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Digital Orientation and Strategy Implementation: The Public Sector Perspective

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Abstract: Although public sector organisations invest enormous time in drafting strategic plans, the failure rate in strategy implementation (including digital strategies) is high, often leading to poor performance. While resources are disbursed to support strategy implementation, leadership devotes less time to it due to participation in political activities during working hours. The primary objective of this study was to probe the nexus between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the South African public sector. The methodological foundation of this study is grounded in the constructivist paradigm, adopting a qualitative approach using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) technique to investigate the relationship between digital orientation and strategy implementation. The findings suggest that poor communication, training, political engagement, and laws and regulations are common barriers that frequently lead to failures in strategy implementation in the public sector. This study recommends appointing dedicated, qualified senior managers to successfully drive strategy implementation.

Keywords: *Digital Orientation; Strategy Implementation; Public Services; Public Sector.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of information and communication technology (ICT) has significantly increased the ever-growing demand for public services worldwide (Baloyi and Beyers, 2019). While the digital orientation era is promptly reshaping the public sector areas (including education, healthcare services, agriculture, and social services) through public engagement and participation (Madaki, Ahmad and Singh, 2024), the application of digital technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, blockchain, big data, and virtual platforms have transformed the business models and enhanced decision-making processes leading to streamlined internal processes and improved public services (Di Giulio and Vecchi, 2023; Edelmann and Mergel, 2022). However, effectively implementing those digital strategies has been a hurdle to realising the organisation's predetermined objectives, particularly for emerging economies like South Africa. To this effect, though, the literature suggests a high failure rate of approximately 80-90% of strategy implementation concerning digital technologies and other strategies in the public sector, particularly in emerging economies (Nkone, Matoka and Ngirwa, 2024; Amin and Afiqah, 2024; Syed, Bandara and Eden, 2023; Baloyi and Beyers, 2020; Olivier and Schwella, 2018).

Notwithstanding the existing literature, studies that specifically focus on the implementation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies strategies in the public sector remain inadequate (Khodakivska, Prystupa, Ivanyshyna, Panura and Tuchak, 2023). Accordingly, there is a call for more research to examine the persistent challenges that impede the implementation of those strategies and to identify opportunities for more efficient digital strategy implementation in the public sector. Apart from several advances in digital technology (e.g., AI, IoT, big data, virtual platforms, and cloud computing), the e-government model has been regarded as an essential vehicle and enabler for implementing digital strategies by various public sector organisations (Ngome and Yeom, 2024). The model has been segregated into four approaches, namely: government-to-citizens (ICT strategies that enhance interactions with the general public), government-to-employees (intensifies relationships with the officials to modify the internal processes through technologies), government-to-business (design strategies to augment communication with businesses electronically), and government-to-government (online services aiming at improving intergovernmental relations) (Chilunjika, 2024). These e-government models are paramount for improving interactions between the government and a wide range of stakeholders in implementing digital strategies.

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According to Amin (2023), top executives and middle management of public sector organisations are at the forefront of developing strategic plans and greatly influence the implementation of these initiatives. One can argue that the intentions to implement digital strategies in the public sector derive from not only the effective distribution of resources (e.g., financial, human, physical and technical) to embrace a change in the turbulent business environment but also top management commitment to drive the strategic intent (vision, mission and values) and ensure policy development and successful strategy implementation (Syed et al., 2023). Moreover, while executives ensure that the public sector enhances individual and organisational performances, developing and executing practical communication tools, ensuring fair and impartial reward systems (both monetary and non-monetary), and fostering collaboration with external stakeholders to accelerate the implementation of digital strategies are pivotal (Tomazevic, Murko and Aristovnik, 2024). Even though digital technologies may vary in their extent and scope across the public sector, executives' willingness to implement digital mechanisms is of utmost importance to the realisation of the public sector's strategic objectives.

While South Africa envisages attaining the priorities (e.g., poverty eradication and reduced inequality, *inter alia*) regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as set by the United Nations' (United Nations, 2024) and National Development Plan (NDP) and Vision 2030: Our future – make it work (National Planning Commission, 2012), the implementation of digital strategies in the digital domain becomes the focal point to improve public services and the well-being of citizens.

