

Digital transformation of Moroccan cooperatives: A case study of the Oriental region

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Abstract:

Since the 2000s, the widespread adoption of high technology has significantly altered management procedures and professional relations within organizations. The concept of digitalization is becoming increasingly important in the strategies of organizations in various countries such as Morocco. Indeed, they see digital as a means of achieving the goals of the new development model, "Digital Morocco". The present paper aims to address and analyze the challenges and opportunities brought about by digital transformation, in particular, for cooperatives at the national level. Methodologically, we have adopted an exploratory qualitative approach with Moroccan cooperatives. It is found that the major challenges facing Moroccan cooperatives are human capital, financing, and methodological support. Digital transformation can sometimes be a source of anxiety for many cooperative leaders. They must experiment with new ways of working that combine experience sharing, teamwork, strong collaboration with customers, creativity, and innovation. All of these issues are solvable with the help of digital technology if we know how to capitalize on opportunities. Hence, through this work, we would like to focus on the case of cooperatives and answer the following question: what impact does digitization have on management practices from the point of view of cooperative managers or leaders?

Keywords: Digitalization; Moroccan cooperatives; Issues and opportunities..

Classification JEL : G41

Paper type: Empirical Research

1. Introduction

Every organization must search for new management strategies that will allow it to outperform the competition, be effective, and be a leader in its sector. The purpose of the present article is to reveal the different aspects of this new concept, including why organizations choose digital transformation, the impact on business, and the factors that determine the success of an organization. This work will introduce the concept of "digital transformation," which is a new way of working adopted by organizations that are ahead of modern business trends. In addition, this analysis will provide us with a general understanding of the new change in the business world and allow us to study real business cases where the entire value chain has been digitized in the future. The Moroccan cooperative sector, which includes more than 27000 cooperatives, has been affected, like other companies, especially small and medium-sized companies, by the health crisis, particularly in terms of marketing. It is time to start the digital transformation in an increasingly connected world where fierce competition from organizations shakes traditional business models. For traditional systems that have not been impacted by digital culture, this transformation shows an imposed and necessary reality. Based on an outdated model, they have a responsibility to not only initiate the digital transformation process, but also to complete it to continue to operate effectively (Colin et al., 2015). The idea of digital transformation is often mentioned in connection with modern technology and marketing roles. However, digitization affects all aspects of professional activity at all levels of the value chain. This is the case for organizations in the social and solidarity economy, specifically the cooperative sector, which are also convinced of the importance and effectiveness of digital and electronic commerce in this period of crisis. A cooperative can only exist if its members want it to. She would probably have a "congenital malformation" if she were born the other way around. Moreover, to survive in the collaborative sense of the term, Perault, 1981. A cooperative is an economic organization that is owned by its employees, families, or craft firms and respects in its work the so-called cooperative principles (Helmberger and Hoos, 1962)

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has set itself the task of supporting and building the capacities of vulnerable cooperatives to introduce them to digital marketing and online sales. Innovative technology and the factors affecting this transformation are numerous, and digital has its place in all aspects of an organization. These factors include digital culture, the emergence of new professions and roles, and the increase in skills and data (Lemoine, 2014). This change, like any major shift within the organization, can generate fears and indecision that must be overcome. This is not a passing phenomenon because management, strategy, and culture all need to change; indeed, these changes need support and accompaniment, which are essential for their success. In the present paper, which will serve as an analytical and conceptual framework for the idea of digital transformation, we will first briefly discuss some general ideas related to the concept, which are at the origin of this research project. Finally, we will present an empirical study on digitization in cooperatives in Morocco, notably those in the Oriental region, along with difficulties and opportunities connected to the digitization of organizations. This is a large and complex topic that can lead to other topics and has recently sparked academic debate. Considering this, we also describe the basic elements of the digital transformation process. All areas of business operations, including data collecting and in-progress human resource management, are covered by this process, which propels digital transformation. The objective is to investigate this phenomenon to comprehend it better and master the pre-implementation steps required for this change. In addition, what does "digital transformation" mean, why is it being adopted by companies around the world at an increasing rate, and what are the factors that determine its success?

