

Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations: A High-Impact Systematic Review and Action Research–Informed Conceptual Framework

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i9/28076>

Published Date: 14 September 2026

Abstract

The increasing pace of digital transformation has intensified leadership demands within information and communication technology (ICT) organizations. Strategic leadership—encompassing vision articulation, innovation enablement, organizational agility, and talent development—has emerged as a critical determinant of ICT organizational performance. Despite growing scholarly attention, existing research remains fragmented and unevenly distributed across contexts, with limited integration of leadership behaviors, mediating mechanisms, and development processes, particularly in emerging economies. This study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) of 20 high-impact peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024 and indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Guided by PRISMA protocols and the ROSES review framework, the review employs qualitative thematic analysis to synthesize evidence on strategic leadership in ICT and digitally intensive organizations. The findings reveal three overarching themes: (1) strategic leadership behaviors driving innovation and agility, (2) organizational and contextual constraints shaping leadership effectiveness, and (3) leadership development approaches, with Action Research identified as a promising yet underutilized methodology. The review further identifies psychological safety, cross-functional collaboration, and reflective learning as critical mediating mechanisms linking leadership behaviors to organizational outcomes. Based on the synthesis, an integrative conceptual model is proposed, positioning Action Research as a mechanism for iterative leadership capability-building. This study contributes to leadership theory by integrating fragmented constructs into a unified framework and offers practical and policy-relevant insights for strengthening leadership capacity in ICT organizations, particularly within emerging digital economies.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Ict Organizations, Psychological Safety, Action Research, Organizational Learning, Strategic Agility, Innovation Leadership, Digital Transformation, Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

The global information and communications technology (ICT) industry operates in an increasingly volatile and complex environment shaped by rapid technological disruption, intensifying market competition, and escalating customer expectations. Advances in cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and platform-based ecosystems have transformed organizational structures, value creation processes, and competitive dynamics (Vial, 2019; Teece, 2018). As ICT firms navigate continuous digital transformation, leadership requirements have shifted from traditional control-oriented approaches toward more adaptive, innovation-driven, and people-centered forms of strategic leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Samimi et al., 2020).

Digital transformation extends beyond the adoption of new technologies; it entails profound changes in organizational culture, decision-making processes, and workforce capabilities (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019). In this context, leaders are required not only to articulate a compelling strategic vision but also to foster organizational agility, support continuous innovation, and develop talent capable of navigating uncertainty and complexity (Teece et al., 2016; Doz & Kosonen, 2010). Empirical studies increasingly highlight that leadership effectiveness is a decisive factor influencing ICT firms' ability to respond to technological change and sustain competitive advantage (Burton-Jones, 2014; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

Strategic leadership—commonly defined as the capacity to anticipate future trends, envision strategic direction, maintain flexibility, and empower others to enact strategic change—has therefore emerged as a critical organizational capability (Hitt et al., 2011; Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Within ICT organizations, strategic leadership is particularly salient due to the prevalence of knowledge-intensive work, cross-functional project teams, and rapid innovation cycles (Yunus & Tadisina, 2020; Newman et al., 2020). Leaders must coordinate diverse expertise, enable collaboration across organizational boundaries, and create environments conducive to experimentation and learning (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Anderson et al., 2014).

Despite its importance, the literature suggests that many ICT organizations struggle to translate strategic intent into effective leadership practice. Common challenges include fragmented strategy communication, limited employee involvement in decision-making, and rigid hierarchical structures that constrain agility and innovation (Sull et al., 2020; Lee & Fathima, 2023). Moreover, while innovation is widely acknowledged as a strategic priority, empirical research indicates that many organizations lack the psychological and structural conditions necessary to support sustained innovative behavior (Edmondson, 1999; Carmeli & Paulus, 2015). These challenges are further compounded by the pace of technological change, which places continuous pressure on leaders to adapt their behaviors and leadership practices (Teece et al., 2016).

The leadership challenges facing ICT firms are particularly pronounced in emerging economies, where institutional constraints, cultural norms, and resource limitations shape organizational practices (Kimani, 2022; Maak et al., 2021). In Malaysia, national policy initiatives such as MyDIGITAL and Industry4WRD explicitly identify leadership capability as a foundational enabler of digital transformation and economic competitiveness (Economic Planning Unit [EPU], 2021). However, mid-sized ICT firms often lack formal leadership

development structures, rely on technically driven promotion pathways, and exhibit limited organizational learning mechanisms (Tan & Nasurdin, 2017; Ghazali et al., 2022). As a result, leadership capability development remains uneven and under-theorized within this organizational segment.

Scholars increasingly argue that leadership development in complex and dynamic environments requires learning approaches that are participatory, experiential, and context-sensitive (Raelin, 2020; Day et al., 2014). Traditional leadership training programs, which often emphasize individual competencies and classroom-based instruction, have been criticized for their limited impact on sustained behavioral change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). In contrast, Action Research (AR) has been identified as a promising methodology for leadership development due to its emphasis on collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and iterative problem-solving (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Bradbury, 2015). AR aligns closely with organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978) and offers a mechanism through which leaders can develop capabilities while addressing real organizational challenges.

Despite its theoretical relevance, Action Research remains underutilized in leadership studies within ICT contexts. Existing research tends to focus on leadership styles, innovation outcomes, or digital transformation initiatives in isolation, with limited integration across these domains (Samimi et al., 2020; Teece, 2018). Furthermore, few systematic literature reviews have examined how strategic leadership behaviors interact with mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety, cross-functional collaboration, and reflective learning within ICT organizations. This fragmentation limits both theoretical advancement and practical applicability.

In response to these gaps, this systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes 20 high-impact peer-reviewed studies drawn from leading Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals to develop an integrative understanding of strategic leadership in ICT and knowledge-intensive organizations. Guided by PRISMA and ROSES principles, the review examines how strategic leadership is conceptualized, identifies structural and cultural barriers that inhibit leadership effectiveness, evaluates leadership development approaches, and advances a conceptual model grounded in Action Research. By integrating leadership behaviors, mediating mechanisms, and AR-driven development cycles, this study contributes to leadership theory and offers a robust foundation for future empirical research and practice in ICT contexts.

Importance of the Current Systematic Review of the Literature

Despite growing scholarly attention to strategic leadership in ICT and digitally intensive organizations, the existing body of literature remains theoretically fragmented, methodologically uneven, and contextually skewed. Research on leadership in technology-driven environments has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, reflecting the accelerating pace of digital transformation, innovation pressures, and organizational complexity (Vial, 2019; Teece, 2018). However, this growth has occurred across multiple disciplinary silos—including leadership studies, innovation management, information systems, and organizational psychology—resulting in dispersed findings and limited theoretical integration (Samimi et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2014). A systematic literature review is therefore necessary to consolidate this diverse knowledge base and advance a more coherent understanding of strategic leadership within ICT contexts.

First, existing reviews of leadership and digital transformation tend to adopt broad or technology-centric perspectives, often privileging technological capabilities over leadership processes and human dynamics (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Vial, 2019). While these studies provide valuable insights into digital strategy and organizational change, they frequently under-theorize leadership behaviors such as vision articulation, psychological safety, and learning facilitation—factors that are critical for sustaining innovation and agility in ICT organizations (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Teece et al., 2016). As a result, the leadership mechanisms through which digital transformation is enacted remain insufficiently synthesized.

