

Absorbing Continuous Change: Middle Managers' Lived Experience of Digital Transformation and AI in the Romanian Market

Daniela-Aida IONESCU¹

Abstract

Digital transformation, accelerated by the rapid use of artificial intelligence, made change a constant condition of organisational life. While research increasingly recognises middle managers as critical actors in transformation, limited attention has been paid to how they experience and enact their role under conditions of ongoing, overlapping change. This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experience of middle managers navigating digital transformation and AI in private-sector organisations in Romania. Based on 18 semi-structured interviews, the study uses an inductive thematic approach to capture how MMs interpret, manage and sustain transformation while maintaining business-as-usual delivery. The findings identify six themes: sustained overload and competing demands; sensemaking and sensegiving as everyday managerial work; change management practised largely through learn-by-doing; DT and AI experienced as cumulative layers of work rather than time-limited programmes; enablement constraints shaped by top management, organisational culture and HR; and coping, motivation and learning strategies developed at the individual level. The results show that transformation outcomes depend on the micro-practices through which MMs translate strategy into workable action under pressure and ambiguity.

Keywords: middle managers, digital transformation, organisational change, change management, managerial work, sensemaking and sensegiving, artificial intelligence

JEL Classification: M10, M12, O33

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation (DT) is becoming a normal condition of organisational life, yet many initiatives still struggle to deliver sustainable change. At the same time, the rhythm of transformation is shifting and change becomes harder to finish since systems and operating models need constant renewal (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020; Hanelt et al., 2021).

In this context, the paper focuses on middle managers (MMs), organisational actors that sit between strategic direction and operational delivery. They play a significant part in translating the work and actual implementation of any

¹ Daniela-Aida Ionescu, SNSPA Bucharest, Romania, e-mail: aida.ionescu.23@drd.snspa.ro, ORCID no. 0009-0007-7016-9775

transformation (Wooldridge et al., 2008; Christodoulou et al., 2022; Porck & Van Knippenberg, 2023). Research sees MMs as important actors in change and DT, yet there is still limited understanding of how they experience and enact their role under conditions of overlapping transformation, even more now, that AI is adding another layer of acceleration. This paper addresses this gap by examining what is the role of MMs is in the context of DT and what their lived experience is: what managers actually do, how they sustain delivery while driving change and what enables or constrains their agency.

The study is based on 18 semi-structured interviews with MMs working in private-sector organisations in Romania, conducted between October and December 2025. The analysis follows an inductive thematic approach to identify recurring patterns across diverse organisational contexts and levels of digital maturity.

2. Literature review

MMs are typically the largest managerial group in organisations and play a key role in implementing strategy (Lucas & Goh, 2009). In this paper, MMs are defined using a broad and practitioner-friendly definition that reflects the diversity of contemporary organisational roles: “the person who manages individuals both below and above them within the structure of a company” (Schaninger et al., 2023, p. 27). The importance of MMs is widely recognised due to their position between strategy and execution (Wooldridge et al., 2008). However, their role continues to be debated. A widely used framework is Floyd and Wooldridge’s (1992) role matrix, which differentiates roles along two dimensions: cognitive (divergent versus convergent thinking) and behavioural (upward versus downward influence). Among these, the implementer role remains particularly applicable, as MMs align employees’ activities with strategic objectives. Later research expanded this perspective by highlighting the relational and emotional dimensions of managerial work. Emotional balancing theory shows that MMs play a critical role in managing team emotions during periods of radical change, which can influence transformation outcomes (Huy, 2002). Agency theory applied to middle management further demonstrated that role enactment depends heavily on enabling conditions: top management clarity, resource allocation, inclusion, trust and support for innovation (Mantere, 2008). Sensemaking research revealed that MMs’ sensemaking - defined as a process through which managers construct meaning about changing organisational realities - and sensegiving - defined as the process shaping how change is communicated and understood across the organisation - impact how employees interpret and respond to change and can positively influence the introduction of digital innovation (Rouleau & Balogun, 2007; Funke et al., 2023). Therefore, the traditional role matrix needs to evolve to reflect that change is continuous and the human side of transformation is increasingly complex (Ionescu, 2025; Salanță et al., 2025).

