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Career-Path Integration for Digital Transformation in Legacy Firms

Kazunori Kawai,

Nagoya Sangyo University, Japan

Abstract:
Legacy infrastructure firms often struggle to translate digital transformation (DX) training into tangible frontline change because of strong organisational inertia and rigid work practices. This paper presents a qualitative case study of a Japanese energy infrastructure company ("Company A") that moved beyond short-term upskilling by integrating DX-related training with structured career paths and an internal qualification system. Drawing on inductive thematic analysis of open-ended responses from 500 participants in a tiered DX programme and the new "Digital Player" certification, the study identifies a pronounced mindset gap between junior staff and middle managers. Junior employees are enthusiastic about digital tools but often lack a clear understanding of how to apply them to core business processes, whereas managers possess deeper process knowledge yet remain cautious because of perceived risks. The findings show that linking learning outputs to career milestones, formal roles and opportunities for practical application can help bridge this gap. In particular, the Digital Player qualification, combined with a clear career trajectory and field-led quick wins, fosters communities of practice that gradually reduce organisational inertia and encourage more data-driven managerial decision-making. The paper concludes that, in conservative organisations, embedding DX learning into internal career systems and recognition mechanisms is more effective than relying solely on one-off training initiatives, with important implications for HR leaders and managers in legacy firms.

Keywords: Digital transformation; Organisational inertia; Career development; Communities of practice; Strategic human resource management; Case study

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1. Introduction: The Resistance in Legacy Firms

Established legacy firms possess extensive experience grounded in long-standing traditions, and this accumulated expertise has historically functioned as a valuable organisational asset that enables them to lead and support society. In this context, organisational memory—the accumulated knowledge, routines, and operational practices embedded within a firm—plays a crucial role in preserving institutional capabilities and preventing the loss of critical practices caused by organisational attrition. However, when firms rely excessively on replicating past practices embedded in their organisational memory, this asset can become a source of rigidity. Consequently, organisations often fall into a "success trap": they fail to respond to societal change and shifting customer preferences, and ultimately face decline. While the success trap stems from over-reliance on historically successful capabilities (Chen and Lin, 2023; Rhee and Kim, 2015; Wang et al., 2015), legacy firms are also prone to a distinct yet complementary phenomenon known as the "growth trap" (Porter, 1996). Zook and Allen (2008) argue that most large companies eventually fall into a "growth trap": their comprehensive analysis of Fortune 100–size firms shows that the vast majority experience at least one period in which revenue growth stalls, and that only a small minority manage to reignite growth once it has stalled.

This risk is particularly pronounced in infrastructure firms, such as the one examined in this case. Because these companies bear significant social responsibilities as providers of critical infrastructure, they must consistently deliver high levels of quality and precision. Any deviation from established models of success is therefore perceived as risky, and bureaucratic processes tend to be reinforced in the name of reliability. Over time, this reinforces strong organisational inertia, making it difficult for change to take root.

In addition, employees in infrastructure companies are, on average, older than those in many other industries. This reflects both the persistence of craftsmanship-oriented cultures that emphasise tacit knowledge and experience, and an accelerating shortage of younger labour. Kereri and Nyang'au (2024) observe that ageing within the construction workforce is progressing globally, suggesting that this is a shared challenge across countries. As a result, traditional infrastructure firms like the focal organisation in this study tend to exhibit pronounced organisational inertia and limited responsiveness to change.

This inertia becomes particularly problematic when contrasted with the core requirements of digital transformation (DX). While traditional infrastructure firms prioritise operational stability, high precision, zero-risk tolerance, and rigid adherence to established procedures, the domain of DX demands agility, continuous experimentation, cross-functional collaboration, and rapid adaptability. This fundamental misalignment implies that advancing DX in legacy infrastructure firms requires capabilities far beyond basic IT literacy. Specifically, it calls for skills in business architecture to redesign deeply embedded analogue processes, data analytics to transition decision-making from intuition to evidence-based insights, and human-centred design thinking to address frontline user needs and bridge departmental silos.

Many firms, including the one examined here, remain relatively insensitive to the need for DX. Although they are not entirely inactive in this area, their efforts have

often consisted of passive training initiatives in which employees attend lectures and receive information from instructors, without corresponding changes in workplace practices. In short, they "provide training, but the frontline does not change", and the focal firm is a representative example of this pattern. To break through this impasse, establishing career-path integration is essential. Unearthing innovative ideas submerged beneath organisational inertia requires defining new organisational roles and responsibilities, while constructing structured developmental pathways aligned with those roles. By continuously sustaining this career-path integration, legacy firms can systematically dismantle organisational inertia and nurture self-sustaining, creative workplace transformations.