Whereas the scholarly debates on emerging digital technologies (e.g., the IoT and AI) are ample, studies focusing on the strategy implementation in the public sector and its failure rate remain scarce in the literature, specifically for emerging economies (Fachridian, Ramli and de Araujo, 2024; Amin, 2023; Syed et al., 2023), and South Africa is no exception. It is argued that although it is imperative to comprehend the critical success determinants (i.e., the drivers) for implementing digital technologies in the South African public sector, it is equally significant to explore the dimensions that lead to persistent failures and to circumvent the recurrence of the same blunders in the future. This can help the South African public sector improve digital strategy implementation and bolster progress toward the SGD targets. The following section underscores the research problem.

➢ *Problem Statement*

In the literature, advanced economies seem to allocate adequate funds to foster the adoption and implementation of new digital technologies, while emerging economies such as South Africa still struggle to allocate sufficient budgets for ICT programmes (Ngome and Yeom, 2024). Apart from that, the country is inundated with socio-economic disparities (e.g., inequality), digital illiteracy, digital divide, and bureaucracy (including politics), which are catastrophic and underscore the research problem revolving around the effective implementation of digital strategies within the public sector of South Africa (Chitimira and Munedzi, 2024; Shibambu, 2024).

➢ *Objectives of the Study*

Based on the research problem, the primary objective of this study is to examine the nexus between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the South African public sector.

In support hereof, the secondary objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify the main drivers of strategy implementation in the public sector.
- To evaluate barriers obstructing the effective implementation of digital technologies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the proliferating research on 4IR technologies, the linkage between the public sector's digital orientation and strategy implementation remains under-researched, particularly in emerging economies (Syed et al., 2023). Therefore, this section discusses the literature on digital orientation and strategy implementation in the public sector. It starts with describing the study context.

➢ *The Context of the Study*

South Africa became free after the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994. After that, in 1999, e-government was developed. More recently, the National E-government Strategy and Roadmap was established and rolled out to drive digital transformation and ensure an all-encompassing digital society, delivering efficient and cost-effective services to citizens (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT), 2024b). This strategy is intended to extend broadband services to marginalised and underserved communities nationwide. To this end, however, the DCDT, in collaboration with the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) and the National Treasury, are at the forefront of driving digital transformation and its implementation in South Africa. In other words, these departments make informed decisions about digital technologies and implement some of them through the agency referred to as the State Information Technology Agency (SITA). For instance, the DPSA has established the "*Draft Digital Government Policy Framework"*, intending to lead the implementation of emerging technologies, even though the policy is yet to be authorised by the South African parliament (DPSA, 2024).

Additionally, the "*National Data and Cloud Policy Framework"* was developed to address the growing need to reform service delivery models and manage massive amounts of data using state-of-the-art technologies, such as cloud computing (DCDT, 2024a). For example, since cloud computing in the South African public sector is in its early stages, the policy underscores the need for broad training and development to improve data administration and strengthen the adoption of this trailblazing technology. On the other hand, the government has also publicised the "*South African*

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National Artificial Intelligence Policy Framework", intending to exploit the integration of AI-enabled technologies (e.g., machine learning, natural language, virtual assistants, etc.) into the processes of diverse departments while enhancing the well-being of citizens and other stakeholders in the digital landscape (DCDT, 2023). In a nutshell, the framework focuses on South Africa's commitment to AI development and implementation, although not yet approved, and addresses ethical issues (e.g., data security, privacy, accountability, and transparency), whilst ensuring the formation of sound governance structures that address those issues and gain public trust.

- *Theoretical Framework*

This study adopts the technology acceptance model (TAM), initially proposed by Davis, Bagozzi, and Warshaw (1989a). The rationale for embracing the TAM model is that the implementation strategy of digital technologies can only materialise when individuals display a readiness to accept technologies and *vice versa*. While the TAM model has been substantial in determining the individual's behavioural intentions to accept or reject technologies in the digital arena, it has been extensively and efficiently employed in the technological environment within the public sector (Aswar, Sumardjo, Wiguna and Hariyani, 2022; Huda, 2023). The TAM model is underpinned by two significant, interlinked theoretical concepts for ascertaining individuals' behaviours and ensuring digital orientation: perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness (Davis et al., 1989a). These variables are essential for measuring ICT successes and failures and for detecting bottlenecks that obstruct individual acceptance of technology in the public sector. Succinctly, the perceived ease of use refers to the condition under which individuals have developed trust that utilising a specific system can yield positive results while disregarding physical and cognitive effort; on the other hand, perceived usefulness refers to the position in which individuals believe that utilising a particular system will improve their job prospects (Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1989b).