The pressures associated with MM’s role are not new. Goldstein (2012) and Cappelli (2020a) connect the intensification of managerial work back to the 1980s, when global competition and deregulation led to delayering and organisational

flattening and expanded managerial workloads. Empirical research confirms that restructuring increases pressure, role intensity and emotional demands on MMs (Thomas & Linstead, 2002; McCann et al., 2008). Huy's (2002) longitudinal field study further highlighted the emotional commitment required from MMs during radical change, showing that their ability to manage team emotions contributes to the capacity to sustain continuous change. Longitudinal research shows that new technologies often bring promises of efficiency for MMs, but increase coordination demands and managerial complexity (Morris & Hassard, 2021; Koponen, 2023; Van Doorn, 2023; Ferraro et al., 2024). Recent research positions MMs as complementary change agents alongside top management. Top management contributes legitimacy and strategic direction, while MMs facilitate coordination, reduce ambiguity and address operational tensions during implementation (Christodoulou et al., 2022; Funke et al., 2023; Porck & Van Knippenberg, 2023; Kringelum et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2024).

On the other hand, the literature on DT - understood in this paper as “an actor-driven organisational transformation triggered by the adoption of technology-driven digital disruption” (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2021, p. 240) - broadly agrees that organisations must develop adaptive capabilities in order to sustain continuous change. Dynamic capabilities, organisational ambidexterity and learning organisations are frequently mentioned as key enablers of transformation (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020; Hanelt et al., 2021). Research also highlights that DT requires ongoing alignment between digital processes and employee skills, as transformation reshapes organisational practices and capability requirements (Rîndaşu et al., 2023). Recently, AI intensified these pressures by increasing expectations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). However, these concepts are often discussed at an organisational level and provide limited guidance for MMs managing transformation. Recent work positions resilience as a capability supporting continuous transformation, relying on anticipatory and adaptive capacities under conditions of uncertainty (Coiciu, 2026). Similarly, empowerment and change readiness are widely emphasised in theory, yet the conditions under which MMs are genuinely empowered remain underexplored (Ullrich et al., 2023). While frameworks such as Kotter's change model (2012) offer structured approaches to transformation, they are not understood through the lived experiences of MMs.

In practice, transformation often unfolds as a complex and continuous process. Research indicates that many transformation initiatives struggle to achieve their intended outcomes, often due to the fact that employees may not fully understand transformation initiatives or how they relate to their everyday work, while strategic guidance is sometimes perceived as abstract or distant from operational realities (Der Schaft et al., 2022; Klein, 2022; Marienfeldt et al., 2024). These limitations are even more obvious in contexts with low digital maturity and organisational readiness, like evidence from Romania shows that enterprise AI adoption remains significantly below the European Union average, while organisational readiness is constrained by gaps in digital skills, managerial literacy and internal processes (Vidu et al., 2022; Shuleski, 2026). These dynamics highlight

the importance of understanding how transformation is experienced and enacted by different organisational actors, particularly by MMs, who translate strategy into everyday practice. Through an inductive approach, this study addresses these gaps by examining how MMs interpret and navigate DT and AI in their everyday work.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study adopted a qualitative, inductive approach to explore how MMs experience and enact their role in the context of ongoing DT. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to follow participants' narratives. An inductive logic guided the research process. Concepts and themes were not imposed from previously analysed theoretical frameworks, emerging from the data.

3.2 Sample and context

The study is based on 18 MMs working mostly in medium- to large-sized organisations, many being either digital natives or incumbents undergoing DT in Romania. Since the digital maturity frameworks presented in academia are inconsistent and complex (Teichert, 2019), the companies' digital maturity was assessed using the Boston Consulting Group model (2022), which divides companies between hyperscalers, digital natives, digital incumbents and legacy organisations. The existing sample does not include tech giants but has at least 5 MMs from each of the other categories, detailed in Table 1. In terms of organisational culture, participants were explicitly asked to evaluate the dominant culture, using the Cameron & Quinn model (2011). Participants were recruited through the researcher's professional network and through referrals.