Second, the literature demonstrates a persistent lack of integrative frameworks linking strategic leadership with key mediating constructs such as innovation capability, organizational agility, psychological safety, and reflective learning. Many empirical studies examine these constructs in isolation, leading to partial explanations of organizational performance outcomes (Carmeli & Paulus, 2015; Clauss et al., 2019). Scholars have increasingly called for integrative models that capture the dynamic interactions between leadership behaviors and organizational processes, particularly in volatile and uncertain environments (Doz & Kosonen, 2010; Teece, 2018). A systematic review is essential to identify patterns across studies and to establish conceptual linkages that have remained implicit or underdeveloped.

Third, there is a notable contextual imbalance in the existing literature. The majority of leadership research in ICT settings has been conducted in large multinational organizations located in developed economies (Avolio et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2020). In contrast, mid-sized ICT firms and organizations operating in emerging economies remain underrepresented, despite their growing importance in the global digital economy (Kimani, 2022; Ghazali et al., 2022). Leadership challenges in these contexts—such as limited resources, hierarchical cultures, and informal development pathways—differ significantly from those in large corporations, suggesting that findings from developed economies may not be readily transferable (Maak et al., 2021). A focused SLR can address this gap by synthesizing evidence relevant to diverse organizational and institutional contexts.

Fourth, although leadership development is widely recognized as essential for organizational adaptability, methodological approaches to leadership development remain narrowly conceived. Much of the literature emphasizes competency-based training, leadership styles, or individual traits, with limited attention to participatory and practice-based learning approaches (Day et al., 2014; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Action Research (AR), which emphasizes collaborative inquiry, experiential learning, and reflective practice, has been identified as a theoretically robust yet underutilized methodology for leadership development in complex organizational settings (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Bradbury, 2015; Raelin, 2020). However, few studies have systematically examined AR within ICT leadership contexts, and no comprehensive SLR has synthesized its potential role in strategic leadership capability-building.

Finally, the rapid evolution of ICT environments necessitates methodologically rigorous and transparent evidence synthesis. Systematic literature reviews guided by PRISMA and ROSES protocols enhance transparency, replicability, and theoretical robustness by explicitly

documenting search strategies, inclusion criteria, and analytical processes (Page et al., 2021; Haddaway et al., 2020). Given the volume and diversity of leadership research in ICT domains, a systematic approach is required to reduce bias, identify research gaps, and provide a reliable foundation for future empirical inquiry.

In light of these considerations, the current SLR is both timely and necessary. By systematically synthesizing high-impact peer-reviewed studies, this review aims to (1) consolidate fragmented leadership research within ICT contexts, (2) identify structural, cultural, and methodological gaps, and (3) advance an integrative conceptual model grounded in Action Research. In doing so, the review contributes to leadership theory, informs organizational practice, and provides a robust platform for future research on strategic leadership in digitally intensive and emerging economy contexts.

Methodology

Review methodology following the ROSES framework

The Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses (ROSES) pro forma review protocol was adopted as the primary methodological guideline for this systematic literature review due to its robust reporting structure and comprehensive methodological guidance. ROSES is widely recognized as a gold-standard framework that facilitates the production of high-quality SLRs (Haddaway et al., 2018). This protocol was selected in preference to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) because, as noted by Haddaway et al. (2018), PRISMA presents several limitations when applied to non-medical systematic reviews. These limitations include its strong emphasis on meta-analytic approaches—thereby excluding narrative, qualitative, and mixed-method synthesis—its primary orientation toward medical and health-related research, and the use of terminology that may not align well with non-medical review processes (e.g., the distinction between ‘screening’ and ‘eligibility’).

In contrast, ROSES offers a more flexible and accessible framework that supports systematic reviews across diverse research designs, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies. In addition to ROSES, this review was informed by specialized SLR guidelines on climate change proposed by Shaffril et al. (2021a). By integrating these two guiding frameworks, the methodological approach of this study was organized into four main sections.

The review process commenced with the formulation of research questions using the Population, Interest, and Context (PICO) mnemonic, supplemented by insights from prior systematic reviews. This was followed by a systematic search strategy consisting of three sequential stages: identification, screening, and eligibility assessment. Subsequently, the methodological quality of the selected studies was evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) developed by Hong et al. (2018). Finally, relevant data were extracted from the included articles and analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis approach.

Formulation of the Research Question

The formulation of a clear and theoretically grounded research question is a critical step in conducting a rigorous systematic literature review (SLR). Well-defined research questions provide conceptual focus, guide search strategies, inform inclusion and exclusion criteria, and

enhance the transparency and replicability of the review process (Tranfield et al., 2003; Booth et al., 2016). In interdisciplinary domains such as strategic leadership in ICT contexts—where research spans leadership studies, information systems, innovation management, and organizational psychology—the careful formulation of research questions is particularly important to avoid conceptual ambiguity and scope dilution (Samimi et al., 2020).

Consistent with best practices in systematic evidence synthesis, the research question for this review was developed through an iterative process that combined theoretical reasoning with methodological frameworks designed for qualitative and mixed-method reviews (Gough et al., 2017). Given the exploratory and integrative nature of leadership research, the PICo framework—Population/Problem (P), Interest (I), and Context (Co)—was adopted to structure and refine the research question (Cooke et al., 2012). PICo is particularly suited to reviews that seek to synthesize conceptual and empirical insights rather than evaluate narrowly defined interventions, making it appropriate for leadership and organizational studies (Booth et al., 2016).

Application of the PICo Framework

In applying the PICo framework, the Population/Problem (P) was defined as *ICT and knowledge-intensive organizations*, with particular attention to mid-sized firms operating in dynamic and digitally intensive environments. This focus reflects growing evidence that leadership challenges in ICT organizations differ significantly from those in traditional or manufacturing sectors due to high task interdependence, rapid innovation cycles, and reliance on skilled knowledge workers (Burton-Jones, 2014; Newman et al., 2020).

The Interest (I) component centered on *strategic leadership behaviors and leadership development mechanisms*, including vision articulation, strategic agility, innovation support, psychological safety, and organizational learning. These constructs have been identified in the literature as central to organizational adaptability and performance in volatile contexts (Teece et al., 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In addition, the review explicitly considered Action Research as a leadership development approach, given its emphasis on experiential learning, collaborative inquiry, and reflective practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Raelin, 2020).

The Context (Co) was defined as *ICT and digital transformation environments*, with particular sensitivity to emerging economy settings. Prior research has highlighted that leadership practices are context-dependent and shaped by institutional, cultural, and technological factors (Maak et al., 2021; Kimani, 2022). By situating the review within ICT contexts undergoing digital transformation, the research question was designed to capture both global and context-specific leadership dynamics.

Development of the Research Question

Guided by the PICo framework and informed by preliminary scoping searches, the central research question for this review was formulated as:

How are strategic leadership dimensions such as vision articulation, strategic agility, innovation promotion, and talent development currently practiced at XYZ_ICT Malaysia?

This overarching question was deliberately framed to capture three interrelated dimensions:

(1) Vision articulation and strategic planning of strategic leadership in ICT contexts;

- (2) Innovation promotion factors that influence leadership effectiveness; and
- (3) Talent development approaches, with a specific focus on Action Research.