- *Digital Orientation and Strategy Implementation in the Public Sector*

As a new and strategic orientation concept in the public sector milieu, digital orientation has received limited academic attention, leading to a considerable research gap (Khuntia, Ning and Stacey, 2021). While digital orientation in the private sector has been broadly studied and effectively applied in different phenomena, such as Small, Medium and Macro Enterprises (SMMEs) and large firms, emerging digital technologies (e.g., AI, cloud computing, big data, virtual platforms, 3-Dimensional printing, and the IoT) have transformed the internal operations and benefitted those firms in generating returns or profits (Kindermann, Schmidt, Fengel and Strese, 2024; Zhou, Kohtamäki, Peng and Kong, 2024). Digital orientation has been defined in the body of knowledge. For instance, according to Amoah, Jibril, Odei, Bankuoru Egala, Dziwornu and Kwarteng (2023:5), digital orientation refers to the process of "using advanced technologies like social networks, mobile apps, and digitised processes to focus more on the digital business market". Instead, Kindermann et al. (2024:3) defined digital orientation as "the strategic directions implemented by a firm to create the proper behaviours for the continuous superior performance of the business". The scholars further emphasise the four fundamental factors that are imperative for the organisation to assimilate into its internal business processes to achieve superior performance. These include the scope of digital technology, digital capabilities, digital ecosystem coordination, and digital architecture configuration (Kindermann et al., 2024).

According to Baloyi and Beyers (2020:63), strategy implementation refers to "the process of executing the plans and policies of the organisation to attain long-term objectives". Despite the growing need to implement strategic plans and other envisioned strategies, it is argued that strategy implementation in the public sector has not been extensively covered in the literature (Olivier and Schwella, 2018; Amin and Afiqah, 2024). However, this is because scholars have perceived strategy implementation in the public sector as an intricate task involving organisational capacity (e.g., resource availability – finance) and managerial competencies to steer the organisational activities (Baloyi and Beyers, 2020; Nkone et al., 2024). Although strategy implementation can be complex and not a one-size-fits-all approach, linking budgets to the chosen strategy is crucial to enhance execution efforts. For example, it is contended that considering motivation and non-discriminatory incentives can accelerate the determination of public servants, thereby realising the public sector's strategic objectives (Tomazevic et al., 2024). Yet again, organisational architecture plays a significant role in addressing strategy execution issues and has been perceived as a key internal strength by Tshabalala, Boikanyo and Gomwe (2024) and Baloyi and Beyers (2020).

The connection between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the public sector has been explored (Fachridian et al., 2024; Madaki et al., 2024; Di Giulio and Vecchi, 2023; Khodakivska et al., 2023; Maragno, Tangi, Gastaldi and Benedetti, 2023; Mergel, Dickinson, Stenvall and Gasco, 2023; Syed et al., 2023; Edelmann and Mergel, 2022). More notably, it is argued that public sectors in most emerging economies (including South Africa) are faced with impediments, such as digital infrastructural deficit, digital divide, limited expertise, lack of appropriate regulatory frameworks, adverse attitudes, and resistance to change that lead to ineffective implementation of ICT strategies (Madaki et al., 2024; Mahusin, Sallehudin and Satar, 2024; Amin, 2023). Importantly, the literature suggests that the implementation of adopted digital strategies and the potential of investing in digital technologies (e.g., AI and cloud computing) cannot be fully realised if these impediments persist in emerging economies' public sectors (Chilunjika, 2024; Shibambu, 2024; Syed et al., 2023).

