure the safety and security of information systems and data for organizations and citizens.

From the perspective of state agencies, the development of e-government and digital government still needs to improve. Technical infrastructure needs to be completed, and operations need more professionalism, making it insufficiently adaptable to emerging demands. Data connectivity and sharing between state agencies remain limited, and the percentage of online public services with active online records still needs to be higher. Many management activities in state agencies continue to rely on traditional paper-based methods. While Vietnam's e-government ranking has improved, it remains average within the region. Digital transformation outcomes have yet to achieve significant breakthroughs, and issues such as cybersecurity, digital human resource development, and IT funding remain inadequately addressed to promote comprehensive progress (Thanh, 2023).

4. Solutions to enhance the role of the leader in implementing digital transformation in state agencies

First, training and improving human resources' digital skills.

One of the most significant challenges in digital transformation is the need for more digital skills in the workforce. To address this issue, agencies and organizations must develop training programs to enhance the digital competencies of officials, civil servants, and public employees. According to a McKinsey study (2020), investing in training can improve the ability to adopt new

technologies and foster creativity in the workplace. Workshops, courses, and certification programs in technology can help employees gain confidence in using new digital tools and platforms. Investing in staff training boosts productivity and mitigates financial risks caused by skill shortages. Improving employees' digital skills allows organizations to adapt quickly to new technologies and optimize workflows.

Additionally, enhancing leadership and strategic management capabilities in digital transformation is critical for leaders of state agencies at all levels to effectively coordinate and manage resources to meet the demands of advancing digital transformation. Leaders must set clear goals and develop long-term strategies for digital transformation to ensure that action plans align with centralized objectives and the specific conditions of the agencies and localities under their management. They need to develop digital leadership skills, such as data-driven decision-making, digital project management, and effective communication in a digital environment. In other words, leaders must understand new technologies and foster a culture of innovation within their organizations, encouraging subordinates to support and actively implement digital transformation programs.

To achieve this, leaders must actively participate in training and capacity-building programs on digital leadership skills organized by ministries, sectors, or institutions specializing in training public officials. Training and enhancing knowledge of digital technology and management for leaders are crucial. Leaders should be equipped with a solid foundation in digital technology and modern governance, including data management and the application of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, and cloud computing. This enables them to make more accurate decisions and evaluate the effectiveness of technological solutions in the digital transformation processes within their organizations.

Developing a long-term vision and strategy for digital transformation in state agencies is also essential. Leaders must establish a clear digital transformation strategy with specific goals regarding technological infrastructure, human resources, and public services. A detailed plan will facilitate effective resource management and ensure that the transformation steps are implemented systematically.

Second, optimizing and creating financial resources for digital transformation.

Organizations can apply practical solutions to address the financial challenge of digital transformation in Vietnam. It is necessary to seek funding from the Government and international organizations because the Government is encouraging digital transformation through support programs and investment funds (Ministry of Information and Communications, 2024). In addition, planning a detailed budget for each stage of the transition and tracking expenditures will help organizations ensure that financial resources are used reasonably and effectively while quickly assessing the value of the investment. Planning a detailed budget for each phase of digital transformation is essential. According to McKinsey, businesses must clearly define the ROI (return on investment) from technology expenditures to ensure sound financial decisions. At the same time, cost optimization also plays a vital role (Shooter, 2020).

Optimizing costs through adopting digital technology, such as the transition to cloud technology, can help reduce the financial burden on small and medium enterprises in Vietnam. Moreover, creating added value from digital transformation, such as improving work efficiency and enhancing customer service, will help the organization have more financial autonomy. Finally, investing in human

resource training and development enhances employees' skills and ability to adapt to new technologies, thereby helping minimize financial risks. These solutions help organizations in Vietnam overcome financial difficulties and promote the implementation of digital transformation effectively and sustainably.

In addition to the rational use of resources allocated for digital transformation, there should be increased mobilization of financial resources and public-private partnerships (PPP). To solve this problem, leaders need to proactively mobilize resources from various cooperation channels, significantly strengthening public-private partnerships (PPP). This activity helps attract more investment capital and brings advanced technology solutions and management experience from the private sector. Large digital transformation projects such as building data centers, developing shared digital platforms, and deploying telecommunications networks all need the participation of large technology enterprises. Therefore, the leader of agencies and organizations need to create favorable conditions for enterprises to participate in investment by building a clear and transparent cooperation mechanism and having appropriate preferential and supportive policies.

In order to increase the mobilization of financial resources and public-private cooperation, the leader of agencies and organizations at all levels need to participate in organizing investment promotion conferences and inviting domestic and foreign enterprises to participate in the agency's digital transformation projects. At the same time, it is necessary to propose reform of administrative procedures related to investment licensing and budget allocation to facilitate the implementation of technology projects. Using modern financial management tools such as an electronic budget management system will help increase transparency and efficiency in the use of capital. In addition, it is possible to study and refer to the development of innovative financial models, such as technology investment funds or digital transformation bonds, to ensure sufficient financial resources for essential projects.

Third, building and strengthening a secure and integrated information technology (IT) infrastructure.

Developing a secure and comprehensive information technology infrastructure is a prerequisite for effective practical digital transformation activities. State agency leaders must prioritize directing investments in and developing modern IT systems that ensure data interoperability and connectivity among state agencies. Organizations' IT infrastructure must be designed to support activities aligned with the overarching goals of digital government, from providing online public services to managing state information and data effectively and securely.

Leaders must proactively develop long-term strategies to build and prioritize of reinforcing secure and synchronized information technology infrastructure in state agencies. Initially, it is essential to assess the current state of IT infrastructure within their organizations to identify weaknesses and improvement needs. Based on this assessment, a detailed plan should be formulated to upgrade server systems, data centers, and network devices, ensuring these facilities can accommodate the increasing volume of data and meet new technological demands such as cloud computing and big data.

Strengthening IT infrastructure must also prioritize information security. Implementing security measures such as data encryption, multi-factor authentication technologies, and 24/7 cybersecurity monitoring systems ensures state agency data safety. Moreover, integrating international security standards

helps state agencies ensure that their IT infrastructure meets stringent information security requirements.

Additionally, the leader of state agencies must proactively collaborate with major technology companies to leverage resources and advanced technical solutions from the private sector. Public-private partnership (PPP) models in developing technology infrastructure help reduce costs and provide quick access to the latest technologies. For example, leaders must coordinate with large telecommunications companies such as VNPT, Viettel, and specialized units within the Ministry of Information and Communications to develop specific IT infrastructure investment plans for each phase. At the same time, policies related to digital transformation investment should focus on critical areas like major urban centers while ensuring that remote and underserved regions are not neglected and that there is nationwide digital infrastructure coverage. Furthermore, implementing security measures such as data encryption, network security monitoring systems, and multi-factor authentication is essential to protect critical information systems from cyber threats. This requires state agency leaders to be committed to investment and ensure these systems smooth and secure operation.

5. Conclusion

Digital transformation is an inevitable and urgent trend for enhancing state management efficiency, improving public service quality, and fostering digital economic development in Vietnam. Leaders of state agencies must amplify their leadership roles by enhancing strategic management capabilities, investing in secure and integrated IT infrastructure, and mobilizing financial resources from diverse channels, mainly through public-private partnership collaborations. These efforts will address current limitations and challenges in digital transformation and lay a solid foundation for sustainable and comprehensive progress across ministries, sectors, and localities. This will contribute to breakthroughs in state management and improved service quality for citizens and businesses.

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