Participants' characteristics

Table 1

Dimension	Categories	Approximate distribution
Industry	Energy, Banking, Tech, Logistics, Retail, Online platforms (marketplaces, deliveries), Other (advertising, recycling)	No dominant sector, 13 companies in total.
Organisation size (global)	<5,000 / 5,000–50,000 / >50,000	Mostly medium to large
Type of organisation	Digital native / Digital incumbent / Legacy	All three represented evenly
Transformation status	Ongoing / Limited / None	Majority ongoing

Dimension	Categories	Approximate distribution
Organisational culture	Hierarchy / Market / Clan / Adhocracy	Hierarchy & Market dominant
Reporting structure	Local / Global / Matrix	Strong global exposure
Access to strategy	Full / Partial / Limited	Mostly partial
AI adoption (individual)	Low / Moderate / High	Mostly moderate
AI adoption (organisation)	Experimental / Selective / Strategic	Mostly experimental and selective

Participants were 33-52 years old (average 42), working across fields such as technology, communication, business, marketing and economics. They were experienced professionals, averaging 19 years of organisational tenure and 13 years of people management. Most managed teams while interacting with senior leadership in complex, often cross-functional environments within large organisations. The context of Romania, part of the CEE region, provides a relevant empirical setting due to the intensity of organisational change experienced in recent years. Rather than being treated as a geographic limitation, this context offers analytical value for understanding middle management work under conditions of a secondary emerging market, extremely attractive for foreign investors (FTSE Russell, 2020; Ipsmiller & Dikova, 2021).

3.3 Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom between October and December 2025. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were conducted in Romanian to facilitate openness and depth of expression. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and fully transcribed. Participants were informed that their contributions would be anonymised for research purposes. While allowing flexibility, the interview guide covered four areas: (1) background and role context, (2) the strategic role of MMs in DT, (3) the impact of AI and digital technologies on managerial work and (4) organisational support, motivation and future reflections. Quotations were translated into English through careful word-by-word translation to keep participants' meaning and expression (Cunliffe, 2001).

3.4 Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2008). The process began with familiarisation through repeated reading of the transcripts and initial analytical observations, followed by open-ended coding. Codes were compared and grouped

based on similarities, leading to the development of themes around recurring patterns in participants' experiences. Themes were reviewed and refined through iterative engagement with the data to ensure coherence and clear differentiation. Elements of the Gioia approach were in differentiating between first-order, participant-centred insights and higher-level thematic interpretations. The findings are presented as an interpretative narrative supported by representative quotations.

4. Findings

The findings reveal six interconnected themes describing how MMs navigate DT while experiencing pressure, ambiguity and organisational enablement.

Theme 1: Overload and competing demands

Participants consistently described their role under sustained pressure, fragmented priorities and limited time to recover. Overload comes from the combination of business-as-usual responsibilities, transformation initiatives and organisational constraints such as centralisation, long decision flows and ambiguous KPIs. They also described repeated blockages, rework and negotiations that consumed both cognitive and emotional energy. Overall, change was referred to as a continuous state of organisational life, not just one-off.

“While you do the usual work, you cannot put things on pause and manage the change.” (MM-05)

“You need to climb three mountains at the same time, and this will not disappear any time soon.” (MM-10)

“Things change very fast and a lot lately, and changes overlap: systems, teams, ways of working.” (MM-18)

Theme 2: Sensemaking and sensegiving as everyday managerial work

Participants did not describe sensemaking and sensegiving as explicit everyday work required to interpret change and make it understandable for their teams. They emphasised the need to first understand how change affects their own work before they can explain it to others. Communication was described as filtered and adapted and managers saw this filtering as a way to protect teams from unnecessary stress and to maintain motivation during periods of overlapping change, while positioning themselves as responsible not only for transmitting information, but also for managing the emotions created by change within their teams.

“We need to understand the process, especially for our teams.” (MM-7)

“I pass everything through my filters. I want to offer transparency in a context that shows the full part of the glass.” (MM-14)

Theme 3: Practicing change management through experience

Participants described change management as a central element of their role, but one developed mainly through experience rather than formal training or structured frameworks. Managers relied heavily on relational practices such as listening, empathy, building informal coalitions and translating strategic objectives into

operational goals. Resistance was generally framed as a natural reaction rather than opposition. Participants suggested that tenure sometimes influenced resistance, particularly among employees approaching retirement or preferring predictable routines. For participants, change management appeared less as a formal competence and more as an improvised relational practice embedded in everyday managerial work.