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodological grounding of this study is based on the constructivist paradigm. It employs a qualitative approach, using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) technique, to

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examine the relationship between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the South African public sector. The basis for applying this technique in this study was to ensure a robust, appropriate, thorough, and rigorous detection and selection process of the corpus of literature (Page et al., 2021) and foster thematic interpretation of academic discourses to maintain theoretical saturation on the relationship between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the public sector. The advantages of applying a systematic literature review include the following: (1) the techniques enhance time management and costs related to the collection of data, (2) it is simpler to administer as it is generally most foreseeable and therefore bears low risk, (3) since the technique does not involve human beings or animals' participants, data is collected secondarily and there is no potential harm, and (4) it assists the researcher in diminishing issues relating to prejudices (Morgan, 2022).

In using the PRISMA technique, the primary search of the literature corpus began with an extensive identification of the topic (i.e., digital orientation and strategy implementation in the public sector), while observing the primary purpose. The corpus of literature was retrieved from the Web of Science, a renowned database of academic papers. Given that emerging digital technologies (i.e., AI, IoT, cloud computing, blockchain, big data, and virtual platforms) are unpredictable and prevalent in ever-evolving business environments, this review article considered only the recent corpus of literature. Moreover, the literature search was restricted to key concepts such as "*digital orientation*," *"fourth industrial revolution," "4IR," "strategy implementation," "public services," "service delivery*", and *"systematic literature review"*. Although the search results returned numerous papers from the Web of Science, those papers were systematically selected, appraised, and synthesised to identify appropriate themes and patterns associated with the topical issues. Furthermore, grey literature (i.e., government publications) was also included. Data quality (trustworthiness) and dependability were improved by assigning two autonomous reviewers to the literature screening process. The EndNote Reference Manager (Version 21.1) was used to facilitate the organisation and management of the data. Most vitally, the Referencing Manager assisted the researchers in detecting and deleting identical papers.

More to this, although some papers (i.e., peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, academic book chapters, and government publications) were contemplated in this study, others were eliminated based on the eligibility criteria (i.e., inclusion and exclusion criteria). In other words, a clean-up process was performed by erasing duplicates, non-English, irrelevant, and non-abstract papers.

IV. RESULTS

The comprehensive search procedure using the Web of Science engine identified 2,125 papers (see Figure 1). Of the 2,125 papers retrieved, the researchers observed that eligibility criteria were critical. They cleaned the gathered sources by deleting non-abstract, non-English, matching, and unsuitable documents. This led to 35 papers (including academic and grey literature) being contemplated for the PRISMA technique, as underscored in the phases below. Notably, this study examined digital orientation and strategy implementation, focusing on public and private sector environments due to the paucity of academic engagement on the former. That being the case, numerous sources included were peer-reviewed journal articles. In the end, 25 peer-reviewed journal articles, two academic book chapters, three conference papers and five grey literature were eligible for inclusion in the study (Refer to Table 2). The PRISMA review process perceived the following eligibility criteria, as described in Table 1.

Table 1 Criteria of the Systematic Literature Review

Dimension	Description
Source of information	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, academic book chapters, and government publications.
Sector	Public sector and private sector (SMMEs and firms)
Key concepts	The following key concepts were searched: "digital orientation," "fourth industrial revolution," "4IR," "strategy implementation," "public services," "service delivery", and "systematic literature review".
Research approach	Both qualitative and quantitative methods were included.
Language and timeframe	English, 2018-2024.

Table 2 Statistics of the Sources Included

Category	Number	Percentage contribution
Peer-reviewed journal articles	25	71%
Academic book chapters	2	6%
Grey literature	5	14%
Conference papers	3	9%
Total	**35**	**100%**

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While considering the eligibility criteria outlined above, the following phases were implemented to identify and select appropriate papers from the Web of Science database (see Figure 1).

- Phase 1: Firstly, papers were sourced through the Web of Science search engine, with 2,125 results, ranging from 2018 to 2024 academic years.
- Phase 2: Secondly, whereas the deletion of non-English, non-abstract and identical papers was performed, 397 papers remained, leading to the removal of 1,757 sources.
- Phase 3: Thirdly, whilst the screening process of the papers has unfolded, 329 full-text papers were excluded based on irrelevance, leaving 68.
- Phase 4: Fourthly, after that, 68 papers were crucially assessed for eligibility criteria to strengthen the study's rigour.
- Phase 5: Out of 68 papers, 38 were disqualified based on the eligibility requirements of the topic.
- Phase 6: Thereafter, 30 papers, comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, academic book chapters and conference papers, were deemed appropriate for inclusion in the systematic literature review (grey literature was sourced directly from the department's websites, amounting to five publications).