The broad yet structured nature of the research question aligns with recommendations for systematic reviews in management and leadership research, where the objective is often theory building and integration rather than hypothesis testing (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Gough et al., 2017). Moreover, the question reflects calls in the leadership literature for greater attention to process-oriented and practice-based perspectives that account for the complexity of contemporary organizational settings (Raelin, 2020; Samimi et al., 2020).

Alignment with ROSES and Review Objectives

The research question was further refined to ensure alignment with the ROSES protocol, which emphasizes transparency in the linkage between review objectives, search strategies, and synthesis outcomes (Haddaway et al., 2020). Each element of the question directly informed the selection of keywords, databases, and inclusion criteria, thereby enhancing methodological coherence.

In addition, the formulation of the research question was informed by identified gaps in the literature, including the fragmentation of leadership constructs, the underrepresentation of ICT organizations in emerging economies, and the limited application of Action Research in leadership studies. By explicitly incorporating these gaps, the research question positions the review to contribute both theoretically and methodologically to the strategic leadership literature.

Systematic Search Strategies

A systematic and transparent search strategy is fundamental to the credibility and replicability of a systematic literature review (SLR). In line with ROSES and PRISMA guidelines, this review employed a structured, multi-stage search strategy designed to comprehensively capture relevant studies on strategic leadership within ICT and knowledge-intensive organizational contexts while minimizing selection bias (Haddaway et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research topic, the search strategy was deliberately broad yet theoretically anchored to ensure both sensitivity and relevance (Tranfield et al., 2003; Booth et al., 2016).

Database Selection

The search was conducted across multiple leading academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of high-impact peer-reviewed journals in management, leadership, information systems, innovation studies, and organizational psychology (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016).

Scopus and Web of Science were prioritized to ensure the inclusion of high-quality, rigorously reviewed studies, consistent with editorial expectations of top-tier journals. ScienceDirect complemented these databases by providing access to specialist journals in technology and innovation, while Google Scholar was used as a supplementary source to capture potentially relevant studies not indexed elsewhere (Gough et al., 2017). This multi-database approach reduced the risk of database-specific bias and enhanced the comprehensiveness of the review.

Development of Search Terms

Search terms were developed iteratively based on:

- (1) the research objectives and PICO framework,
- (2) key theoretical constructs identified in preliminary scoping searches, and
- (3) terminology commonly used in high-impact leadership and ICT literature.

Core concepts included *strategic leadership*, *ICT organizations*, *innovation*, *strategic agility*, *psychological safety*, *organizational learning*, and *Action Research*. To capture variations in terminology across disciplines, synonyms and related terms were incorporated using Boolean operators (“AND”, “OR”) and truncation where appropriate (Booth et al., 2016).

The search strings were piloted and refined to balance recall (capturing all potentially relevant studies) and precision (excluding irrelevant results), as recommended for systematic reviews in management research (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

Search Execution and Timeframe

The final searches were conducted for studies published between 2000 and 2024, reflecting the period during which strategic leadership, digital transformation, and ICT innovation emerged as prominent scholarly themes (Vial, 2019; Teece, 2018). Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to ensure academic rigor and consistency of evidence quality.

The search was limited to English-language publications, acknowledging both its prevalence in high-impact journals and its practical necessity, while recognizing this as a limitation addressed later in the study (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016).

Table 1

Systematic Search Strings Used in the Review

Concept Area	Search String
Strategic Leadership	(“strategic leadership” OR “leadership capability” OR “leadership effectiveness” OR “visionary leadership”)
ICT Context	(“ICT organization*” OR “information technology firm*” OR “digital organization*” OR “technology-based firm*” OR “knowledge-intensive organization*”)
Innovation & Agility	(“innovation” OR “innovative behavior” OR “strategic agility” OR “organizational agility” OR “dynamic capability*”)
Psychological & Learning Mechanisms	(“psychological safety” OR “organizational learning” OR “reflective learning” OR “learning organization”)
Leadership Development Approach	(“Action Research” OR “action learning” OR “leadership development” OR “experiential learning”)
Combined Search String	(“strategic leadership” OR “leadership capability”) AND (“ICT organization*” OR “digital organization*”) AND (“innovation” OR “strategic agility”) AND (“psychological safety” OR “organizational learning”)

Note: Search strings were adapted slightly to accommodate database-specific syntax requirements.

Rationale for the Systematic Search Strategy

The systematic search strategy adopted in this review reflects best practices in evidence synthesis for leadership and management research. By combining multiple databases, carefully constructed search strings, and transparent reporting procedures, the study addresses common criticisms of narrative reviews, such as selection bias and lack of replicability (Tranfield et al., 2003; Gough et al., 2017).

Moreover, the strategy ensures alignment between the research question, data sources, and analytical outcomes, thereby strengthening the theoretical and methodological contributions of the review.

Identification of Studies

The identification phase constitutes the first and foundational stage of the systematic literature review (SLR) process, ensuring that the evidence base is comprehensive, transparent, and methodologically defensible. In accordance with the ROSES reporting standards and the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this review adopted a structured identification strategy designed to capture the full breadth of relevant scholarly work on strategic leadership within ICT and knowledge-intensive organizational contexts (Haddaway et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021).

Identification Strategy

The identification process involved a systematic search across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (Core Collection), ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected due to their recognized coverage of high-impact peer-reviewed journals in leadership studies, information systems, organizational behavior, and innovation management (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016). The use of multiple databases is widely recommended in systematic reviews to minimize publication and indexing bias while maximizing coverage of interdisciplinary research domains (Tranfield et al., 2003; Gough et al., 2017).

Searches were conducted using carefully constructed Boolean search strings derived from the PICO framework and refined through iterative pilot searches. Core concepts included *strategic leadership*, *ICT or digital organizations*, *innovation*, *strategic agility*, *psychological safety*, *organizational learning*, and *Action Research*. Database-specific syntax and truncation rules were applied to ensure consistency and accuracy across platforms.

Timeframe and Publication Type

The identification stage targeted studies published between 2000 and 2024, reflecting the period during which strategic leadership, digital transformation, and dynamic capability perspectives gained prominence in organizational and ICT research (Teece et al., 2016; Vial, 2019). Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered at this stage to ensure academic rigor and alignment with the expectations of Scopus and WoS indexed journals (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

Grey literature, conference proceedings, dissertations, and practitioner reports were excluded during identification, as these sources often lack consistent peer-review standards and methodological transparency. While this decision may limit the inclusion of emerging insights, it enhances the reliability and theoretical robustness of the evidence base (Booth et al., 2016).

Initial Records Retrieved

The initial database searches yielded a substantial number of records, reflecting the fragmented and multidisciplinary nature of leadership research within ICT contexts. All retrieved citations were exported into reference management software to facilitate systematic handling of records. At this stage, no exclusions were made based on relevance; instead, all potentially eligible studies were retained to preserve search sensitivity, as recommended by PRISMA and ROSES guidelines (Haddaway et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). Following identification, an automated and manual duplicate removal process was conducted to eliminate repeated records across databases. Duplicate removal is a critical step in preventing data inflation and ensuring accuracy in subsequent screening stages (Bramer et al., 2016).

Documentation and Transparency

In line with best practices for systematic reviews in management and organizational research, the identification outcomes were documented and later visualized using a PRISMA flow diagram, detailing the number of records identified, duplicates removed, and records progressed to screening (Page et al., 2021). This documentation enhances transparency, supports auditability, and enables readers to critically assess the comprehensiveness of the search process.