The plan of our research is divided into two distinct sections. The first section is dedicated to establishing a theoretical framework, including the definition and evolution of digital transformation as well as the exposure of its success factors and its impact on organizations, this part also aims to draw up a detailed panorama of digital transformation as a new promising discipline for organizations, especially cooperatives, while highlighting the challenges faced.

On the other hand, the second section focuses on an empirical study aimed at examining the place of digital transformation in Moroccan cooperatives, especially those in the eastern region. This practical approach will allow a thorough understanding of the concrete perspectives of cooperatives involved in taking digital into account in their activities to draw conclusions and suggestions, the objective of which is to affirm the relationship between digital and the sustainability of cooperatives.

Thus, this division into two sections offers a holistic approach, combining in-depth theoretical analysis with an exploratory study of the perceptions of the cooperatives in our sample.

2. The digital transformation of organization: concept and evolution

The term "digital transformation" is a newer concept that is gradually replacing the term "digitalization." Since 2004, the word "digitalization" has been used to describe the most recent technical advancements. Besides these technologies, digital transformation is related to the company as a whole and takes into account not only technological developments but also human capital and strategic factors.

- How to define digital transformation

The Internet and new technologies have had a huge impact on society since the nineteenth century. Today, digital transformation is reshaping our current society. It has become an integral part of every business and every individual, and it continues to grow. Whether companies, employees, or customers, no one is immune (Belleguic et al., 2011). Thus, the definition of the term "digital transformation" according to digital expert Laurent Burr is "the process of implementing as many available digital technologies as possible within their activities to improve the business and achieve company sustainability"

- Evolution of digital transformation

It is worthwhile to mention that the transformation is constantly evolving. There are many technological tools and equipment that are shaping our future, such as the Internet of Things, data collection, the cloud, 3D printing, artificial intelligence, and collaborative bots. The new generations are immersed in the digital world and will not notice the digital revolution; instead, they will have to adapt to get along with others (like today's employees). A company's digital transformation should be based on a thoughtful digital strategy rather than isolated and unsupported efforts. To ensure the success of this organizational transformation, planning is required.

2.1. Factors affecting the success of the digital transformation

2.1.1. Human factor

The human factor is the most important component of change within organizations. The collaborative and effective strategy of digital transformation, which focuses on integrating teamwork tools that unite employees, is one of its assets. Co-creation, or more precisely, cocreation, helps to break down physical boundaries within an organization. As businesses go digital, it is time to support cross-functional management that is less dependent on hierarchical structure.

1.1.2. A new culture has emerged within the organization

The company culture, which is essential to the process, has a significant impact on a company's digital transformation. Some areas of activity require both technical and human adjustments. Strong internal communication will be the key driver for the digital transformation process, and this will happen outside the scope of the first project. Therefore, the participation of human capital is a critical step that affects the entire value chain because all teams must participate in this change.

- Launching initiatives in an organization in the process of digitization

To coordinate their operations, all team members are testing various tools at this stage and want to do so independently of the hierarchy. Employees try to distract themselves from the lack of solutions provided by the company. With new working methods, for requests such as sending large files, teamwork, project management, etc. They may even start using their funds in a professional setting or express themselves occasionally on social media platforms when they are not aware of data security issues. The "Initiatives" phase is characterized by scattered actions that management must coordinate better.

- The Constitution of a competent team requires training, which is essential to the process of acculturation to the digital transformation

Before starting the process of digital transformation, it is essential to have a team that is well versed and, above all, well-trained in this field, with the primary responsibility to explore new ways of using digital tools and take advantage of all opportunities while having the ability to assess its shortcomings. It is also important for this team to do more than just integrate IT to implement sustainable improvements. Certainly, the new team requires training and/or potential hiring, which incurs additional costs, but the success of this new method depends on it. To teach and embed the topic, before moving on to the team-building phase, care must be taken to incorporate a digital culture within the company.