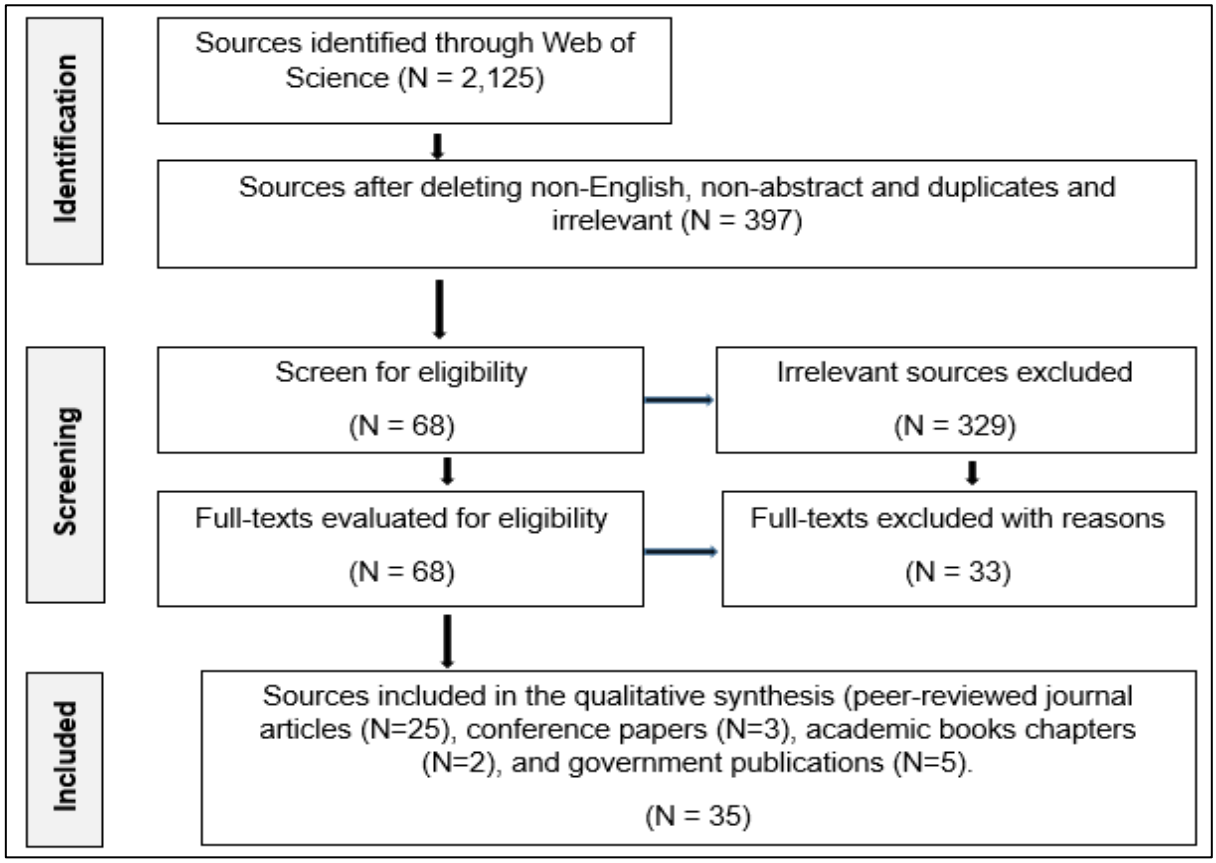


Fig 1 Prisma Flow Diagram
Adapted From: Page Et Al. (2021)

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS EMANATED FROM THE THEMES

The PRISMA technique helped identify relevant themes and patterns aligned with the study's purpose. This section presents findings on the main drivers of strategy implementation and the barriers to the effective implementation of digital technologies in the public sector. Furthermore, the following findings were identified based on the critical evaluation and synthesis of the literature included in the study.