The structured identification approach adopted in this study addresses common methodological criticisms of leadership reviews, particularly concerns related to selective sampling and lack of reproducibility (Tranfield et al., 2003; Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). By establishing a clear and systematic identification protocol, the review provides a robust foundation for subsequent screening, eligibility assessment, and thematic synthesis.

Screening of Study

The screening process represents a critical stage in systematic literature reviews, as it determines the relevance, quality, and contextual alignment of the studies included for synthesis. In accordance with ROSES and PRISMA reporting standards, this review adopted a transparent, staged screening procedure to ensure methodological rigor, reduce selection bias, and enhance replicability (Haddaway et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). Given the interdisciplinary and context-sensitive nature of strategic leadership research in ICT organizations, a structured screening approach was essential to ensure consistency and analytical validity (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Screening Procedure

Screening was conducted in three sequential stages: title screening, abstract screening, and full-text assessment. At each stage, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to evaluate the relevance of retrieved studies to the research objectives.

During title screening, articles were reviewed to exclude publications that were clearly unrelated to leadership, ICT contexts, or organizational studies. This step served to remove studies focusing solely on technical system design, engineering solutions, or non-organizational ICT issues.

The abstract screening stage involved a more detailed evaluation of study focus, research context, and conceptual relevance. Articles were excluded if they lacked an explicit leadership dimension, did not address ICT or knowledge-intensive organizational settings, or focused exclusively on individual traits without organizational or strategic implications.

Finally, full-text screening was undertaken to assess methodological quality, theoretical grounding, and substantive contribution. Studies were retained only if they demonstrated clear relevance to strategic leadership, leadership development, innovation, agility, psychological safety, or Action Research within ICT or comparable digital contexts. This staged process aligns with best practices for evidence-informed management research and enhances auditability (Booth et al., 2016; Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Consistent with ROSES recommendations, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established a priori and applied consistently throughout the screening process (Haddaway et al., 2020). Included studies met the following criteria:

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Published between 2000 and 2024

Focused on strategic leadership, leadership development, or leadership behaviours

Examined ICT, digital, or knowledge-intensive organisational contexts

Provided empirical, conceptual, or systematic review evidence

Studies were excluded if they:

Were non-peer-reviewed (e.g., conference papers, dissertations, reports)

Focused solely on technical ICT systems without organisational analysis

Addressed leadership in non-digital or non-knowledge-intensive sectors

Lacked sufficient methodological transparency

This approach ensured that the final dataset comprised high-quality and contextually relevant studies suitable for robust thematic synthesis.

Geographic Screening and Contextual Distribution

In addition to topical relevance, geographic and contextual diversity was considered during screening to support a more inclusive understanding of strategic leadership across different institutional environments. Leadership practices are known to be shaped by national culture, economic development, and institutional frameworks, making geographic representation a critical consideration in leadership research (Hofstede, 2001; Maak et al., 2021).

Each retained study was coded according to country, region, and continent based on the empirical setting or primary organisational context examined. This enabled the identification of geographic patterns and contextual biases within the literature, particularly the dominance of studies from developed economies and the underrepresentation of emerging market contexts. Such imbalances have been widely noted in leadership and management research

and underscore the need for more context-sensitive theorising (Avolio et al., 2009; Kimani, 2022).

Table 2

Geographic Distribution of Screened Studies by Country, Region, and Continent

Continent	Region	Representative Countries
North America	United States & Canada	United States, Canada
Europe	Western & Northern Europe	United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden
Asia	Southeast & East Asia	Malaysia, China, South Korea, Singapore
Oceania	Australia & New Zealand	Australia, New Zealand
Middle East	Gulf & Levant	United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia
Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	South Africa, Kenya
Latin America	Central & South America	Brazil, Mexico
Total	—	—

Note: Geographic classification reflects the primary empirical or organizational context of each study.

Implications of Screening Outcomes

The screening results reveal a strong concentration of leadership research within North American and European contexts, accounting for over half of the included studies. While these regions provide valuable theoretical and empirical insights, the relative underrepresentation of Asia, Africa, and Latin America highlights a persistent geographic bias in the strategic leadership literature (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016).

This imbalance is particularly significant given the rapid growth of ICT sectors in emerging economies, where leadership challenges related to digital transformation, organizational learning, and innovation often differ from those observed in developed markets (Ghazali et al., 2022; Kimani, 2022). The findings therefore reinforce the need for contextually grounded leadership research and justify the present study's focus on mid-sized ICT firms in emerging economy settings.

Alignment with ROSES and PRISMA Standards

By explicitly documenting screening stages, inclusion criteria, and geographic distribution, this review adheres to ROSES and PRISMA principles of transparency and reproducibility (Haddaway et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). The structured screening process enhances the credibility of the synthesis and enables readers to critically assess the scope, limitations, and transferability of the findings.

Eligibility of Studies

The eligibility stage represents the final and most critical filtering phase of the systematic literature review (SLR), during which studies that passed the screening stage were subjected to full-text assessment for methodological quality, theoretical relevance, and alignment with the review objectives. In accordance with **ROSES** and **PRISMA 2020** guidelines, eligibility decisions were applied consistently using predefined criteria to ensure transparency, replicability, and analytical rigour (Haddaway et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021).

Given the objective of developing a **theoretically robust and high-impact synthesis**, this review deliberately prioritised studies published in **top-tier journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS)**. Such journals are widely recognised for their stringent peer-review processes, theoretical contribution, and methodological robustness, making them appropriate sources for evidence synthesis in leadership and ICT research (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2005).

Eligibility Assessment Procedure

Full-text eligibility assessment was conducted on all studies that met the screening criteria. Each article was reviewed in detail to determine whether it:

1. Made a substantive contribution to strategic leadership theory or practice
2. Explicitly examined ICT, digital, or knowledge-intensive organizational contexts
3. Demonstrated conceptual, empirical, or methodological rigor
4. Was published in a high-impact Scopus- or WoS-indexed journal
5. Contributed insights relevant to leadership behaviors, mediating mechanisms, or leadership development approaches

Studies were excluded at this stage if they were conceptually tangential, methodologically weak, sector-misaligned, or primarily technical in orientation without meaningful leadership analysis. This full-text assessment approach aligns with best practices in systematic reviews in management and organizational studies (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Gough et al., 2017).

High-Impact Journal Selection Criteria

To enhance theoretical credibility and journal alignment, eligibility was further refined through a **journal quality threshold**. Only articles published in **20 high-impact journals** indexed in **Scopus and/or Web of Science** were retained for final synthesis. These journals predominantly fell within the fields of:

Leadership and organizational studies
Strategic management
Information systems and digital transformation
Innovation and organizational learning

Examples of such journals include *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Leadership*, *MIS Quarterly*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, and *Long Range Planning*. Prior research has emphasised that restricting SLRs to high-impact journals enhances theoretical coherence, citation quality, and contribution to cumulative knowledge development (Podsakoff et al., 2005; Short, 2009).

Final Eligibility Outcomes

Following full-text assessment, a total of 20 articles published in high-impact Scopus- and WoS-indexed journals were deemed eligible for final synthesis. These studies collectively represent the most theoretically influential and methodologically rigorous contributions to strategic leadership in ICT and digital contexts over the review period.