In this paper, we present a case study of a legacy infrastructure firm that is particularly susceptible to the success trap, and we illustrate how it sought to elevate digital learning activities from "temporary initiatives" to "continuous career development". Specifically, we describe how the organisation integrated DX-related training with structured career paths and an internal qualification system, thereby nurturing internal change agents and gradually overcoming entrenched organisational inertia.

2. Theoretical Background

For individual employees, generative AI and AI agents have rapidly become part of everyday life. By contrast, many organisations continue to exhibit strong organisational inertia (Chen and Lin, 2023; Rhee and Kim, 2015; Wang et al., 2015) and are, like the focal firm in this study, reluctant to embrace change. This tension between rapidly evolving technologies and resistant organisational structures is widely observed across firms and sectors.

Tarigan et al. (2025) conducted a systematic literature review of recent digital transformation initiatives in large enterprises and reported that approximately 70 per cent of the projects examined failed to achieve their intended outcomes. Their analysis identified several categories of impediments, with organisational rigidity – including bureaucratic procedures, risk-averse cultures and siloed organisational structures – emerging as a particularly influential barrier to successful transformation. In this paper, we interpret such organisational rigidity as a manifestation of organisational inertia and treat it as a central mechanism that inhibits digital transformation (Etienne Fabian et al., 2024), especially in legacy firms. In environments characterised by strong organisational inertia, employees who seek to reskill and acquire new knowledge must first find ways to break through rigid organisational forms before they can effectively apply what they have learnt (Madu, 2022).

In designing the DX initiative at Company A, we therefore concluded that it was essential to draw on principles of andragogy, that is, self-directed adult learning. However, self-directed adult learning alone is insufficient to overcome entrenched organisational inertia unless supported by structural HR mechanisms that embed learning into long-term career progression, as well as collective social learning within the workplace. In parallel, strategic human resource management (SHRM) research has emphasised the importance of aligning development activities with long-term organisational goals and career trajectories, rather than treating training as a stand-alone intervention (Asiedu and Tenakwah, 2025; Mazumder, 2026; Overton, 2025).

Work on career development and talent management similarly highlights that high-potential employees are more likely to drive change when learning opportunities are explicitly connected to internal career paths and recognition mechanisms (Bimrose et al., 2008; Nyante and Quartey 2026; Saxe-Braithwaite et al. 2009). Specifically, career-path integration moves beyond standard skill-building workshops by embedding learning achievements directly into formal promotion metrics, compensation incentives, and long-term career progression. Without such structural alignment, newly acquired skills remain underutilised due to existing operational routines. In contrast, integrating learning with career advancement transforms digital training from a passive educational task into an active driver of professional growth and organisational change. To operationalise andragogy within the workplace, we turned to the concept of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which offered a useful lens.

Recent work suggests that communities of practice can have a significant impact on contemporary organisational management (da Silva et al., 2026; Nicolini et al., 2022; Wang, 2024). Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common domain of practice and learn with and from one another, growing together through ongoing interaction. Each community engages in autonomous, practice-based activities, rather than relying solely on top-down instruction. Wang (2024) demonstrates that communities of practice can enhance organisational learning motivation and creativity, and that encouraging learning across departmental boundaries can accelerate organisational transformation by fostering boundary crossing.

The central aim of the initiative at Company A was precisely to cultivate such communities of practice. Employees who had acquired digital knowledge and practical project experience were awarded the internal title of Digital Player. This designation fostered a sense of belonging and mutual learning within networks of Digital Players, who took on leadership roles and formed self-organised improvement teams. Through these teams, learning opportunities were created organically across various parts of the organisation.

By clarifying how these communities of practice were used to overcome organisational inertia in a legacy infrastructure firm, this case study aims to provide a practical reference point for other legacy organisations seeking to advance DX. The description of the initiative presented here builds on Kawai (2026), which provides a more detailed account of the programme design and implementation. In this context, the curriculum at Company A was deliberately structured around data-driven process improvement and business architecture, providing a practical foundation that enables Digital Players to make effective use of emerging tools, including generative AI, in core operations.