➢ *The Main Drivers of Strategy Implementation*

The main drivers of strategy implementation, as per the findings derived from the systematic literature review, include top management dedication, organisational culture, organisational structure, reward systems, and resource allocations (Amin and Afiqah, 2024; Leonard, 2024; Tomazevic et al., 2024; Tshabalala et al., 2024; Di Giulio and Vecchi, 2023; Baloyi and Beyers, 2020). These key drivers of strategy implementation are intertwined and can influence one another positively or negatively. At the outset, these drivers are necessary to implement marshalling strategies in the public sector.

- *Top Management Dedication*

One enabling factor for strategy implementation in the digital era is top management's commitment to driving strategic management practices (i.e., strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation or control) in the public

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sector. While top management plays a vital role in supporting the implementation of digital strategies such as AI (Tomazevic et al., 2024), their sound decision-making mechanisms are indispensable and prevalent in overcoming obstacles associated with the resistance to change that may arise, thereby enhancing strategy execution efforts within the organisation (Tshabalala et al., 2024). Moreover, since top management is responsible for directing the strategic intent of public sector organisations, they are expected to exert control, sustain flexibility, and capacitate public servants to ensure the effective implementation of strategy and enhance public services for citizens (Baloyi and Beyers, 2020).

- *Organisational Culture*

Organisational culture involves norms, standards, and values embedded in individuals that may affect (positively or adversely) strategy implementation in the public sector (Amin and Afiqah, 2024). To this end, organisational culture can be an enabler or a constraint on the effective implementation of digital technologies (e.g., cloud computing). Therefore, an organisational culture incompatible with the selected strategy (e.g., digital) can significantly hamper strategy implementation (Boikanyo and Gomwe, 2024). Thus, organisational culture should match a chosen strategy; in other words, a tight association should exist between the two variables. Consequently, scholarly arguments in the academic discourse in the public administration discipline confirm the linkage between organisational culture and strategy implementation in enhancing performance (Baloyi and Beyers, 2020; Amin and Afiqah, 2024; Fachridian et al., 2024). Despite that, organisational culture has a disintegrated outlook that displays the organisation. It can be a "bureaucratic, innovative and supportive culture" (Amin and Afiqah, 2024:73) towards implementing digital strategies. Having said that, most public sectors in emerging economies (including South Africa) are characterised by bureaucratic leadership that shapes organisational culture and, in turn, strategy implementation (Eresia-Eke and Soriakumar, 2021; Syed et al., 2023). The common slogan, "the way we do things around here", is prevalent in management research and often disrupts organisational activities (including digital strategy and policy implementation) by reinforcing resistance to change (Brown, 2023).

- *Organisational Structure*

As one of the vital internal capabilities of the public sector, the organisational structure has been viewed as a critical dimension influencing strategy implementation (Baloyi and Beyers, 2020) and enhancement of organisational performance (Olivier and Schwella, 2018). Arguably, the public sector's process of linking the designated digital strategy with the organisational structure is nontrivial if the execution efforts are to be improved. Further, it is worth noting that the adoption of pervasive digital technologies (e.g., AI, the IoT, virtual platforms and cloud computing) by the public depends not only on middle managers' capabilities to drive strategy implementation but also on the availability of a flexible organisational structure that accommodates those 4IR technologies (Maragno et al., 2023; Fachridian et al., 2024). That being the case, the tight relationship between organisational structure and strategy implementation is evident in the literature (Eresia-Eke and Soriakumar, 2021). As Senyo, Effah, and Osabutey (2021) noted, the public sector may not successfully implement digital strategies if existing organisational structures are not aligned with digital orientation activities. In other words, rather than investing significant time in politics, which is a primary obstacle to embracing the modernised public sector, an all-encompassing structure could be valuable for improving the implementation of the envisaged digital strategies.

- *Reward Systems*

Reward or incentive systems are the crucial drivers of strategy implementation in the public sector. These can include monetary and non-monetary rewards (Baloyi and Beyers, 2020). With the increasing necessity to accelerate the implementation of strategies (e.g., digital) and fast-tracking service delivery in the public sector realm, it is corroborated that one of the top management's responsibilities in ensuring the proper execution of those strategies has been allied with the introduction of rational reward systems (Amin and Afiqah, 2024). Generally speaking, the public sector's business model was implemented through performance management and development systems (PMDS), aimed at motivating and compensating public servants for their outstanding performance in South Africa. Even though the model has been effectively introduced in an endeavour to fuel strategy implementation and policy execution, it lacked standardisation. It thus revealed several loopholes (e.g., favouritism, discrimination, and unfairness) in the performance review of public servants, leading to the system's withdrawal. This is consistent with the view of Syed et al. (2023), who state that rewarding individual performance is essential to uplifting public servants' morale and viewpoints towards implementing digital strategies.

