

# Does Digitalization Affects Work-Life Flexibility? A Perspective of MNCs in Malaysian Working Environment

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**Abstract:** *MNCs advances in digitalization have changed the way one work and the way they live their lives. The long-term goal of this study is to better understands, organize and restructure each MNCs digitalized knowledge system parallel to their employees' work-life flexibility. This chapter aims to investigate the impact of digitalization and knowledge absorptive capacity and employees' work-life flexibility in MNCs industry. Previous research has primarily relied on organizational science that have explored digital innovation in specific industry and the did not treat work-life flexibility as pre-requisite in order for an employee to achieve wellbeing or performance. Besides that, this study treats digitalization as an example of external disruptive technology that influences knowledge transfer from MNCs subsidiaries to contract manufacturing in a post-Covid environment where it has changed the way instructions, methods, and ideas transferred across these organizations and its effects to employee's work-life flexibility. Previous research fails to fully recognize the unique and distinct characteristics of digitalization and their formative and transformative effects in terms of MNCs operational logics and to achieve work-life flexibility. Therefore, this study is investigating the relationship of digitalized knowledge transfer between MNCs' subsidiaries and contract manufacturers and employee work-life flexibility in the context of learning intent on the effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge transfer among the technical team across organizations.*

**Keywords:** Digitalization, Work-Life Flexibility, Knowledge Absorptive Capacity, Knowledge Management, MNCs, Knowledge Transfer

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## 1. Introduction

Digitalization, as defined by Lindell et al. (2022), refers to the adoption of digital technologies in society and businesses, which leads to changes in how individuals, organizations, and objects connect with one another. While digitization involves converting analog signals to digital, digitalization encompasses the broader sociotechnical processes of adopting and utilizing digital technologies. As Khor and Tan (2022) noted, digitalization remains mainly focused on digital technologies that have become increasingly many and accessible due to substantial investments in technological progress. Consequently, there is a faster commoditization and time-to-market of digital technologies, exemplified by the rapid growth of lightweight applications like Instagram compared to hardware-heavy technologies like the telephone. Some examples of digital technologies include emerging technologies like blockchain and the

Internet of Things (IoT), as well as more established ones like mobile computing, cloud computing, social media, and advanced analytics.

According to Mohamad et al., (2022), there are still a number of unresolved issues surrounding the topic of work-life balance. While work-life balance has traditionally been associated with individuals, particularly women, who are employed in corporate settings and have family obligations, there is a need for more thorough investigation into this area. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in adoption of the information and communication technologies (ICT) in recent years, a phenomenon commonly referred to as digitalization. Although much research has focused on the labor market effects of digitalization, including the number of jobs that may be displaced by new technologies, there has been relatively little attention paid to how digitalization adoption affects employees' work-life flexibility.

It is important for multinational corporations (MNCs) to be able to assess how digitalization affects job satisfaction, as this understanding can help inform their decision-making processes regarding the implementation of new technologies (Mohamad et al., 2022). Furthermore, employees themselves should be aware of the potential effects of digitalization on their job satisfaction, which may be useful in evaluating the consequences of changing work practices. Digitalization has had a transformative impact on nearly every aspect of daily life in recent decades, with increased internet access, social media, mobile phone use, as well as other ICT services changing the way people interact, learn, communicate, and work worldwide (Lindell et al., 2022). In the context of MNCs, the various stages of production and industrial revolution have been linked to changes in the labor market, productivity, demographic trends, and income per capita.

The majority of research has focused on employee performance or well-being, with limited attention given to work-life flexibility in relation to digitalization within multinational corporations (MNCs). The aim of this research is to investigate the influence of digitalization on the work-life flexibility among MNC employees, as their absorptive capacity to adapt to digitalization has not been adequately explored, and there is no conclusive evidence regarding its effect on employee performance. In recent years, work-life balance has become a significant topic due to economic uncertainty, organizational restructuring, and increased competition, leading to higher levels of stress among employees who work long hours under inflexible schedules. Therefore, work-life flexibility is essential for promoting employee well-being even before considering performance outcomes.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **a) Digitalization**

Digitalization refers to the incorporation of digital technology in both business and society, resulting in changes within the connectivity of persons, organizations, as well as objects. Digitization, on the other hand, is the technical procedure of the converting analog indications to digital format. Besides, the adoption and usage of the digital technologies within a broader personal, organizational, plus societal context is commonly denoted as digitalization (Kori & Omar, 2022). Digital technologies are the primary factor driving digitalization, and due to significant investments in technological advancements, numerous digital technologies are available on the market. The commoditization of these technologies and time-to-market has accelerated significantly. For instance, it took around 75 years for telephone technology to reach one hundred million users, while Instagram achieved the same coverage in little more than two years (Farivar & Richardson, 2021). Established digital technologies, as well as

emerging ones like the Internet of Things (IoT) or blockchain, are included in the category of digital technologies.