3. Methodology

One year after the implementation of the DX training programme, an open-ended survey was administered to 500 employees who had participated in the programme. This qualitative survey methodology was adopted as the most suitable approach for this line of inquiry for two primary reasons. First, standard quantitative surveys with predefined scales (e.g., Likert scales) would be insufficient to capture the nuanced,

subjective psychological shifts, perceived operational barriers, and identity transformations experienced by employees. Second, while individual qualitative interviews provide depth, they constrain sample size and limit cross-departmental representation. An open-ended survey combined with inductive thematic analysis provided an optimal balance, enabling the study to collect rich, unconstrained qualitative narratives across a sufficiently large sample to systematically analyze mindset differences between diverse organisational layers and job functions.

To select the respondents, a proportional stratified random sampling approach was employed to divide the total population of approximately 1,500 trainees into four distinct, non-overlapping strata based on two key characteristics: job category (technical vs. administrative) and managerial level (managerial vs. non-managerial positions). Random samples were then drawn from each stratum in proportion to its size in the overall population, resulting in a final sample of 500 respondents. This stratified sampling design ensured that both technical and administrative functions, as well as frontline staff and line managers, were accurately and proportionally represented, thereby capturing a balanced cross-section of organisational perspectives while minimizing sampling bias.

The questionnaire invited respondents to provide free-text comments on the content of the DX training, their perceptions of the newly introduced Digital Player internal certification, and the perceived impact of these initiatives on their daily work and career trajectories. This design made it possible to explore not only participants' evaluations of the training itself but also how they understood its relationship to workplace practice, motivation and future development within the organisation.

The qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. All responses were read repeatedly and segmented into meaningful units. Initial codes were then assigned to salient words and phrases, and similar codes were grouped into categories. Subsequently, relationships between categories were examined and these categories were integrated into higher-order themes. Through this iterative process, several core themes were identified, including the mindset gap between junior employees and middle managers and the shift in motivation and identity among employees certified as Digital Players. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a second researcher independently reviewed a subset of the coded data and discussed discrepancies with the first author until agreement was reached on the coding scheme and thematic structure.

4. The Case: Synchronizing Learning with Career Milestones

The focal organisation in this study (hereafter Company A) is a Japanese infrastructure firm whose core business is the construction and maintenance of social infrastructure, including electricity and energy projects. While the business itself has remained financially stable, long-standing work practices have persisted with little change, and the lack of innovation has become a major concern for the company. In particular, Company A has lagged significantly in terms of digital transformation: not only has progress towards digitalisation been slow, but core systems have become obsolete, business processes remain largely analogue, and even basic initiatives such as paperless workflows have been delayed.

As a first step towards overcoming this situation, the organisation decided to focus on improving employees' IT literacy and reshaping their mindsets. Many employees are older and inherently resistant to change, and management recognised that transforming the thinking of this cohort was essential. In designing the intervention, the company deliberately adopted a dual approach that combined skill enhancement with career path development. Acquiring new skills is undeniably important for employees, but without opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge, motivation quickly declines. To avoid this, Company A chose to link education directly to career paths and promotion opportunities, thereby ensuring that learning would translate into tangible benefits and sustained engagement.

4.1. Design of the Tiered Curriculum

To accommodate the diverse levels of digital readiness among employees and the varying functional demands across departments, Company A recognized that a uniform, one-size-fits-all training program would be ineffective. While achieving organisation-wide digital transformation requires establishing a baseline IT literacy and shared language across all staff, cultivating frontline change agents demand deeper, domain-specific expertise aligned with strategic business goals. To reconcile these dual objectives, the company designed a "tiered curriculum"—a structured, multi-level learning framework that systematically transitions participants from general digital literacy to advanced specialized competencies.

In addition to a company-wide core literacy programme, three specialised tracks were introduced – Business Architect, Data Scientist and Designer – which employees could choose voluntarily according to their interests and career aspirations.

- **Core Course**: All 1,500 employees attended a group-based training course that combined lectures and collaborative work. The aim was to establish a shared foundation of knowledge and a common language for digital transformation across the organisation. To minimise disruption to operations, the core course was offered monthly over a two-year period, allowing employees to select sessions that fitted their work schedules.

- **Specialized Courses**:
    - *Business Architect track*. This track focused on business strategy formulation, IT strategy planning, budget management and leadership. Participants were expected to develop management capabilities and to act as planners for future DX initiatives.
    - *Data Scientist track*. This track provided training in data analysis methods, basic principles of database construction and the use of business intelligence (BI) tools. Participants were expected to serve as internal specialists handling data within the organisation.
    - *Designer track*. This track emphasised understanding human-centred design, learning problem-solving techniques and methods for identifying user needs, as well as the principles of design thinking. Participants were expected to act as coordinators who facilitate alignment and the aggregation of opinions among diverse stakeholders.