2.2. Cooperation, innovation, and cultural acculturation within the organization

To successfully implement digital transformation, companies need to put their human capital first. It is to their credit that, depending on the organization's level of digital maturity, this difficult and rather time-consuming procedure might result in added value (Gadille and Jaujard, 2015). Collaboration is the stage where tools are used to increase professional competence. Acculturation is the exchange of knowledge and the transfer of ideas in a knowledge society. And finally, the key stage of this change is innovation.

2.2.1. Collaboration

One of the bases of Digital Transformation Strategy (DTS) and the step most collaborators find "convenient" is collaboration. It is about creating new tools or optimizing profit and taking advantage of those already created, and it can be very different: Internal communication tools, such as Slack, make it easier for employees to communicate with each other and with other departments. In addition, the possibility of sharing documents, files, data, and information on current projects, upcoming projects, or events among colleagues via corporate social responsibility (CSR); project management software (such as Wrike or Trello), which can improve day-to-day efficiency; and collaborative Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools, which can improve upcoming events between employees via (CSR).

2.2.2. At the heart of the transformation is digital marketing, or digital strategy

Digital marketing is one of the foundations of the digital revolution. Companies today use

digital channels to market their products. These channels include social media websites, mobile sites, and mobile apps. They also use more sophisticated tools such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) keyword advertising, messaging, and Short Message Service (SMS) advertising. Companies begin by redesigning their website to comply with new standards and make the customer experience easier. They conduct an audit to assess priorities and the current situation

2.2.3. Data is the foundation for digital transformation

By gathering as much information as they can from online interactions, such as websites visited, videos uploaded or posted, written messages, social media, and data, which are the foundation of digital transformation, businesses can access an endless quantity of information about their clients. Data, which also aids in the definition of its business model, supports the process of its digital transformation. Apart from the challenge of digitizing all business functions, which is rather complex but essential, leaders also have to overcome the challenge of collecting data, provided it is not raw but usable. The data readily available today can be collected through a simple transaction, online, or through other means. If the collected data is used effectively, it can lead to the creation of valuable new sources. When the information is wrong, it is useless. For every organization, information can be shared and used on two levels: internally, among all functions, and externally, through interactions with partners and suppliers. Any company with access to data must meet the challenge of creating value.

3. Challenges of Digitizing Organizations in Morocco

Digital transformation is now categorically essential for any company to succeed in its market, and it is a real performance lever. As companies increasingly go digital, this option is no longer available. It is fundamentally changing the way companies operate. It forces companies to constantly reinvent themselves due to the paradigm shift imposed by new technologies. It affects their relationships and interactions within their teams. In addition, the information processing and analysis capabilities offered by this revolution open up a wide range of business opportunities, including the ability to reduce costs, engage customers in new ways, and improve customer service organization effectiveness. Companies are aware of these opportunities and are participating in the digital transformation process (Dudézert, 2018). The latter causes a real change in the organization of work, not only because it makes it possible to account for all organizational processes, but also because it requires that each company create a new balance between employee autonomy and control over the employer.

- Main challenges of digital transformation

In this context of accelerating digital transformation, technological, economic, and social challenges are very well taken into account

3.1. Technical issues

Digital technologies are involved in the transformation of the organization and operating methods within companies by automating processes and evolving project and business practices. The alignment of technologies and their uses with the strategic directions of the company, the mastery of internal and external data sources, the identification of algorithms that make it possible to give meaning to the information collected, and the possession of the skills for coordinated action within the organization appear to be the main success factors in the new digital environment. The issue of information technology governance, which allows the IT organization to support and develop the organization's strategy and objectives, is more important than ever: «The challenge is for digital technologies to help improve value creation

processes while taking into account risk management and technical performance» (Bounfour et al., 2015; Bounfour 2020; Cornforth, 2004).