To better understand the current digital transformation, scholars have distinguished between three stages: digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation. The first two stages are necessary prerequisites for the third and most significant stage of digital transformation. Digitization and digitalization have mainly impacted internal and external documentation processes and have not yet influenced value creation activities (Birtalan, 2021). Digitalization uses information technologies to modify existing business processes and create new opportunities. It focuses not only on cost reduction but also on improving existing business processes and enhancing customer experience. Digital transformation goes beyond digitalization by fundamentally altering business processes, process logic, routines, and capabilities. It involves implementing new digital technologies throughout the entire organization and causing industry disruptions that affect communication with customers, competitors, and suppliers. Innovative digital technologies require new forms of business strategies (Farivar & Richardson, 2021). This information is based on a constructive meta-analysis of several literary works.

### **b) Work-life flexibility**

Achieving a balance between work and personal life has become a popular concern for most people today. Many individuals complain about not having sufficient time or support to handle their work commitments plus personal duties, leading to a frustrating search for work-life balance. This issue affects both men and women and can result in juggling competing demands, leading to stress, tiredness, lower productivity, sickness, and absenteeism (Coban, 2022). Therefore, it is essential for both employees and organizations to comprehend how to utilize flexibility options to improve the balance between work and life, leading to increased productivity, employee satisfaction, and reduced turnover. Employers who value their employees' personal life are likely to have a high rate of successful employees and low turnover. To achieve this, companies need to identify the best ways to support their employees' flexibility and work-life balance, which requires research and innovative approaches (Como et al., 2021). A good work-life balance has benefits that many people may not realize, making it crucial to strike the balance between works plus personal life.

In today's global economy, multinational corporations are increasingly recognizing the importance of the work-life flexibilities in achieving a healthy work-life balance and enhancing job performance (Farivar & Richardson, 2021). By offering employees flexibility in terms of when, where, and how they work, MNCs can improve employee productivity and job satisfaction. However, the relationships between work-life flexibility and reduced work-life conflict are not entirely clear, and further research is needed to determine whether the use of flexible workplace arrangements or the perception of their availability is more important in reducing work-life conflict. While there has been some research on flexibility in terms of when and where employees work, little is known about how these different types of flexibility interact or how cultural differences may influence their effects.

Anwar, (2020) ecological systems theory provides a useful framework for understanding the complex interplay between work and life domains. According to this theory, work and life are separate microsystems that overlap and influence each other, creating what is known as the work-life mesosystem. The boundaries between these microsystems are porous, with characteristics from one domain influencing the other. Work-life conflict is seen as the mechanism that links work and life domains, as employees experience conflict when they

perceive that the demands of their paid work and life roles are incompatible. The degree of conflict depends on the individual's resources and environmental demands.

### **c) Knowledge Absorptive Capacity**

Absorptive capacity, coined by Uddin, (2021), refers to the company's ability to recognize and utilize external information for commercial purposes. It enables organizations to tap into external knowledge and utilize it to their advantage. This capacity is built upon domain-specific understanding, which is the fundamental building block of the individual creativity plus is organized into domain-specific plans or the knowledge structures. Prior knowledge in a particular domain, also known as intra-domain knowledge, is the most critical predictor of the absorptive capacity within that domain. While Uddin (2021) initially proposed absorptive capacity mainly as the mechanism for absorbing various types of knowledges, they later focused on the technological knowledge or solution knowledge.

For example, during the research and development (R&D) phase of an industry, prior understanding from in-houses R&D efforts serves as the primary feedstock for companies' absorptive capacity, as stated by Zaiga et al., (2020). Therefore, absorptive capacity is often measured through R&D spendings, number of the patents, or numbers of scientists, as these indicators reflect a firm's capacity to absorb technical knowledge. However, although innovations centered on new technologies are crucial for firm and industry evolution, research on absorptive capacity mainly has taken the technology-centric opinion. It is important to note that successful innovation can stem from both technology push plus demand pull bases.