“I realised I am needed to help my teams manage the changes.” (MM-01)

“Through the nature of my job I became more aware of my tendency to stay in my comfort zone.” (MM-10)

“Change management is an extremely delicate thing because humans oppose change by default.” (MM-11)

“People need somebody to take care of them and guide them through change.” (MM-15)

Theme 4: Digital transformation and AI as ongoing work

Participants associated DT with efficiency, cost reduction, simplification and customer orientation rather than technology adoption itself and emphasised outcomes such as reducing bureaucracy, eliminating waste, streamlining processes and enabling faster decision-making. While AI was expected to improve efficiency, participants noted that organisational processes are not yet ready for large-scale deployment and for now AI brings more pressure, than value. Taken together, their answers showed an ambivalent yet open positioning toward technology, a combination of awareness of costs and limits, as well as curiosity and commitment to making transformation work.

“You cannot afford not to automate.” (MM-18)

“A pilot is not the same as the real environment.” (MM-8)

“It is very important to understand that transformation doesn’t mean money; it means behaviours.” (MM-6)

Theme 5: Organisational enablement and leadership context

Participants consistently emphasised the influence of top management behaviour and organisational culture on their ability to lead transformation. They did not question the legitimacy of strategic change, but shared frustration about how it was communicated and supported. When leaders showed consistency between strategic messages and everyday behaviour, MMs talked about engagement and ease of implementation. Participants also highlighted the role of HR and peer relationships. HR support was described as uneven - either very administrative, either very supportive, depending on individual professionals rather than by how the system are designed. At the same time, relationships with direct managers and peers functioned as informal support networks where challenges and frustrations could be shared.

“With the operational reality, those very pragmatic things will eat up the strategy.” (MM-8)

“I can go to my manager, acknowledge my limits and minuses, and I trust that I can do this without future consequences.” (MM-2)

Theme 6: Support, motivation and coping

Managers described developing individual coping mechanisms to keep motivation and effectiveness under continuous change. Learning appeared as a very important source of motivation, many participants being self-driven and actively pursuing training or certifications. Participants also highlighted conflict management and emotional regulation as particularly challenging aspects of their role. Motivation was often said to come from meaning of work and leading people. At the same time, many managers initially described their work using language associated with endurance and perseverance.

“I want to leave something behind me and this is my biggest motivation.” (MM-14)

“Every time I get this question, ‘Aren’t you afraid they will take your place?’ I say I would be super happy; this means I was a good teacher.” (MM-16)

Overall, the findings show MMs as organisational actors working under sustained pressure, ambiguity and competing demands. Their work looks more like an ongoing process of sensemaking, emotional balancing and pragmatic coordination. As translators between strategy and operations, MMs make transformation workable for their teams while navigating their own uncertainty. DT and AI appear as additional layers of work, yet participants remain broadly open to learning and experimentation.

5. Discussion and limitations

The findings confirm previous research that positions middle management as a structurally intermediary layer and as a consequence, key actor in organisational transformation. In line with existing empirical evidence from Funke et al. (2023), MMs’ sensemaking, sensegiving and issue-selling activities appear closely related to the introduction and stabilisation of innovation and digital initiatives. However, these practices were described as a sequence in which they first make sense of change for themselves and only then create a version of reality that can be shared with their teams (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

From a capability perspective, the findings indicate that MMs rely heavily on experiential learning and expertise accumulated over time, showcasing a role that is built systematically, through constant exposure to pressure, experience and learning on job, reflecting the broader discussions in DT literature regarding the growing importance of capability development and skills adequacy in sustaining organisational transformation processes (Helfat & Martin, 2014; Rîndaşu et al., 2023). As Preda and Stan (2023) argue, there is an increasing “gap between an organisation’s natural capacity to adapt and the unsustainable speed of change” (p. 121). MMs perform emotional labour by managing their own reactions while

simultaneously shaping the emotional state of their teams and they engage in emotional balancing to ensure stability while enabling change (Huy, 2002). These findings also point toward broader organisational readiness challenges associated with DT and AI adoption. Romanian evidence suggests that organisational readiness remains limited by insufficient managerial digital literacy and underdeveloped internal processes (Shuleski, 2026), increasing the adaptive and coordination burden of MMs.

