Change-Ready SMEs for Sustainable Transformation: The Role of Employee Involvement, Lean Management, and Digital Capability

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ABSTRACT

Smaller and medium-sized enterprises are under pressure to become digitalized, operate more efficiently, engage employees and deliver long-term results at the same time. However, many transformation initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes. because they're a function of companies' siloed resources that simply don't possess the organizational muscle to do what it takes to bring them to a place where people, processes and technology are aligned. This conceptual paper This paper provides an integrated overview of. employee involvement and lean management and digital capability and change readiness building a framework as drivers of change readiness with respect to how change readiness drives sustainable transformation in small and medium sized enterprises through innovative approaches. A structured narrative review of recently published peer-reviewed literature on organizational change, lean management, digital transformation, employee engagement and sustainable organisational change, employee participation and the need for employee involvement based on sustainability was performed. Employee engagement is identified as human and behavioural capability, lean management as operational and process capability, and digital capability as a technological and informational capability,. The paper argues that each capability positively predicts change readiness and that their fit creates a complementary capability profile that is more reliable than isolation of adoption. Change readiness is then proposed to connect these capabilities into sustainable transformation — economic resilience, environmental efficiency, and social value. To add to this, the framework links normally disparate research streams and serves as a context-sensitive premise for future empirical work, specifically within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises in resource constrained settings (like in Iraq and the rest of developing economies).

Keywords: Digital capability, Employee buy-in, Lean management, , Readiness for change, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) must respond to disruptions from technology, resource constraint, change in customer demand, and increased demand for sustainability at the same time. These pressures have shifted transformation from an ancillary improvement initiative to a strategic need. However, SMEs face more intense challenges to transformational adoption due to their limited capital, expertise, management time, and formalized processes, which hinder their preparedness for disruption and adjustment. According to the emerging literature, SMEs tend to fail to adopt digital technologies because they possess an incomplete awareness of digital transformation and a lack of ability to integrate technology into business strategy (Sagala & Őri, 2024; Held et al., 2026). The issue is not so much whether SMEs have practices or technologies peculiar to their industry. Companies are likely to roll out employee participation programs, lean tools or digital applications without being prepared for change. While employee involvement can engender voice, ownership, and commitment, such participation that is symbolic or not linked to decisions may not change behavior. Lean management can lead to disciplined problem solving and continuous improvement efforts, but it can be a result of short-term cost-cutting when leadership and learning are lacking. The power of digital technologies can broaden availability of information and operational visibility, yet technology investment can become patchwork when skills, culture, and process alignment are lacking (Hanelt et al., 2021; Sagala & Őri, 2024). Change readiness offers a useful means to explain why some investment in capabilities results in transformative change and others in underproductive use. The readiness of an organization to change indicates its shared commitment to change and its collective confidence in the organisation’s capacity to change (Weiner, 2009). Readiness thus

connects resources and practices to concerted action. When employees see the urgency of the change process, believe that the organization could accomplish this and feel that sufficient support exists, resistance is lessened and implementation effort is more organized (Holt et al., 2007; Potnuru et al., 2023). This is particularly pertinent at the Iraqi level. The Iraqi private sector is characterised by small and micro firms facing financing constraints, infrastructure, expertise, and institutional constraints. Insufficient digital infrastructure is a problem for small businesses — they often lack the digital infrastructure (World Bank, 2023) to fully reap the rewards of digital transformation and productivity gains. Within such a context, "the revolution cannot be supported solely by costly technology. For SMEs, change does not come from an abundance of technology but from a matched set of human involvement, operational discipline, and digital capabilities that explains, makes plausible and sustainable the impact of change. Current research has tended to focus on employee engagement, lean, and digital performance in separate streams. Employee involvement research highlights commitment and readiness, lean research shows waste reduction, quality and continuous improvement; and digital transformation studies highlight technology, leadership, culture and dynamic capabilities. Without an integrated explanation however, a conceptual gap emerges: exactly how these three capabilities collectively create readiness for transition and change towards sustainability in SMEs? This paper addresses this gap by suggesting a complementary capability framework where employee involvement, lean management and digital capability lead the transformation readiness which aids in sustainable transformation. The paper is oriented towards three aims: First, this explains the unique role of employee engagement, lean management and digital capability for SME transformation. Second, it suggests change readiness as the primary link between these capabilities and sustainable transformation. Third, it elaborates propositions and an integrated framework for empirically testing in Iraq and other resource-challenged developing countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable transformation in SMEs