There is a growing understanding among scholars that the ability towards absorbing knowledge depends on the type of knowledge being absorbed. As a result, there is a call for a more nuanced approach to the study of absorptive capacity, with greater attention to the specific characteristics of different types of knowledge (Amin et al., 2020). Cazan (2020) has argued that research on absorptive capacity needs to focus more precisely on the type of knowledge being absorbed, and that absorptive capacity is not limited to the domain of technology alone. It is therefore difficult to restrict absorptive capacity to a narrow category of knowledge, such as solution knowledge, particularly in the context of R&D, since this may hinder exploration of how the absorptive capacity functions for other kinds of knowledge and in different contexts (Harteis, 2018). The characteristics of knowledge from diverse domains, including its quality, complexity, and representation, can vary widely, and as such, absorptive capacity may have different antecedents and mechanisms of transmission in different domains.

## **3. Hypothesis Development**

Through a meta-analysis and a comprehensive literature review, a real-world issue has been identified, and a conceptual framework has been proposed to examine the relationship between work-life flexibility, job performance, and job satisfaction. The conceptual framework suggests that the work-life flexibility has a noteworthy impact on job performance and job satisfaction (Farivar & Richardson, 2021). Therefore, identifying the level of work-life flexibility that an employee is experiencing is crucial to achieving good work performance.

Work-life flexibility can be classified into four categories according to Albion's (2005) work-life flexibility model. These categories include flexible activities that are frequently available to employees and allow differences in working times or conditions minus losing salaries, reduced hours with a corresponding reduction in salaries, flexibility of paid and unpaid leave

entitlements related to family, and ad hoc work flexibility that people can access to meet unforeseen circumstances (Gigauri, 2020).

The widespread adoption of information and communication technology in multinational corporations has made it easier for organizations to monitor the professional activities of their employees, leading to a higher degree of centralization. The use of digital devices and data storage enables organizations to monitor their employees more effectively and maintain constant accessibility. Studies have found that firms are increasingly using ICT to track employee time, monitor their IT usage, and evaluate their proficiency (Agache et al., 2021). Managers can also use ICT to track their employees' locations. However, research on the impact of digitalization on work-life flexibility is inconclusive, as some studies suggest that ICT can promote both decentralization and centralization. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether digitalization promotes work-life flexibility in MNCs, as previous research suggests that digitalization can have both positive and negative impacts on work-life flexibility. Based on this information, two hypotheses will be developed.

Hypothesis 1: The impacts of digitalization on the work-life balance of staffs in Malaysian media and content network companies can be both positive and negative. Hypothesis 2: An employee's knowledge-gathering ability has an influence on the flexibility of their work-life balance in Malaysia.

#### **4. Methods**

This study employs a meta-analysis approach using a random-effects model to evaluate the collective effect size of work-life flexibility in multinational corporations and the impact of digitalization on effectiveness outcomes. The study also utilizes a positive deviance approach to identify intervention features that result in the highest rates of engagement and adherence. The research addresses the issue of a gap in the literature by identifying literature on digitalization and evaluating its effectiveness on MNC employees' work-life flexibility in various emerging countries. The literature on the relationships between work-life flexibility and performance is often contradictory, and standard narrative literature review methods are insufficient to study the impact of digitalization on employees' work-life flexibility in several emerging countries. As a result, statistical methods such as meta-analysis are necessary. This approach amalgamates the quantitative results of various individual studies to offer a combined approximation of effect size. Furthermore, the meta-analysis method enables the researchers to determine the strength and direction of relationships while eliminating variance due to statistical artifacts such as sampling and measurement error.