- *Resource Allocation*

Resource allocation is at the core of the public sector's business (Baloyi and Beyers, 2020). Despite considerable improvements in digital orientation, the public sector is overwhelmed by limited resources for the uptake and implementation of strategies, especially in emerging economies such as South Africa (Ngome and Yeom, 2024). In a nutshell, the public sector in emerging economies is constrained by budgetary and funding challenges, which exacerbate the realisation of 4IR initiatives and intensify socio-economic disparities (Fachridian et al., 2024; Mahusin et al., 2024). However, political interference from top management has been a hurdle, leading to ineffectiveness and budgetary constraints. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the process of aligning budgetary resources with predetermined objectives is substantial to attaining the public sector's strategic intent – vision, mission, values and long-term goals (Amin and Afiqah, 2024; Nkone et al., 2024). Even though governments face insufficient funding for digital projects, the ever-changing business conditions (e.g., political, economic, social, legal, ecological, and technological) compel the public sector to adapt to these changes to survive in the digital epoch.

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➢ *Barriers Obstructing the Effective Implementation of Digital Technologies*

The implementation of pervasive digital technologies often brings various technical glitches for public sector organisations, such as poor communication, ineffective training and capacity building for public servants, political interference, and a lack of binding laws and regulations. Scholarly debates by Eresia-Eke and Soriakumar (2021), Maragno et al. (2023), Amin and Afiqah (2024), Chilunjika (2024), and Fachridian et al. (2024) have all highlighted these glitches. Additionally, the barriers to effectively implementing digital technology strategies, emphasised below, are derived from themes recognised in academic discourse.

- *Poor Communication*

According to Baloyi and Beyers (2020:66), communication "plays a significant role in disseminating information and knowledge during the strategy implementation process". Emerging communication strategies (e.g., virtual platforms – Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, e-mails, video conferencing, and Google Meetings) are pivotal in augmenting the strategy implementation efforts of digital technologies in the public sector. They efficiently strengthen the interactions between governments and diverse stakeholders (including citizens and businesses). To this end, public sectors in emerging economies are inundated with ineffective communication approaches, which adversely affect systems, processes, and procedures due to the failure of strategy implementation in those organisations (Eresia-Eke and Soriakumar, 2021; Syed et al., 2023; Madaki et al., 2024). According to Shibambu (2024), digital communication tools are prevalent in amplifying the execution of digital activities in the public sector while, at the same time, increasing information sharing in a modern way with various stakeholders.

- *Ineffective Training and Development*

The uptake of emerging digital technologies implies that the public sector needs to reshape its conventional practices and embrace innovative ways to reskill public servants to cope in the digital world, thereby ensuring efficient and advanced service delivery to the public (Edelmann and Mergel, 2022). As cited by Nkone et al. (2024), Tomazevic et al. (2024), and Madaki et al. (2024), skills acquisition through education and training, in-service training, coaching, and mentoring of public servants are very important and act as a vehicle to effective digital strategy and policy implementation in the public sector. However, the training and development of public servants must be customised to meet the organisation's specific needs (digital aspects) to thrive in the digital-driven economy. Additionally, despite the limited funding available to emerging economies such as South Africa and other African countries, the public sector should strive to provide rigorous training in digital technologies to enhance internal operations (including digital strategy implementation) and individual performance (Shibambu, 2024).

- *Political Interference*

Even though top management significantly influences organisational activities and strategic management practices, the public sector is besieged by political interference, which particularly hinders strategy and policy implementation. Accordingly, while resources are disbursed to support strategy implementation, leadership devotes less time to it due to participation in and engagement in political activities during office hours, which negatively affects service delivery to citizens (Eresia-Eke and Soriakumar, 2021). This is supported by Baloyi and Beyers (2020), who argued that political interference had been a debacle that derailed strategy implementation mechanisms, reducing public servants' morale and, thus, the public sector's performance. Moreover, Senyo et al. (2021) argue that recurrent political intervention often undermines the implementation of digital strategies, obscuring the significance of emerging digital technologies in public-sector decision-making processes and the recognition of streamlined, seamless processes.

