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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF DIGITAL EDUCATION PROJECTS: THE ROLE OF TEAM COMMUNICATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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Abstract

Digital transformation in education requires more than technological procurement. Educational institutions must manage strategic objectives, stakeholders, risks, resources and organisational change simultaneously. This paper examines strategic management of digital education projects through the combined perspective of team communication and psychological safety. The paper uses a conceptual, literature-based approach and does not report primary empirical findings. It argues that communication should be treated as a strategic management capability because digital projects depend on continuous information exchange between educational, administrative and technical actors. Psychological safety is considered an enabling organisational condition that can strengthen the quality of this exchange. Based on the discussion, a strategic management model is proposed consisting of strategic alignment, stakeholder coordination, psychologically safe communication, risk management, implementation monitoring and continuous learning. The model may provide a basis for future empirical research and for practical management of digital education initiatives.

Keywords

strategic management; digital education projects; psychological safety; team communication; stakeholder management; risk management.

1. Introduction

The expansion of digital technologies has transformed education management. Institutions increasingly implement learning management systems, digital assessment, information systems, online communication tools and data-driven administrative processes. OECD research shows that an effective digital education ecosystem includes technological infrastructure, management systems, digital learning resources, human competences and governance mechanisms. Consequently, digitalisation is a strategic organisational process rather than a narrow IT activity.

Strategic management is particularly important because educational technology projects frequently involve long implementation periods and multiple stakeholders. A project may begin with a clear technical objective but encounter resistance, skill gaps, interoperability problems, budget constraints or unclear ownership during implementation. These challenges require managers to connect strategic goals with operational decisions.

Communication is central to this process. Strategic plans become meaningful only when employees understand priorities, responsibilities and expected outcomes. At the same time, managers need feedback from employees to determine whether strategy is working in practice. Psychological safety is therefore relevant because it may influence whether employees communicate inconvenient information and alternative opinions.

The objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual approach to strategic management of digital education projects that integrates team communication and psychological safety. The paper focuses on management implications and identifies directions for future empirical investigation.

2. Strategic Management Perspective

Strategic management in digital education projects involves setting objectives, analysing the organisational environment, allocating resources, managing stakeholders, monitoring performance and adapting implementation. A useful strategy should answer several questions: What educational problem is the project solving? Which stakeholders will use or be affected by the solution? What resources and competences are required? What risks may prevent adoption? How will success be measured?

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A common weakness is to define the project primarily through technological outputs. For example, installing a platform may be treated as the main objective, while teacher adoption, student usability and institutional processes receive less attention. A strategic approach shifts attention from the technology itself toward the value created by the technology.

This approach also requires alignment between project objectives and institutional strategy. Digital initiatives should contribute to broader goals such as improving access, quality, administrative efficiency, learner support or evidence-based decision-making. Strategic alignment reduces the risk that individual projects become isolated experiments without sustainable institutional value.

3. Team Communication as a Strategic Capability

Communication in digital education projects should not be understood simply as sending information. It is a process of creating shared understanding. Project participants need to understand what has been decided, why it was decided, what remains uncertain and who is responsible for the next action.

Several communication practices can strengthen project governance. Regular coordination meetings can support information exchange; written decision records can reduce ambiguity; stakeholder feedback can identify usability problems; and risk discussions can reveal emerging barriers. Digital collaboration tools can make information accessible, but technology cannot automatically guarantee communication quality.

Strategic managers should therefore design communication architecture at the beginning of the project. This architecture may define communication channels, meeting frequency, reporting responsibilities, escalation procedures and feedback mechanisms. It should also identify which information needs to reach senior management and which information should remain within operational teams.

Communication quality becomes especially important when projects cross organisational boundaries. Teachers, administrators, IT specialists and external providers may use different professional languages. The project manager can reduce this gap by establishing shared terminology, clear responsibilities and structured decision-making processes.

4. Psychological Safety and Strategic Decision-Making

Psychological safety adds a human dimension to strategic management. When employees believe that questioning or reporting problems will lead to humiliation or punishment, managers may receive an overly positive picture of implementation. This creates an information risk: the formal project report may indicate progress while practical difficulties remain hidden.

A psychologically safe environment does not mean that every opinion must be accepted. It means that people can express concerns and alternative interpretations without unnecessary interpersonal threat. Managers can encourage this climate by asking open questions, inviting dissenting views, separating problem analysis from personal blame and responding constructively to reported mistakes.

In digital education projects, this is important because implementation problems often emerge gradually. A teacher may find a platform difficult to use, an administrator may discover duplicated data entry, or a technical specialist may identify a security concern. Early communication provides an opportunity for corrective action. Silence removes that opportunity.

Psychological safety may therefore be positioned within strategic management as an organisational capability supporting information quality. This proposition requires empirical testing, but it provides a useful theoretical bridge between organisational behaviour and project management.

5. Proposed Strategic Management Model

The proposed model consists of six connected elements. The first is strategic alignment, which links the digital project to institutional priorities. The second is stakeholder coordination, which identifies the interests and responsibilities of teachers, administrators, students, technical staff and leadership. The third is psychologically safe communication, which supports open discussion and early reporting. The fourth is integrated risk management, which uses information from stakeholders to identify and respond to risks. The fifth is implementation monitoring, which combines technical and

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organisational indicators. The sixth is continuous learning, through which lessons from implementation are incorporated into future decisions.

The model can be represented as a management cycle: strategic objective → stakeholder planning → communication and participation → risk identification → implementation and monitoring → learning and adaptation. Psychological safety is embedded across the cycle because each stage requires people to communicate information that may be incomplete, uncertain or critical.

The model also reflects the OECD view that digital education ecosystems require coherent governance, human competences and appropriate management of technology and data. Digital tools become more valuable when institutions can coordinate the people and processes around them.

6. Practical Recommendations

Educational institutions implementing digital projects should begin with a clear problem definition rather than a technology-first approach. Project charters should specify expected educational and organisational outcomes. Stakeholder maps should identify groups affected by the project and define their communication needs.

Project leaders should establish structured feedback mechanisms and ensure that reported issues receive a response. A simple distinction between technical failure, process weakness and human adoption difficulty can improve problem diagnosis. Training should be continuous rather than limited to the launch period.

Monitoring systems should include both project-management indicators and human/organisational indicators. Possible indicators include milestone completion, unresolved risks, user participation, response to feedback, adoption levels and stakeholder satisfaction. These indicators can help management detect divergence between planned and actual implementation.

Finally, institutions should conduct post-project reviews. Lessons learned should be documented and used when designing subsequent digital initiatives. This turns individual projects into organisational learning rather than isolated investments.

7. Conclusion

Strategic management of digital education projects requires integration of technological, organisational and human factors. Team communication provides the mechanism for sharing information and coordinating stakeholders, while psychological safety can create conditions in which relevant information is more likely to be communicated openly. The proposed six-element model offers a conceptual structure for connecting these factors with strategic alignment, risk management, monitoring and organisational learning.

The paper does not claim empirical causal relationships. Future studies should test the model using survey, case-study or mixed-method designs across educational institutions. Such research could examine how leadership style, organisational culture, digital competence and fear of negative evaluation interact with psychological safety and communication. The framework can therefore serve as a foundation for further research in the 08.00.13 Management specialty.

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