3.2.Economic issues

Digital technologies continue to underpin new organizational structures and new intermediaries, fundamentally changing economic models inherited from the Industrial Revolution as well as the role of the consumer or user. In addition, the way organizations collect and process massive amounts of data while providing reassurance to the many parties involved in operations can create significant capital that is not adequately valued by the markets. The digitalization of cultural commodities has already had an impact on the media industry, as consumers have decided to publish music and movies by depending on online exchange platforms, while other industries like automotive and healthcare are still in transition.

3.3.Human issues

Today, human activities are increasingly dependent on digital devices. The importance of humanitarian issues must be recognized in this case. One of the prerequisites for achieving a return on investment in the use of digital technology at work is its adoption (Grimand, 2012) by employees, managers, and leaders of the organization. It is vital to pinpoint the elements influencing the distribution of digital resources in a specific environment to build deployment plans with the assistance of all stakeholders in the organization.

- Individual or team skill development

The use of digital technology affects individual and team skills in all organizations. Technical, informational, relational, and metacognitive (TIRM) skills are becoming essential in a digital world.

- Analysis of the evolution of the insurgency

It seems that digital transformation is leading to the creation of new professions, which are often known by their English names: (Chief Data Officer or Data Scientists). The first results indicate that the skills of some of these new occupations fall under a different registry than their predecessors, so all these occupations need to be better identified and qualified (Chaintreuil, 2015). Therefore, the skills required of a Chief Data Officer are less related to IT and have more to do with an in-depth understanding of the digital behaviors of parties and the ability to drive the necessary changes in organizations to meet their expectations.

4. Methodology

The methodology proposed in this study is based on a qualitative approach. This method of analysis encourages the search for complete and rich information. Indeed, the implementation of a qualitative study that allows an in-depth analysis of the phenomena related to digitization and employment and adaptive strategies to deal with them and the collection of information through individual semi-directive interviews have been established.

• Target population

Based on our research objectives, sampling is done to create an experimental group. The sample size is determined by criteria based on objectives related to the target population, the context in which the data is collected, and the time available for the study. Concerning these guidelines, two criteria were identified to support our sample: sample size and study context. How long we can stop depends on the sample size.

The number of cases studied will stop once saturation has occurred (Glaser and Strauss, 2010).

New cases only repeat what was said before in previous cases. The cooperatives studied were selected in a non-arbitrary manner to ensure that the selected case studies met several criteria. As a result, it is necessary to use principals and managers as information sources to gain a better understanding of the logic and relationship between digital and collaborative. This method is recommended by many researchers due to its purpose of collecting information and validating the data collected. Twenty cooperative societies agreed to participate in the survey, and their owners and managers expressed interest in sharing their experiences with us, especially the marketing aspect. To protect the confidentiality of interview subjects, we have given numbers to the various units of analysis. The numbers assigned to the cooperatives and the resulting information are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewed cooperatives

Number	City/Province	Workforce	Area of activity	Profit and Quality	Experience of the interviewee
1	Oujda	10	Arts and crafts	President	2 years
2	Oujda	12	Cosmetic	President	5 years
3	Oujda	10	Confection	President	5 years
4	Oujda	15	Confection	President	5 years
5	Oujda	11	Confection	President	2 years
6	Jerada	20	Organic-Cosmetics	President	4 years
7	Jerada	20	Consumption		3 years
8	Jerada	16	Consumption	President	4 years
9	Jerada	10	Confection	President	8 years
10	Ahfir	12	Argan tree	President	5 years
11	Ahfir	14	Sewing-Embroidery	President	9 years
12	Ahfir	12	Organic-Cosmetics	President	3 years
13	Tafoughalt	17	Textile-Carpets	President	5 years
14	Tafoughalt	20	Textile-Carpets	President	5 years
15	Gafeit	10	Breeding	President	5 years
16	Gafeit	10	Breeding	President	7 years
17	Saidia	13	Argan tree	President	6 years
18	Saidia	15	Sewing-Embroidery	President	10 years
19	Figuig	20	Foodstuffs	President	8 years
20	Figuig	18	Breeding	President	6 years

Source: Author based on survey data.