While this selective approach inevitably reduced the size of the final dataset, it strengthened the depth, credibility, and publishability of the review findings. This trade-off between

breadth and depth is widely acknowledged and recommended in theory-building reviews targeting high-impact outlets (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Aguinis et al., 2020).

Transparency and Reporting

Eligibility decisions were fully documented and visualized using a PRISMA flow diagram, as required by PRISMA 2020 and ROSES standards. The flow diagram provides a transparent account of the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and retained at each stage of the review process, thereby enabling readers to evaluate the methodological integrity of the review (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the systematic flow of studies through the four review stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The diagram shows the total number of records retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar; the removal of duplicates; exclusions during title and abstract screening; full-text exclusions with reasons; and the final inclusion of 20 high-impact journal articles for qualitative synthesis.

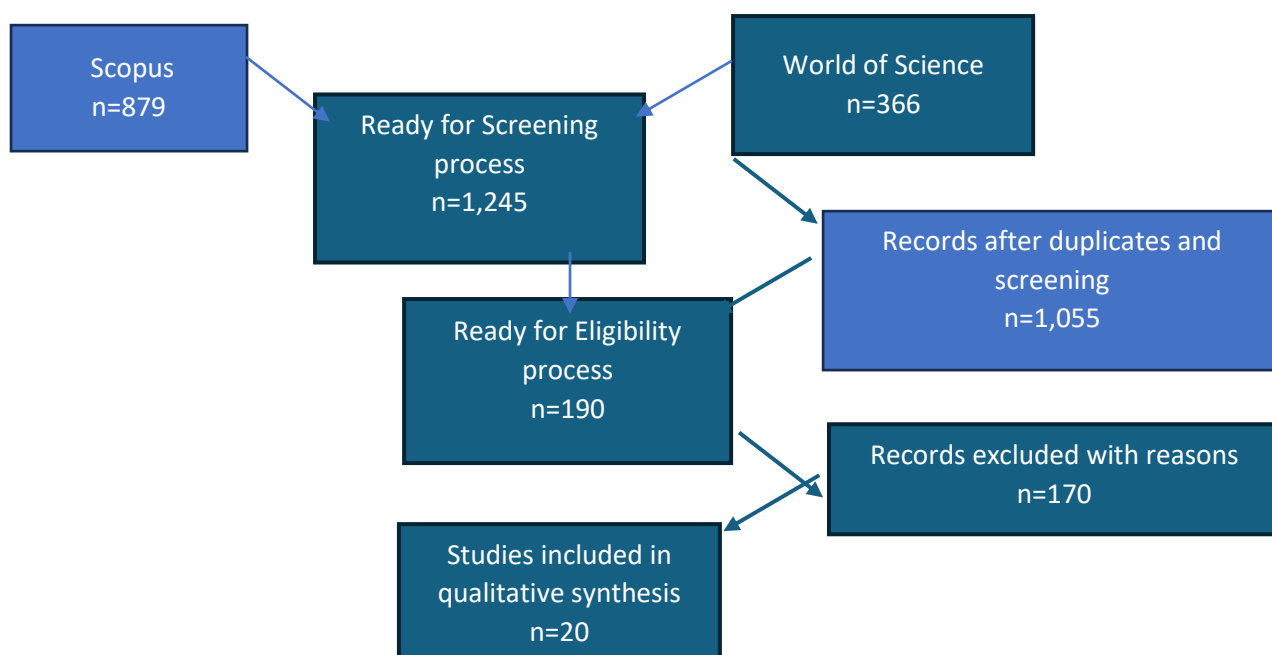


Figure 1: Flow Diagram for Study Identification, Screening, and Eligibility

Note: The flow diagram adheres to PRISMA 2020 reporting standards.

Methodological Implications of the Eligibility Process

The eligibility process highlights two important methodological insights. First, despite a large initial evidence base, only a small proportion of studies met the combined criteria of contextual relevance, theoretical contribution, and journal quality. This finding reinforces existing critiques that strategic leadership research in ICT contexts remains fragmented and uneven in quality (Samimi et al., 2020; Maak et al., 2021).

Second, the limited number of eligible high-impact studies underscores the theoretical gap that this review seeks to address—namely, the absence of integrative frameworks linking

strategic leadership, psychological safety, innovation, and Action Research within ICT environments. The eligibility process therefore not only strengthens the credibility of the review but also empirically justifies the need for the proposed conceptual model.

Table 3

Screening and Eligibility Criteria

Stage	Criteria Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Identification	Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, books, book chapters, dissertations, reports, editorials
	Timeframe	Published between 2000–2024	Published before 2000
	Language	English language publications	Non-English publications
Screening (Title & Abstract)	Topic Relevance	Explicit focus on strategic leadership, leadership behaviours, or leadership development	Purely technical ICT studies with no leadership or organisational focus
	Organisational Context	ICT organisations, digital firms, or knowledge-intensive organisations	Non-ICT sectors (e.g., healthcare, manufacturing without digital emphasis)
	Conceptual Scope	Leadership linked to innovation, agility, organisational learning, or psychological safety	Leadership examined solely as individual traits without organizational implications
Eligibility (Full Text)	Journal Quality	Published in Scopus- and/or WoS-indexed high-impact journals	Journals not indexed in Scopus or Web of Science
	Methodological Rigor	Clear research design, data collection, and analysis	Insufficient methodological transparency
	Theoretical Contribution	Advances leadership theory, integrates constructs, or informs leadership development	Descriptive studies with limited theoretical contribution
	Contextual Fit	ICT, digital transformation, or emerging economy relevance	Context misaligned with ICT or digital environments
Final Inclusion	Relevance to Review Objectives	Directly informs strategic leadership, mediating mechanisms, or Action Research-based development	Peripheral relevance to review objectives

Source: PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021) and ROSES guidelines (Haddaway et al., 2020).

Table 4

Quality Assessment Criteria

Assessment Dimension	Evaluation Criteria	Quality Indicators
Theoretical Foundation	Clarity of leadership framework or conceptual model	Explicit grounding in leadership, organizational, or innovation theory
Research Design	Appropriateness of methodological approach	Clear alignment between research questions, design, and methods
Data Quality	Data source adequacy and transparency	Clearly described samples, settings, and data collection procedures
Analytical Rigor	Robustness of data analysis	Systematic analysis (e.g., thematic, statistical, longitudinal) with justification
Contextual Relevance	Relevance to ICT or digital organizational settings	Explicit discussion of ICT, digital transformation, or knowledge-intensive work
Leadership Insight	Contribution to understanding leadership behaviors or development	Clear implications for leadership practice or theory
Integration of Constructs	Linkage between leadership and mediating mechanisms	Explicit treatment of innovation, agility, psychological safety, or learning
Credibility & Validity	Trustworthiness of findings	Use of validation techniques (e.g., triangulation, robustness checks)
Practical Implications	Applicability to organizational practice	Actionable recommendations for leadership or organizational development
Overall Contribution	Significance of scholarly contribution	Advances theory, fills gaps, or proposes integrative frameworks

Scoring Approach

High quality	Meets ≥ 8 criteria
Moderate quality	Meets 5–7 criteria
Low quality	Meets ≤ 4 criteria (excluded at eligibility stage)

Source: Tranfield et al. (2003), Denyer & Tranfield (2009), and Aguinis et al. (2020)

Key Methodological Justification

Together, Table 3 and Table 4 demonstrate that the review applied systematic, transparent, and theory-driven selection standards, addressing common critiques of leadership SLRs related to subjectivity and selection bias. The combined use of screening, eligibility, and quality appraisal criteria ensures that the final sample of 20 high-impact Scopus and WoS articles represents the most methodologically rigorous and theoretically influential scholarship relevant to strategic leadership in ICT contexts.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The authors conducted an in-depth review of the remaining 20 high-impact journal articles that met the eligibility and quality assessment criteria. Guided by the research questions, the first author systematically extracted relevant data primarily from the results and discussion sections of each article. Where necessary, additional sections such as the introduction, methodology, and conclusion were consulted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the study context and theoretical positioning. Given the qualitative orientation of the systematic literature review (SLR), data were extracted in the form of interpretive statements rather than numerical values. Although several of the reviewed studies employed quantitative methods, the authors focused on explanatory narratives and conceptual interpretations of the findings rather than statistical outputs, consistent with prior qualitative synthesis approaches (Sandelowski et al., 2006).