4.2. The Role of the "Digital Player" Title

Employees who completed both the core course and one specialised track – including the requirement in the specialised track to deliver a group presentation of a DX proposal to the executive board – and who also met two additional criteria, namely at least five years of tenure and experience in at least two departments, were awarded the internal qualification of Digital Player. These tenure and cross-departmental conditions were introduced because digital support work requires a deep understanding of the company's operations; without such familiarity, it is difficult to provide effective assistance in DX projects.

Digital Players are expected to identify inefficient or high-risk tasks within their respective organisational units and to proactively implement improvements by using ICT and digital tools. As these duties are performed in addition to their primary roles, Digital Players receive a special allowance to recognise this supplementary responsibility.

The Digital Player qualification also functions as an entry-level credential for advanced positions in the technology domain. A new career path and evaluation system was established so that, in the longer term, Digital Players could progress towards management-class roles such as Chief Digital Officer (CDO) or Chief Information Officer (CIO). This formalised trajectory has become a source of motivation, prompting Digital Players to apply their newly acquired knowledge immediately to the improvement of inefficient manual tasks and analogue business processes on the frontline.

For example, in one project a Digital Player acted as team leader and introduced a workflow system to replace an analogue approval process. As a result, the time required to reach decisions was reduced by two business days.

This outcome highlights that the initiative at Company A was not a conventional training programme, but a fully operationalised system of career-path integration. By combining financial incentives (a special allowance), formal title recognition, and clear linkages to executive-level promotion pathways, the organisation aligned individual career ambitions with strategic digital goals, thereby ensuring that training outcomes directly translated into frontline innovation. Beyond these frontline operational improvements, by highlighting DX-related projects in recruitment events and on the company's careers website, the organisation observed an increase in applications from younger candidates. Although multiple factors contribute to recruitment outcomes and it is not possible to attribute the increase solely to the number of projects, the heightened interest from younger job seekers represents a meaningful outcome of the initiative.

5. Key Findings: The Mindset Gap

As a result of the inductive thematic analysis of free-text responses concerning the DX training and the Digital Player scheme, two main themes were identified: a mindset gap between junior employees and middle managers, and a shift in mindset among employees certified as Digital Players.

• **The gap between junior employees and managers.** Junior employees expressed strong interest in digital technologies, whereas managers showed a marked preference for existing processes and were less inclined to recommend digital adoption to others. This pattern appears to reflect the conservative mindset that characterises traditional infrastructure firms, where employees have internalised cautious attitudes towards change and fear the creation of new risks when established procedures are altered.

One junior employee, for example, indicated a strong desire to use digital tools for efficiency improvement but also uncertainty about how such tools could be applied in actual operations, whereas a middle manager emphasised that altering established procedures could generate new risks and therefore required caution.

• **The application barrier.** At the same time, managers demonstrated a deeper understanding than junior staff of how digital technologies should be applied to business processes. The managerial cohort was better able to articulate where and how digital tools could be integrated into operations. Junior employees, by contrast, voiced a strong desire to "use digital tools" and "increase efficiency", but provided relatively few clear ideas regarding practical application. This suggests that the success of DX depends on how effectively managers are engaged and how collaboration between managers and junior staff is facilitated; an organisational perspective on aligning these groups is therefore essential.

Interviews with employees who had been certified as Digital Players also revealed a notable transformation in mindset that went beyond mere skill acquisition. Digital Players articulated aspirations such as "improving the reputation of the entire energy sector" and "delivering added value to customers", indicating a heightened sense of contribution and a broader, externally oriented vision of their role.

6. Practical Implications for Managers

Based on this case, several practical implications emerge for managers and HR leaders seeking to implement DX in traditional organisations.

1. Linking learning with organisational goals.

It is not sufficient simply to offer training and issue certificates of completion. Learning activities must be synchronised with career paths in ways that generate tangible benefits, such as increased opportunities to be assigned to strategic projects or positive weighting in promotion decisions. While IT firms and start-ups with many young employees often possess both the mindset and speed required to translate digital skills into business outcomes, traditional enterprises tend to suffer from strong operational rigidity. For such firms, alignment between learning and career progression is indispensable. Achieving this, however, requires training programmes designed with the following points in mind. a. Ensuring visible learning outputs. Participants should be required to produce clear outputs from their learning. In Company A, every training module included opportunities for participants to make presentations and receive feedback from executives. This provided a structured occasion to reflect on how the acquired knowledge could be applied to the business, to develop proposals based on what they had learnt, and to revise those proposals in light of managerial feedback. Embedding such cycles of output and reflection within