Nevertheless, while hands-on competence was high, the study reveals a persistent absence of structured organisational investment in developing change leadership, digital literacy and strategic capabilities. Planning, consistent communication of shared goals and alignment of KPIs were not systematically supported, despite the fact that they are highlighted in the literature as critical enablers of transformation (Kotter, 2012; Funke et al., 2023; Marienfeldt et al., 2024).

Importantly, the findings reveal in general a positive and underemphasised aspect: a strong lifelong-learner mindset, aligned with the capabilities required in fast-evolving organisational environments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). In this sense, MMs appear not only depleted by continuous change, but also uniquely positioned to navigate it if provided with the right organisational support.

The findings challenge assumptions about the association of middle management with resistance in transformation. Resistance appeared more from lack of readiness and support, which can make MMs feel that their roles and identities are threatened (Buick et al., 2017; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). This aligns with Ford and Ford's view of resistance as feedback rather than limitation (Ford & Ford, 2009) and that attitudes toward DT are shaped less by resistance itself and more by unmet needs, feasibility concerns and organisational enablement (Ionescu, 2024).

At the same time, the findings clarify how participation functions during transformation. Co-creation and involvement were described as energising. On the other hand, participants shared that large-scale or radical change need clear top-down direction. This aligns with recent evidence indicating that top-down decisions tend to be more effective in complex transformation contexts, while bottom-up initiatives often deliver incremental improvements (Marienfeldt et al., 2024). This suggests that participation is most effective when combined with clear direction, credible leadership and managerial layers complement one another.

Top management behaviour, organisational culture and HR practices emerged as key contextual forces shaping MM agency. Leadership narratives lost credibility if perceived as disconnected from operational realities. The opposite was also visible: clarity, contextualisation, early and continuous involvement and leadership-by-example - particularly around learning and AI adoption - increased commitment and credibility. HR appeared as extremely ambivalent: procedural and compliance-orientated in some contexts or a strong transformation partner when competent individuals were involved. This shows that HR might be an underdeveloped actor in transformation.

The findings extend research on MMs behaviour under DT by showing what these shifts look like in everyday practice through emotional and cognitive efforts. While prior research already recognises DT as ongoing rather than episodic, the contribution here comes from making visible the concrete efforts of MMs.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretive design and prioritises depth over statistical generalisation. The sample consists of 18 MMs, which allows for rich exploration of lived experiences but limits extrapolation. Most respondents come from large and very large organisations, where structures, resources and transformation dynamics might be different from those in small or medium-sized enterprises. Second, the study did not explicitly take into consideration factors such as regulation or organisational lifecycle stages. Third, the study focuses on the lived experiences of MMs, examining how they interpret and manage ongoing transformation rather than assessing measurable transformation outcomes. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal studies, industry-specific comparisons or other approaches that link micro-level managerial practices to outcomes such as implementation quality, adoption or effectiveness.

6. Conclusions and future research avenues

This study opens several avenues for future research, relevant for both scholars and practitioners. The findings show the need for more systematic investigation of MMs' change management capabilities and change readiness and how they are put into practice in conditions of continuous and simultaneous change. Future research could examine how capabilities such as planning, stakeholder alignment, emotional balancing, conflict management and sensegiving evolve over time.

Participants also emphasised the interdependencies they navigate with peers and transversal teams, each involved in common or separate transformation changes and department goals, as well as the need for constant resource negotiation, which indicates the value of further research on MMs' boundary-spanning roles and influence across organisational setups. Building on recent work on intergroup effectiveness in team-based organisations of Porck & Van Knippenberg (2023), future studies could explore how lateral influence, issue-selling, negotiation capabilities and problem-solving shape coordination and implementation outcomes in transformation contexts.

Finally, longitudinal research could help link micro-dynamics like coping and resilience strategies, sensemaking practices, resistance management and technologies to organisational-level outcomes, such as quality, adoption rates, retention or performance.

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