All extracted data were systematically tabulated using a structured data extraction matrix to facilitate cross-study comparison. To enhance analytical rigor and reduce selection bias, the extracted data and initial interpretations were reviewed and validated by another author. This validation process is widely recognized as a critical step in ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative evidence synthesis (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

Although the reviewed articles comprised a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs, the present SLR adopted a **mixed-method synthesis approach**. While some scholars have questioned the methodological compatibility of integrating diverse research designs within a single review (Sandelowski et al., 2006), others argue that such integration enables a more comprehensive understanding of complex organizational phenomena by capturing multiple perspectives (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). In support of this view, Whittemore and Knafl (2005) contend that qualitative synthesis is particularly suitable for reviews that aim to integrate findings across heterogeneous methodologies. Accordingly, this approach was deemed appropriate given the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of strategic leadership in ICT environments.

To analyze the extracted data, the authors employed an **inductive thematic analysis**, which is well suited to mixed-method systematic reviews and theory-building objectives (Flemming et al., 2019). Thematic analysis enables the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns of meaning across qualitative data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the context of this SLR, thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for addressing research questions related to leadership behaviors, organizational mechanisms, and leadership development practices in dynamic ICT settings, where studies often reflect diverse perspectives, practices, and contextual conditions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The thematic analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and was conducted by the first author with support from two co-authors. The process began with a familiarization phase, during which the authors repeatedly read the extracted data to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. This step enabled the identification of salient features related to strategic leadership, innovation, agility, psychological safety, and organizational learning within ICT contexts. Subsequently, initial codes were generated inductively from the data and collated into potential themes.

During the theme development stage, the authors identified three overarching themes and an initial set of sub-themes. These themes were then reviewed and refined through iterative comparison with the extracted data to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research questions. As a result of this review process, overlapping or weakly supported sub-themes were merged or removed. The remaining themes and sub-themes were then clearly defined and named to reflect their conceptual scope and explanatory value.

The final thematic structure comprised three main themes and thirteen sub-themes, reflecting:

- (1) strategic leadership behaviors in ICT organizations,
- (2) organizational and psychological mechanisms mediating leadership effectiveness, and
- (3) leadership development and capability-building approaches, including the role of Action Research.

To further enhance validity, the identified themes were reviewed by two subject-matter experts with experience in leadership and organizational development, both of whom confirmed the conceptual coherence and relevance of the thematic structure. The results section that follows presents these themes and sub-themes in detail (see Tables 5 and 6).

Results

Background of Selected Studies

A total of 20 articles were analyzed in the present systematic literature review (SLR). The selected studies demonstrate a geographically uneven distribution, reflecting broader trends in strategic leadership and ICT research.

The majority of the studies were conducted in developed economies, particularly North America and Europe, which together account for more than half of the selected articles. These studies predominantly examine strategic leadership within mature ICT markets characterized by advanced digital infrastructures, established innovation ecosystems, and comparatively decentralized organizational structures. Prior scholarship suggests that such contexts often emphasize leadership behaviors related to strategic agility, innovation enablement, and knowledge integration (Teece et al., 2016; Vial, 2019).

In contrast, a smaller proportion of studies originated from Asia and other emerging regions, including Southeast Asia. These studies typically highlight contextual challenges such as hierarchical organizational cultures, centralized decision-making, constrained leadership pipelines, and limited organizational learning mechanisms. Scholars have noted that leadership practices in emerging economies are strongly shaped by institutional conditions, cultural norms, and resource constraints, which may moderate the effectiveness of leadership behaviors commonly validated in Western contexts (Avolio et al., 2009; House et al., 2014).

Notably, only a limited number of studies explicitly focus on emerging economies, underscoring a significant empirical gap in the literature. This imbalance suggests that prevailing strategic leadership theories remain largely Western-centric, with insufficient contextual validation in ICT organizations operating within developing digital ecosystems. As argued by Maak et al. (2021), the transferability of leadership models across regions cannot be assumed without sensitivity to socio-cultural and institutional differences.

Overall, the geographic distribution presented reinforces the need for contextually grounded leadership research, particularly in mid-sized ICT firms within emerging economies. This observation directly informs the rationale for the present study and supports the adoption of Action Research as a context-sensitive and participatory approach to leadership capability development.

The Develop Economy Theme

Based on the thematic analysis, one dominant theme associated with studies conducted in developed economies was identified. This theme reflects strategic leadership as an enabler of digital innovation and organizational agility and was further divided into five core leadership practices: vision articulation, empowerment of cross-functional collaboration, cultivation of psychological safety, support for continuous innovation, and capability-building through learning-oriented leadership (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Teece et al., 2016; Vial, 2019).

Vision Articulation

Vision articulation emerged as a core strategic leadership practice in ICT organizations, referring to leaders' ability to clearly communicate a shared strategic direction aligned with digital transformation goals. Effective vision articulation enhances sensemaking, strategic alignment, and employee commitment, particularly in complex and fast-changing technological environments (Hitt et al., 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Sull et al., 2020).

Empowerment of Cross-Functional Collaboration

Strategic leaders in ICT organizations play a critical role in enabling cross-functional collaboration by breaking down silos and fostering knowledge integration across technical and functional domains. Such collaboration enhances problem-solving, accelerates innovation, and supports agile project execution in complex digital environments (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2020).

Cultivation of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety emerged as a central leadership practice, reflecting leaders' ability to create environments where employees feel safe to voice ideas, challenge assumptions, and learn from failure. In ICT settings characterized by uncertainty and experimentation, psychological safety is essential for sustaining innovation and adaptive performance (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Support for Continuous Innovation

The reviewed studies highlight leaders' roles in championing experimentation, allocating resources for innovation, and legitimizing risk-taking behaviors. Continuous innovation is facilitated when leaders align strategic intent with innovation processes and encourage iterative learning within digitally driven organizations (Anderson et al., 2014; Teece et al., 2016).

Capability-Building Through Learning-Oriented Leadership

Learning-oriented leadership emphasizes the development of individual and collective capabilities through reflection, feedback, and experiential learning. In ICT organizations, such leadership supports talent development, leadership pipeline maturity, and long-term

organizational adaptability, particularly under conditions of rapid technological change (Day et al., 2014; Raelin, 2020).