- **Data collection techniques**

We have used semi-directive interviews with an average run time of 25 minutes for each condition as the method for our investigation. Through open-ended questions, allowed the participants to express themselves freely to obtain as much information as possible. Furthermore, whenever they crossed the topic, we directed them. Likewise, they are asked quick questions that repeat the last words of their answers to ascertain the meaning they want to convey. This interview guide is organized around three lines of research, namely:

- ✓ Perception and maturity of the cooperative in the face of digital transformation;
- ✓ Opportunities offered by the digital transformation of the cooperative;
- ✓ Challenges and prospects.

- **Data processing techniques**

In a qualitative study, data analysis “consists of reducing information to categorize and correlate it before describing, explaining, or constructing it” (Wacheux, 1996). The information collected is formatted, in writing, which represents the raw data of our survey.

The transcription is done manually to accurately identify the interviewees' words. For easier reading and an honest record, he writes down everything the interviewee says word for word, without editing or interpreting the text, and without abbreviations. A thematic content analysis was performed to address all interviews conducted. The combination of vertical analysis (interview by interview) and horizontal analysis (subject by subject) enabled us to highlight a certain number of results. In a qualitative study, data analysis "consists of reducing information to categorize it and put it into a close relationship before describing, explaining, or constructing it" (Wacheux, 1996).

5. Results and discussion

- **Conception and maturity of the cooperative in the face of digital transformation**

With 9 participants stating that they are aware of the existence of this trend, there is no longer a discernible distinction between the various cooperatives regarding the idea of digital transformation. The Moroccan cooperative appears to be fully cognizant of this technological revolution. Despite the classic or somewhat traditional vision of the IT job and the low presence of jobs dedicated to digital jobs. The terms leaders use to talk about information technology rather than digital or new technologies. In addition, nearly a third of cooperative leaders say digital transformation is part of their overall plan. In this context, at the level of implementing projects related to the topic, the interviews made it possible to ensure the diversity of features among the cooperatives that implemented digital transformation projects (10 cooperatives), which led to the creation of a website or a page on social networks, others with ongoing projects (03 cooperatives), and the rest with projects that have not started yet or without digital projects (07 cooperatives). Another very important note is the low usage of e-commerce and e-marketing. Almost 70% of respondents are not in the e-commerce channel. If there are websites, although there are many digital platforms related to e-commerce and dedicated only to Moroccan cooperatives.

- **Digital transformation opportunities**

We have noticed that most of the cooperatives interviewed for this study declare that the benefits of digital transformation are numerous. We cite:

- improvement of the working chain;
- opening up to foreign markets is especially important for the textile sector, crafts, and organic products;
- develop new services;
- optimization of production costs;
- enlargement of the marketing network
- development of employee skills
- inspiration from foreign experiences

We note that the digital transition requires financing, which is difficult for SSE organizations to obtain. It is in this sense that the ODCO has announced the accompaniment of cooperatives who wish to benefit from the financing offers of the Integrated Support and Financing Program for companies "Intilaka". This will allow them to invest in this digital path and increase their efficiency and performance. In addition, we have noticed a certain incompatibility between the values and principles of the solidarity economy and digital technology. As we have just seen, cooperatives are more human-oriented, while the technological culture aims to conquer a market as quickly as possible, while reducing spontaneous human interactions. But we believe that it remains manageable as long as there is no shortage of initiatives to promote and support this promising development.

