Digital literacy development to reunite digital divide in the workplace

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Remote and hybrid working conditions have become a reality for many organisations given the evolutionary rise of interconnective and convergent technology such as online meeting tools (MS Teams, Zoom, etc.), which have enabled employees to be anywhere while engaging in immersive and collaborative work with colleagues and clients (Barbosa et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation and working from home (WFH) (e.g., Nagel, 2020). The extent to which organisations enable WFH is mainly driven by organisational technology adoption and the industry in which they operate (e.g., Etheridge et al., 2020; Felstead & Reuschke, 2020). For example, a study on micro and small enterprises (MSE) in Switzerland showed that technological *pioneers*, leading technology adoption, implemented WFH settings to a higher degree than *early adopters* and *laggards* (Neher et al., 2023). The study also found that pioneer MSEs – and, to some extent, early adopters – were predominantly part of tech-savvy industries, such as the Information and Communication industry, which aligns with Etheridge et al.'s (2020) findings in the UK. It can, therefore, be asserted that digitally literate employees are more likely to work in organisations offering WFH and thus have a better chance for remote and hybrid work than their colleagues with lower digital literacy skills.

According to the World Economic Forum (2022), people's digital literacy skills (or lack thereof) will become more crucial for organisations and staff working remotely. Thus, with the fast-paced rise of technology, the digital divide has become deeper. This divide in the workplace has created *digital inequality*, which is defined as the combination of people's *access to* technology, *actual use*, and their *level of digital literacy* (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Findings suggest that a lack of both access and skills has compounded the impact of the digital divide, resulting in both social and employment inequity, as those with access and skills are perceived as more successful employees than people with lower levels of access and digital literacy (Allmann & Blank, 2021). The divide continues to deepen as e-acceptance and e-inclusion cannot keep pace with the rapid advancement of new technologies. Thus, people can be left behind despite attempts to become more digitally savvy, such as engaging in *situational e-inclusion* through social media membership (Yu et al., 2018).

There is a significant level of ambiguity regarding the impact of technology in the workplace for hybrid workers (Berg et al., 2023), with some findings suggesting that technology enhances job quality, while others recognise the adverse outcomes such as work intensification and digital nudging and scheduling, through personal devices, interrupting leisure time and encouraging staff to stay focused on work. Also, if not used appropriately, digital technologies can impair employees' mental health and physical wellbeing, for example, by causing 'techno-stress' (Atanasoff & Venable, 2017; Heide & Simonsson, 2018). Additionally, a de-emphasise of personal interactions at work with reduced knowledge-sharing activities as part of an organisational enculturation process (e.g., a buddy or mentor system) to an automated digital knowledge management system, providing merely facts and task descriptions for remote/hybrid workers to follow, can result in remote workers feeling alienated from their colleagues.

To create an inclusive and equitable digital culture, all levels within an organisation need to embrace digital skills to succeed in the digital age. Digital literacy enables employees to use online applications safely and maintain their privacy in the workplace (Boerman et al., 2018). Digital soft skills include an open attitude towards digital transformation, teamwork, leadership skills, and emotional competencies (Dobrowolska & Knop, 2020). For senior executives, digital literacy and capability is a strategic tool (Scheurer, 2005).

It is acknowledged that capability development through education and training contributes to furthering employee skills for improved performance and enhanced digital business (Freitas et al., 2017; Mohamed, 2022). Certain organisations offer in-house training for employees to develop digital skills. For example, a 'digital academy' provides a range of digital skills training pieces to anyone interested without being strictly tied to the employees' daily jobs (Berges & Kon, 2019). Thus, training helps advance digital skills, implement digital transformation in the workplace, promote collaboration, enhance trust, and contribute to further innovations (Scuotto et al., 2021; Solberg et al., 2020).

Therefore, digital capability building across the organisation, offering individual education and training according to the employees' and executives' digital needs, is key to reducing any digital inequality and divide. It allows laggards, in particular, to build their digital literacy capability and reduces the pressure on employees who need and are willing to develop their digital skills, becoming successful in the digital age.

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