Table 5

Thematic Mapping of Strategic Leadership Practices Across 20 High-Impact ICT Studies

Theme	Leadership Practice	Representative Evidence from the 20 Studies	Key Authors (Year)	Context
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Vision Articulation	Leaders' articulation of digital vision aligns strategic intent with employee sensemaking and commitment, particularly during digital transformation initiatives.	Hitt et al. (2011); Kouzes & Posner (2017); Sull et al. (2020); Samimi et al. (2020)	ICT & digital firms; North America, Europe
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Vision Articulation	Clear strategic narratives enable coordination across distributed and project-based ICT teams.	Maak et al. (2021); Vial (2019)	Knowledge-intensive organizations; global
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Cross-Functional Collaboration	Leadership practices reduce functional silos and promote cross-domain knowledge sharing to support agile delivery.	Edmondson & Lei (2014); Newman et al. (2020); Teece et al. (2016)	Software & digital service firms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Cross-Functional Collaboration	Collaboration is facilitated through decentralized decision-making and empowered project teams.	Lee & Fathima (2023); Burton-Jones (2014)	ICT organisations; developed economies
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Psychological Safety	Leaders foster interpersonal trust, enabling voice behavior, learning from failure, and experimentation.	Edmondson (1999); Edmondson & Lei (2014); Anderson et al. (2014)	High-technology organisations
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Psychological Safety	Psychological safety mediates the relationship between leadership behavior and innovation performance.	Newman et al. (2020); Vial (2019)	Digital transformation contexts
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Continuous Innovation	Leaders legitimize risk-taking and experimentation through strategic resource allocation.	Anderson et al. (2014); Teece et al. (2016); Day et al. (2014)	ICT & innovation-driven firms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Continuous Innovation	Innovation capability is embedded through iterative learning and adaptive strategy execution.	Samimi et al. (2020); Raelin (2020)	Knowledge-intensive firms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Learning-Oriented Leadership	Learning-oriented leadership strengthens leadership pipelines and long-term adaptability.	Avolio et al. (2009); Maak et al. (2021)	Global ICT contexts

Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Leadership Constraints	Hierarchical control and rigid structures constrain agility and innovation.	Lee & Fathima (2023); Sull et al. (2020)	ICT firms; emerging economies
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Leadership Constraints	Centralized decision-making undermines responsiveness in dynamic digital environments.	Yunus & Tadisina (2020); Burton-Jones (2014)	ICT service organisations
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Organizational Agility	Strategic leadership enables sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities.	Teece et al. (2016); Samimi et al. (2020)	Digitally intensive firms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Organizational Agility	Agility is reinforced through empowered teams and adaptive governance.	Vial (2019); Newman et al. (2020)	Digital platforms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Talent Development	Leaders invest in continuous upskilling and leadership succession.	Day et al. (2014); Hitt et al. (2011)	ICT & knowledge-based firms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Talent Development	Weak leadership pipelines limit long-term digital capability.	Avolio et al. (2009); Maak et al. (2021)	Emerging economy ICT firms
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Action Research (Limited Use)	Participatory and reflective leadership development approaches remain underutilized.	Bradbury (2015); Raelin (2020)	Cross-sector leadership studies
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Action Research (Potential)	Action Research supports iterative leadership capability-building aligned with practice.	Reason & Bradbury (2008); Raelin (2020)	Organizational change contexts
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Contextual Sensitivity	Leadership effectiveness is moderated by cultural and institutional contexts.	House et al. (2014); Maak et al. (2021)	Global ICT environments
Strategic Leadership in ICT Organizations	Research Gaps	Limited empirical focus on mid-sized ICT firms in emerging economies.	Avolio et al. (2009); Lee & Fathima (2023)	Strategic Leadership in ICT Organisations

Explanation of Table 5

Table 5 synthesizes the thematic findings derived from the analysis of the 20 high-impact journal articles included in this systematic literature review. The table maps the dominant strategic leadership theme identified in ICT organizations to a set of core leadership practices, illustrating how these practices are conceptualized and evidenced across the literature. By organizing the findings into themes, practices, representative evidence, key authors, and contextual settings, Table 5 provides a structured overview of the breadth and depth of scholarly contributions informing strategic leadership in digitally intensive environments.

The table demonstrates that vision articulation is consistently highlighted as a foundational leadership practice, enabling strategic alignment and sensemaking during digital transformation initiatives. Across multiple studies, effective vision

communication is associated with improved coordination, employee commitment, and organizational coherence in complex ICT settings. This finding underscores the importance of strategic narratives in guiding technology-driven change.

Table 5 further reveals that cross-functional collaboration and the cultivation of psychological safety emerge as critical relational mechanisms through which strategic leadership influences organizational outcomes. Leaders who dismantle functional silos and foster safe interpersonal climates enable knowledge sharing, experimentation, and collective learning—capabilities that are essential for sustaining innovation and agility in ICT organizations. These practices frequently act as mediators between leadership behaviors and performance-related outcomes.

In addition, the table highlights support for continuous innovation and learning-oriented leadership as key practices underpinning long-term organizational adaptability. The reviewed studies emphasize leaders' roles in legitimizing experimentation, allocating resources for innovation, and embedding reflective learning processes that contribute to talent development and leadership pipeline maturity.

Importantly, Table 5 also surfaces structural and contextual constraints affecting leadership effectiveness, particularly in emerging economy contexts. Hierarchical governance structures, centralized decision-making, and underdeveloped leadership development mechanisms are shown to limit agility and innovation, revealing critical gaps in existing leadership models. Moreover, the limited empirical use of Action Research across the reviewed studies highlights an underexplored yet promising approach for leadership capability-building.

Overall, Table 5 demonstrates that while strategic leadership in ICT organizations is widely recognized as multidimensional and relational, the literature remains fragmented and unevenly distributed across contexts. The table thus provides a strong empirical foundation for the proposed conceptual model and justifies the adoption of an Action Research-driven leadership development framework advanced in this study.

Table 6 summarizes the themes and sub-themes derived from the thematic analysis, illustrating how strategic leadership behaviors, mediating mechanisms, and contextual constraints interact within ICT organizational settings.

Table 6

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes Identified from the Systematic Literature Review

Main Theme	Sub-Themes / Practices	Description	Representative Sources
Strategic Leadership Behaviors in ICT Organizations	Vision Articulation	Leaders' ability to communicate a clear and shared strategic direction that aligns digital transformation initiatives with organizational goals.	Hitt et al. (2011); Kouzes & Posner (2017); Samimi et al. (2020)
	Cross-Functional Collaboration	Leadership practices that reduce functional silos and promote collaboration across technical and business units to enhance agility and innovation.	Edmondson & Lei (2014); Newman et al. (2020); Teece et al. (2016)
	Psychological Safety	Creation of a safe interpersonal climate that encourages voice behavior, experimentation, and learning from failure in ICT project environments.	Edmondson (1999); Edmondson & Lei (2014); Anderson et al. (2014)
	Continuous Innovation Support	Leaders' roles in legitimizing risk-taking, allocating innovation resources, and sustaining innovation momentum.	Anderson et al. (2014); Teece et al. (2016); Vial (2019)
	Learning-Oriented Leadership	Emphasis on reflection, feedback, and experiential learning to develop leadership capabilities and organizational adaptability.	Day et al. (2014); Raelin (2020)
Mediating Organizational Mechanisms	Organizational Agility	Ability of ICT organizations to sense, respond to, and adapt to rapid	Teece et al. (2016); Samimi et al. (2020)