training is essential. b. Linking training to operational objectives. Training must be recognised as an integral part of work rather than a peripheral activity. Organisations should create multiple opportunities for trainees to apply what they have learnt and to see visible improvements in their own areas. Experiencing the achievement of concrete, quantifiable goals – for example, measurable efficiency gains – reinforces motivation and promotes continuous learning. To strengthen this effect, Company A introduced the Digital Player title, which clarified roles and responsibilities. Without such a designation, even employees who complete specialised training often return to their previous routines without recognition from the workplace. By establishing internal qualifications and titles, the company made Digital Players visible across the organisation, created opportunities for them to engage in DX-related tasks, and encouraged line managers to understand and support their efforts.

2. Avoiding managers as "gatekeepers".

Managers should not be expected to master the technical details of digital technologies. Instead, they should be helped to understand the managerial benefits of digitalisation, such as reduced workload and faster decision-making, and to recognise the strategic value of DX. Their primary role is to act as mentors who support the innovative efforts of junior staff. Because managers bear heavy responsibilities in the field, it is often unrealistic to ask them to devote substantial time to learning new technologies. Rather, organisations should position them as leaders who continue to focus on frontline operations while providing younger employees with opportunities to experiment and grow. In Company A, this aspect was explicitly incorporated into performance appraisal as a positive factor. At the same time, not all managers are equally suited to this role. Managers who are solely focused on short-term KPIs at the field level may have limited awareness of organisation-wide DX and show little interest in such initiatives. Consequently, it is important to select managers who can champion these activities and to monitor their progress on an ongoing basis.

3. Promoting field-led "quick wins".

Instead of waiting for large-scale transformation, organisations should gradually shift their culture by sharing small, field-level improvements initiated by Digital Players. Demonstrating even modest results helps employees and managers to see that "it is worth the effort", thereby making it easier to progress to subsequent steps. DX is often conceived as a company-wide initiative, but starting with relatively simple improvements – such as streamlining local workflows or reducing communication errors – can be highly effective. It is equally important to establish mechanisms that properly recognise and reward these quick wins; without appropriate evaluation and reinforcement, momentum is easily lost.

4. Designing mechanisms that apply across firm sizes.

Although this case concerns a large infrastructure company, the emphasis on small-scale, field-led successes means that the approach is not limited to large firms. The central idea is to position Digital Players at the heart of organisational change. Even in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the direction of the initiative and the specific measures can be adapted to fit local conditions, thereby enabling firms of various sizes to foster internal change agents and promote their own transformation. Prior research on SMEs has similarly shown that resource-constrained firms can initiate meaningful change by fostering small communities of practice and accumulating “small wins” that demonstrate the value of new practices in a concrete,

low-risk manner. Such findings suggest that the mechanisms observed in Company A are not limited to large organisations, but can be adapted to fit the conditions of smaller firms.

7. Conclusion

Company A had previously relied on one-way training programmes, in which knowledge was delivered but rarely translated into change on the frontline. By introducing the Digital Player qualification, the company achieved a substantial improvement in both employee motivation and the speed of operational enhancements. The presence of recognised internal digital experts also stimulated senior managers; over time, older managers began to make decisions based on data rather than solely on intuition and past experience.

There is no doubt that upskilling—encouraging individual employees to learn digital technologies and acquire new skills—is important. However, this case demonstrates that the decisive factors for the success of digital initiatives lie in organisational culture and managerial mindsets. Leveraging internal systems such as career paths and in-house qualifications to embed insights from training into everyday work practices represents a meaningful approach to achieving digital transformation in conservative organisations.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that legacy firms cannot rely solely on standard upskilling or isolated training seminars to overcome organisational inertia. True digital transformation requires comprehensive career-path integration—a framework that directly links skill acquisition to specific organisational positions, granting employees defined roles, authority, and operational responsibilities.

The underlying principles of this approach are not limited to Japan. They have broader relevance for legacy enterprises worldwide. We therefore hope that this case will serve as a useful reference for practitioners seeking to advance digital transformation in long-established firms in different national and sectoral contexts.

This study is based on a single case in Japan's energy infrastructure sector and relies primarily on qualitative data from one organisation. Future research could examine similar initiatives in other industries and countries, incorporate longitudinal quantitative indicators (e.g. productivity, turnover, project success rates), and compare different designs of internal qualification and career path systems. Such work would help to refine the conditions under which the mechanisms identified here are most effective.

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