- *Lack of Binding Laws and Regulations*

Previous research has paid limited attention, emphasising external business conditions, such as governmental laws and regulations related to strategy implementation in the public sector (Amin and Afiqah, 2024). Despite this, Eresia-Eke and Soriakumar (2021) discovered in their study of in-depth semi-structured interviews that while the external business conditions, such as political and governmental laws and regulations, were identified as an obstacle to effective strategy implementation in the emerging economies' public sector, the hierarchical structure (top-down) has been a leading contributor, particularly when the new administration is introduced after the government elections. From this perspective, digital strategies adopted by the public sector are hampered by nonspecific laws and regulations that impede their effective implementation. On the other hand, Tomazevic et al. (2024) argue that although public sector organisations are progressively adopting 4IR technologies (e.g., AI), their smooth functioning requires the development of comprehensive laws and regulations to guide the implementation of strategies. Those laws and regulations should be binding and compulsory when executing digital strategies.

VI. PRACTICAL MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study applied the technology acceptance model (TAM) proposed by Davis et al. (1989a) to examine the relationship between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the South African public sector. From this perspective, the findings of this study, derived from the PRISMA technique, reveal barriers to the successful implementation of digital technologies in the public sector, such as poor communication, ineffective training and development, political interference, and a lack of binding laws and regulations to guide strategy implementation. These barriers provide an eye-opening insight for the public sector. In other words, they are significant in helping emerging economies, such as the South African public sector, remedy

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the status quo of high rates of strategy implementation failures in digital strategies. Moreover, the main drivers to strategy implementation (e.g., top management commitment, organisational structure, organisational culture, reward systems, and resource allocation) were also critically probed. They are imperative in guiding the public sector while implementing pervasive digital strategies in the ever-evolving digital realm. Against this background, policymakers, practitioners, strategists, and decision-makers in the public sector, in the context of South Africa (i.e., an emerging economy), can find the findings of this study helpful and as a blueprint for successful strategy implementation of digital initiatives.

It is suggested that the appointment of committed and qualified senior managers (top management) in the South African public sector who stay clear of political engagements during working hours be considered to eliminate the current failure rate in strategy implementation, which is imperative for improving service delivery and the public's well-being. Furthermore, ample funding for South Africa's strategic and digital initiatives (through collateral, international collaborations, and donors) can strengthen the determination to implement the strategy and, as such, boost public servants' morale, as reward systems are also likely to be enhanced. With this proposal, the South African public sector should reconsider its budget allocation process and earmark adequate funds tailored to improve digital programmes to ensure survival in the technology-driven economy. Broadly, the continuous training and development of public servants in digital matters can help close the strategy implementation gap currently faced by the South African public sector, as it will make public servants aware of what is expected of them. Lastly, up-to-date communication strategies and approaches assimilating virtual platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, e-mails, and Google Meetings) should be in place to facilitate and accelerate the implementation of the public sector's digital strategies.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study sought to probe the relationship between digital orientation and strategy implementation in the South African public sector. As strategy implementation plays an imperative role in enhancing organisational performance and public services, it is contended that the South African public sector's capability to steer execution processes can lead to the attainment of its vision, mission, values, and long-term objectives. One of the specific objectives of this study was to identify the major drivers of strategy implementation, such as top management commitment, organisational culture, organisational structure, reward systems, and resource allocation. These drivers are inevitable if the South African public sector takes cognisance of prosperity in the digital age and enhances innovation in public administration. Additionally, apart from the study's identification and discussion of the drivers highlighted above that provide direction, the barriers to strategy implementation were also explored in the literature, including poor communication, ineffective training and development, political interference, and the lack of binding laws and regulations. Considering the rising failure rates of strategy implementation in the public sector (Syed et al., 2023), including South Africa, exploring these barriers is essential. The public sector can learn from this study's results while reforming its internal processes and systems to address the implications of digital orientation. Lastly, possibilities for future research, if deemed necessary, include focusing critically on each of the drivers and barriers to strategy implementation within the context of the South African Public sector.

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