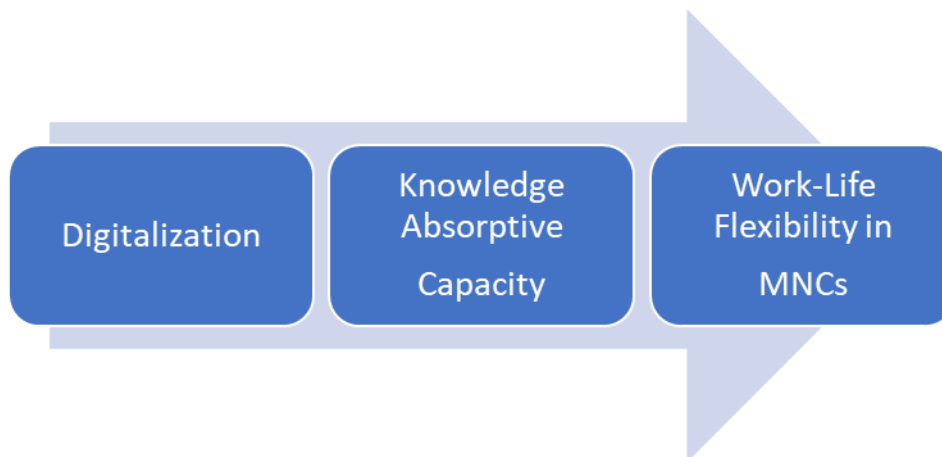
#### **5. Findings**

The objective of this research remains to examine the impact of digitalization on work-life flexibility in multinational corporations, with the mediating effect of knowledge absorptive capacity. While previous studies have made significant contributions in this area, this study aims to identify the most effective aspects that can enhance work-life flexibility among MNC employees and, consequently, contribute to the Malaysian economy (Kori & Omar, 2022). Moreover, the study aims to provide a set of interrelated ideas to enhance work-life flexibility, which can have practical implications and antecedents in three measures. By addressing these important measures, the challenges posed by digitalization and knowledge absorptive capacity in promoting work-life flexibility among MNC employees can be addressed. The issue of work-life flexibility among MNC employees is ongoing and uncertain (Putri & Amran, 2021).

Therefore, by understanding the interrelated measures of work-life flexibility, this study can contribute to the literature and shed light on the association between digitalization, knowledge absorptive capacity, and work-life flexibility among MNC employees.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between human resource development, knowledge absorptive capacity, digitalization, and work-life satisfaction among multinational corporations' employees. This study seeks to contribute to the Resource-Based View theory as well as Dynamic Capabilities theory by exploring how organizations can enhance their competitive edge by managing and effectively utilizing resources and capabilities. To achieve this, we will consider various factors that can improve employees' knowledge absorptive capacity and explore how digitalization can support this capacity, ultimately improving work-life flexibility. This study aims to make significant contributions to the literature on resource-based view and dynamic capabilities by examining multinational corporations' internalization from the perspective of employee work-life flexibility.

### a) Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

## 6. Findings

### a) Digitalization Affects Work-Life Flexibility

The impact of digitalization on organizations has been significant, with one of the most notable changes being the increased accessibility and transparency of information. As a result, organizations have been able to share more information with their employees, including those in lower hierarchical positions. This increased accessibility has had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it has led to increased employee productivity and demands for work both in and out of the office. On the other hand, it has resulted in an intensification of work for around 66% of surveyed employees, leading to a faster pace of work (Farivar & Richardson, 2021). Despite this, the use of information and communication technology has allowed employees to focus on more complex tasks, as secondary and repetitive tasks can now be automated. Digitalization has also led to greater productivity and efficiency and has resulted in rapid and disruptive changes in most companies, which has forced traditional organizations to reconsider their structures, roles, and strategies to achieve their new business goals (Putri & Amran, 2021). As a result, new models of businesses and organizations are emerging, creating new challenges and opportunities for companies in the future.

In order to achieve work-life balance for parents and caregivers, flexible working arrangements are essential, allowing employees to adjust their working patterns through remote working arrangements, flexible schedules, or reduced working hours. However, in Malaysia, this issue has not been a major focus, particularly on gender issues. Studies from Ireland, Spain, and Romania suggest that digitalization can be particularly important for women in achieving work-life flexibility, facilitating their job (re)entry and improving gender equality (Putri & Amran, 2021). For instance, the Irish example from the Revenue Commission shows that the majority of those using flexible working schemes, including work-sharing, flextime, shorter working years, career breaks, and part-time work, are women.

### **b) Knowledge Absorptive Capacity affects Work-Life Flexibility**

The flexibility of an employee's work-life has been impacted by two factors related to their absorptive capacity in multinational corporations. The first factor is internal and relates to the organization's size, strategy, structure, previous knowledge base, plus organizational responsiveness. Besides, the second factor is external and includes prior linked knowledge, which has a significant effect on absorptive capacity, enabling an organization to acknowledge the value of new knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it commercially (Cijan et al., 2019). To encourage employees to enroll in new job roles, organizations must ease the integration of the new knowledge, as employees tend to avoid new tasks when they believe prior knowledge is necessary.

Absorptive capacity is determined by an organization's memory, which is influenced by past experiences. The collective absorptive capacity of all individuals in the organization affects an individual employee's absorptive capacity, but it is not simply an addition of these capacities. Combinative capabilities, which allow the organization to aggregate the different absorptive capacities of its employees, are crucial for its success. Education and academic degrees are also important factors that affect absorptive capacity, especially during the knowledge assimilation phase. Employees with higher levels of education are better equipped to absorb new knowledge in a particular field and are more willing to take on new tasks. The diversity of backgrounds and knowledge also enhances an individual's absorptive capacity, as new knowledge is often related to existing knowledge in the firm, facilitating its assimilation.