- **Challenges and issues facing cooperatives regarding their digital transformation**

Our study shows that digital transformation poses several key challenges for the surveyed cooperatives, namely the lack of digital training. The majority of cooperatives (10 participants) believe that support and access to information are the main challenges to be faced and insist on developing new skills. Others believe that financing remains the biggest challenge. In a broader sense, the human factor outweighs the lack of budgetary resources. A human challenge in terms of increasing the skills of internal resources to be able to support this transformation. The second challenge relates to financing this transformation, because it requires searching for new donors. But for cooperatives, it is necessary, first of all, to ensure full support by all structures supporting entrepreneurship. We can also add that a lack of time and resources, but also a concern for confidentiality and a lack of trust, the complexity of the process, and a lack of knowledge of current options are other obstacles to mention, or even fear of failure, especially before embarking on an initiative, for example, « financing a Web-based advertising campaign, platform or website setup costs, etc. »The work brings together, in an exploratory manner, three important dimensions, namely the perceptions of leaders and managers of Moroccan SMEs and the challenges and issues related to digital transformation. Findings regarding the impact of digital transformation on business practices are widely shared through research work. In this context, we cite the work of Dudézert (2018), which confirms, beyond the financial and human challenges, the current debate between those who consider digitization to be a tool in the service of de-employment and those who believe that it is a liberating tool that allows the employee to devote himself more effectively to his task. Our exploratory work combines three important dimensions, namely the perceptions of Moroccan cooperative leaders and the issues and challenges related to digital transformation. Conclusions regarding the impact of digital transformation on cooperative practices are widely shared in the research work. Let's use the work of Dudézert (2018) and Abebaw et al., (2013) in this context, in addition to addressing economic and social problems, sheds light on the ongoing argument between those who think digitization is a tool for unemployment According to Mohamed Jilou, a digital marketing and e-commerce specialist, cooperatives have suffered from the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis, especially during the lockdown marked by the sudden cessation of activity of most operators in the sector. Few cooperatives have managed to withstand this crisis and know how to use it to increase their sales. This includes those who have resorted to e-commerce as a solution to market their products nationwide. (Derkaoui and Rabhi, 2022) have emphasized cooperation between cooperatives: to strengthen the cooperative movement, these entities collaborate via local, national, regional, and international structures. and those who think it is a tool of liberation that enables workers to work more effectively by focusing on their task.

6. Conclusion

Different managers see digitization as a factor in their companies' growth, according to an analysis of the average level of digital maturity. However, there is still little investment in digital technology and the implementation of an effective digital strategy. The main finding of the present study is that businesses' priorities in terms of digital technologies continue to be somewhat basic, constrained, or even biased toward the conventional understanding of how Information Technology (IT) tool's function. Hence, the issue of supporting cooperatives in this sense is identified as a challenge that must be faced to support and encourage them to embark on the initiative by adhering to the digital approach. With this challenge, the

availability of qualified resources and available means or the development of skills in this area is also often an issue. It is therefore essential that the cooperative surround itself with professionals who know its references to be able to accompany them on this useful, even essential, path for its development. The development of sectors dedicated to innovation and the robotization of production and operating processes will allow Moroccan cooperatives to gain a competitive advantage, thus ensuring their sustainability and expansion in virtual markets with high growth potential. Given the importance of these elements, this study led us to identify several recommendations of different nature and importance that can contribute to the acceleration and success of the digital transformation of our companies:

- It is necessary to strengthen the support of Moroccan cooperatives in terms of digital transformation, to subsequently provide them with a legal and financial framework, as well as the development of new sectors intended for innovation and automation of production, or even initial and continuing training in the field of digital technology, the objective of which is to facilitate the marketing of products and especially the mastery of computer tools.
- In terms of education, it is also necessary to think about integrating digital technology and basic knowledge from primary school by mobilizing all the necessary resources to have quality training
- It is concluded that this research is far from finished, given the potential of digital transformation and its effects on cooperative activities. To further our understanding of this phenomenon, efforts should be made to undertake a comprehensive study involving additional
- stakeholders, including employees. For our sample, we believe this research has substantial limitations, and this might be a subject for other studies.

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