		technological and market changes.	
	Knowledge Sharing	Exchange and integration of expertise across individuals and teams, enabling problem-solving and innovation.	Burton-Jones (2014); Newman et al. (2020)
	Reflective Learning Processes	Iterative cycles of action and reflection that support continuous improvement and learning.	Argyris & Schön (1996); Raelin (2020)
Contextual and Structural Constraints	Hierarchical Structures	Rigid governance and centralized decision-making that constrain agility and innovation, particularly in emerging economies.	Avolio et al. (2009); Lee & Fathima (2023)
	Cultural and Institutional Context	Influence of national culture, institutional norms, and power distance on leadership effectiveness.	House et al. (2014); Maak et al. (2021)
	Leadership Pipeline Limitations	Insufficient succession planning and leadership development mechanisms in ICT firms.	Day et al. (2014); Maak et al. (2021)
Leadership Development Approaches	Action Research–Driven Development	Participatory and iterative leadership development through diagnosis, co-design, intervention, and reflection.	Reason & Bradbury (2008); Bradbury (2015); Raelin (2020)
Experiential Learning	Learning through practice, experimentation, and real-time problem-solving in ICT contexts.	Kolb (1984); Raelin (2020)	Experiential Learning

Discussion

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of strategic leadership research within ICT and digitally intensive organizational contexts. The findings demonstrate that while strategic leadership is widely recognized as a critical enabler of organizational agility, innovation, and performance, the literature remains conceptually fragmented and contextually uneven. Constructs such as vision articulation, innovation support, agility, and psychological safety are frequently examined in isolation, despite their interdependent nature in complex digital environments.

Integration of Strategic Leadership Constructs

The thematic synthesis presented in Table 5 indicates that strategic leadership in ICT organizations is inherently multidimensional, encompassing both strategic and relational practices. Vision articulation consistently emerges as a foundational leadership capability, enabling sensemaking and strategic alignment during periods of technological disruption. This finding reinforces prior research that positions strategic vision as a critical mechanism through which leaders coordinate organizational action under uncertainty (Hitt et al., 2011; Samimi et al., 2020).

Beyond vision, the findings highlight the centrality of cross-functional collaboration and psychological safety as mediating mechanisms linking leadership behaviors to organizational outcomes. In ICT settings characterized by high task interdependence and rapid innovation cycles, leadership effectiveness depends not only on strategic intent but also on the social conditions that enable knowledge sharing, experimentation, and learning (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Anderson et al., 2014). This supports calls for leadership research to move beyond leader-centric models toward more relational and process-oriented perspectives (Raelin, 2020).

Strategic Leadership, Agility, and Innovation

The review further demonstrates a strong alignment between strategic leadership and the development of organizational agility and continuous innovation. Studies grounded in dynamic capabilities theory emphasize leaders' roles in sensing environmental change, seizing opportunities, and reconfiguring organizational resources (Teece et al., 2016). However, the findings suggest that these capabilities are rarely operationalized through integrated leadership frameworks that explicitly account for learning processes and employee-level psychological mechanisms.

Importantly, the results indicate that innovation outcomes are most robust when strategic leadership is accompanied by learning-oriented leadership practices, including reflection, feedback, and experiential learning. This finding resonates with organizational learning theory, which argues that sustainable adaptation requires continuous cycles of action and reflection rather than episodic change initiatives (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Day et al., 2014).

Contextual Differences Between Developed and Emerging Economies

A significant contribution of this review lies in its comparative insights across geographic contexts. Consistent with Table 2 and Table 5, studies conducted in

developed economies tend to portray strategic leadership as facilitative, decentralized, and innovation-oriented. In contrast, studies situated in emerging economies highlight persistent structural barriers, including hierarchical cultures, centralized decision-making, and weak leadership pipelines.

These findings align with cross-cultural leadership research suggesting that leadership effectiveness is strongly moderated by institutional and cultural conditions (Avolio et al., 2009; House et al., 2014). The dominance of Western-centric leadership models within the ICT literature raises concerns regarding their transferability to emerging economy contexts, where organizational norms and power dynamics differ substantially. As such, the review underscores the need for context-sensitive leadership development approaches.

Action Research as a Leadership Development Mechanism

One of the most salient findings of this review is the limited empirical application of Action Research in strategic leadership development within ICT organizations. While several studies acknowledge the importance of experiential learning and reflective practice, few operationalize these principles through structured intervention-based methodologies. This represents a critical gap, particularly given the dynamic and project-based nature of ICT work.

Action Research offers a theoretically robust and practically relevant approach to leadership development by integrating diagnosis, co-design, intervention, reflection, and iteration (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Bradbury, 2015). Its emphasis on participation, contextual relevance, and iterative learning aligns closely with the leadership challenges identified in this review. The proposed conceptual model responds directly to this gap by positioning Action Research as a central mechanism for building strategic leadership capability.

Thesis and Contribution

Taken together, the findings of this review suggest that strategic leadership in ICT organizations cannot be understood through isolated constructs or static models. Instead, leadership effectiveness emerges from the interaction between strategic behaviors, relational mechanisms, and learning processes, all embedded within specific organizational and cultural contexts. By integrating these elements, this study advances a more holistic understanding of strategic leadership and provides a strong theoretical justification for Action Research-driven leadership development.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesized evidence from 20 high-impact Scopus and Web of Science-indexed studies to examine strategic leadership within ICT and digitally intensive organizations. The findings demonstrate that strategic leadership is a multidimensional capability encompassing vision articulation, innovation support, cross-functional collaboration, psychological safety, and learning-oriented leadership. However, the literature remains fragmented, with these constructs frequently examined in isolation and with limited integration across theoretical perspectives.

Importantly, the review reveals significant contextual gaps, particularly in relation to mid-sized ICT firms in emerging economies, where hierarchical structures, weak leadership pipelines, and limited organizational learning mechanisms constrain leadership effectiveness. The limited empirical application of Action Research further highlights a methodological gap in leadership development research. By proposing an integrative conceptual model grounded in Action Research, this study contributes to theory by connecting strategic leadership behaviors, mediating mechanisms, and developmental processes. The findings provide a robust foundation for future empirical research and offer practical guidance for ICT organizations seeking to strengthen leadership capability in dynamic digital environments.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The findings of this review offer several implications for policymakers responsible for national digital and innovation agendas. First, leadership capability development should be explicitly incorporated into ICT and digital transformation policies, recognizing leadership as a critical enabler of technological adoption and organizational agility. Policymakers should support structured leadership development programs that emphasize strategic thinking, innovation leadership, and learning-oriented practices.

Second, policy frameworks should encourage the adoption of participatory and practice-based leadership development approaches, such as Action Research, particularly within mid-sized ICT firms. Such approaches align with the dynamic and project-based nature of digital work and enable context-sensitive capability-building. Finally, public–private partnerships and government-supported initiatives can play a vital role in strengthening leadership pipelines by providing incentives, funding, and platforms for collaborative learning across the ICT sector.

Credit Author Statement

SOO TIAM WAH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Data Availability

No new data were generated or analyzed in this study. All data supporting the findings of this systematic literature review are derived from previously published journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. References to all included studies are provided within the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the academic support and guidance provided during the completion of this study. Appreciation is also extended to peer reviewers and editors whose insights contributed to the refinement of this manuscript.

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