Gatekeepers' absorptive capacity plays a crucial role in enhancing the process of organizational learning. The structure of the organization affects the dissemination of absorptive capacity, and a functional structure promotes a high efficiency of absorption but a limited scope and flexibility of absorption. Specialization in a functional structure can create communication barriers between different departments, limiting the movement of knowledge. Thus, the organization's structure should maximize the movement of knowledge through formal and informal networks (Galanti et al., 2023).

## **7. Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study have important theoretical implications, as previous research has shown that job satisfaction has a positive impact on the mental and physical well-being of employees, their quality of life, and society's progress. Uddin, (2021) has suggested that digitalization has a direct impact on employees' job flexibility, allowing them to choose when and where they work. However, some studies have shown that employees feel that the line between work and non-work activities is blurred, and this can have negative consequences for their work-life balance and health.

On the other hand, some researchers have argued that digitalization can increase work-life flexibility by facilitating faster communication and easier access to knowledge (Amin et al., (2020). In this study, we found that digitalization has both positive and negative effects on employees, which is different from previous literature that only focused on well-being. Employees reported that the rapid expansion of digitalization, combined with insufficient knowledge absorptive capacity, can lead to increased monitoring and less worker autonomy.

## **8. Practical and Social Implications**

The findings of this study have significant practical and social implications for MNCs management, as they provide insight into how digitalization impacts employee work processes and how knowledge absorptive capacity can be evaluated to ensure that employees are assigned tasks and roles that align with their abilities. The study suggests that MNCs that understand their employees' knowledge absorptive capacity and adapt their leadership style accordingly, for example, by empowering employees through training and development and career advancement opportunities, can increase employee autonomy and positively impact work-life flexibility. Additionally, it is essential for MNCs to plan significant technological changes carefully as excessive digitalization can result in increased supervision, stress, and negative impacts on employee work-life flexibility. Therefore, it is vital for MNCs to assess and understand the ways in which digitalization impacts various areas of employee work-life flexibility, such as health and safety, and implement practical solutions and policy reforms to mitigate negative impacts.

## **9. Limitation and Recommendations for Future Research**

The research conducted on the impact of digitalization on multinational corporations has some limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, which restricted the ability to perform complex statistical analyses. The study was conducted using a meta-analysis approach. Secondly, accessing employees from different organizations was limited due to strict data sharing policies. Past literature also suggests that the data collected were self-reported, which may introduce bias as respondents' recollection of their feelings may not be accurate. Future studies could compare the effects of digitalization on MNCs in Asia and Western countries. Additionally, research could be conducted on all generations in the workforce, as younger generations are generally more adept at adapting to technological innovations than older ones. Investigation could also focus on how and why digitalization affects different generations in different ways.

## **10. Discussion and Conclusion**

The utilization of digital technologies has a significant impact on the work-life balance of employees in multinational corporations. To enhance the performance of subsidiaries, it is crucial to leverage local expert knowledge and absorptive capacity in developing best practice reports that facilitate knowledge transfer. Explicit knowledge sharing can be facilitated through best practice reports and learning systems, but interdisciplinary teams tend to focus more on tacit knowledge exchange. These teams combine and integrate knowledge that was previously dispersed across functions and subsidiaries. Educating employees across subsidiary boundaries and promoting the use of specific language codes can increase their ability to combine and blend knowledge across the MNC's subsidiaries. By integrating individual community members' knowledge, teams can achieve knowledge insights beyond what individual members could achieve alone.



Team conversations and language-based learning can enhance the development of new knowledge, which in turn increases the subsidiary's absorptive capacity by enabling employees to share knowledge in social interactions. This study focuses on intra-firm knowledge flows within MNC subsidiaries and conceptualizes absorptive capacity as an antecedent factor that influences knowledge flows in both internal and external relations of the MNC. By defining and measuring absorptive capacity in this way, the study provides new insights into the impact of digitalization on MNC employees' work-life flexibility.

Birtalan (2021) emphasizes that the implementation of digital technologies is essential for MNCs to improve their performance, and Putri and Amran (2021) suggest that educating employees across subsidiary boundaries and promoting the use of specific language codes can help interdisciplinary teams to integrate knowledge from different subsidiaries. The study conducted by Cijan et al. (2019) focuses on the concept of absorptive capacity and its influence on intra-firm knowledge flows within MNCs.

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