Sustainable transformation is an organization-wide process by which a firm reconfigures its strategy, operations, technologies, and stakeholder relationships in order to deliver lasting economic, environmental, and social value. It is more extensive than adopting single environmental practices or tools due to the need of altering routines, decision criteria, employee behavior, and allocation of resources for the firm. Sustainable digital transformation research argues similarly that technology should be integrated with sustainability goals rather than treated as an end in itself (Martínez-Peláez et al., 2024). Sustainable transformation for SMEs is simply a continuous juggling act between short-term survival and long-term capability building. Sustainability in the economy means productivity, adaptability, customer responsiveness, and continuity. Environmental sustainability requires efficient use of energy and materials and waste reduction. Sustainability in society is also associated with growing employees through development, participation, fairness in work, and responsible stakeholder relationships. Lean and sustainability-oriented innovation can enhance these, but the effect will depend more on the complementary situation of the organization rather than on any single practice (De et al., 2020; Dey et al., 2020).

Change Readiness

A transformation mechanism Individual and organizational constructs for change readiness. At an individual level, they are related to beliefs about whether the change is appropriate, whether the management supports it and what personal ability and personal outcomes they would expect from that change (Holt et al., 2007). At organizational level, readiness represents shared commitment to change and collective change efficacy (Weiner, 2009). These viewpoints complement each other: it would take psychologically prepared employees and a well-structured organization to deliver transformation. Readiness is vital in SMEs in particular, due to the fact that formal change structures are not readily available, and the degree of implementation is determined by owners, managers and close employee relationships. Studies on SMEs indicate that personalized management, feelings of employees and direct communication contribute to readiness during a transition process in organizations (Stacho et al., 2022). Employee voice and engagement also influence readiness by increasing commitment and reducing the level of external imposition of change (Potnuru et al., 2023). So, readiness is not just a state of mind prior to action, but a capability that translates strategic intent into organized behavior.

Employee Participation and Readiness for Change

Employee involvement is where employees are actively involved in information sharing, problem identification, decision making and improvement activities, leading the way in all areas of work. It gives employees some influence on things that impact their day-to-day work and also allows management to deploy operational knowledge that is often not on hand at the senior levels. Participation can increase trust, sense of ownership, perceived fairness and commitment towards change. Empirical findings also show that employee voice and participation are important precursors of commitment and readiness in the organization to change. Potnuru et al. (2023) found that employee involvement interacts with leadership conditions in shaping commitment to change, as well as more participation-oriented climates correlated with higher levels of readiness (Mumtaz et al., 2024). In continuous improvement situations, employee involvement provides potential to find problems, attempt to test solutions, and learn while applying implementation; yet, training and an inclusive improvement mentality are necessary to convert participation towards long-term development (van Assen, 2021). Within SMEs, involvement can be particularly strong as employees have overlapping responsibilities and excellent understanding of customers, workflows and regional constraints. Participation can reduce informational asymmetry of owners and employees, and can further make transformational objectives more credible. Consequently, engagement of the employees attends to the human and human-behavior aspects of the readiness for change by increasing comprehension, ownership and willingness to act.

Principles of Lean Management and Change preparedness

Lean management is an organizational philosophy that aims to create customer value - through waste reduction, process visibility, respect for people, standardization and continuous improvement. But whereas lean is frequently represented by means of tools, to be effective implementation of lean requires leadership behavior, employee engagement, learning and an improvement culture. Lean practices establish the framework against which problems can be recognized, causes identified, countermeasures trialed and better processes stabilized. These features can enhance change readiness in three ways. First, visual management with standardized processes makes clear the needs of current performance and change. Second, continuous improvement helps to create the change effectiveness through recurrent micro-problem solving. Third, lean philosophy and staff engagement can make adaptation a routine, rather than a special event. The role of management behavior and employee participation in lean and process improvement success has been reported (van Assen, 2018, 2021). Research on lean and sustainability innovation also suggests that operational effectiveness and innovation are complementary in providing SME sustainability performance (De et al., 2020; Dey et al., 2020). However, readiness can be undermined by lean only when lean is adopted primarily as a method to cut costs or pressures on the workforce. Thus, the proposed framework views lean management as a process efficiency and operational capability rather than a toolkit. Its contribution is in developing disciplined routines with which to help the theory of change can be understood, implemented, appraised and maintained.

Digital Capability and Change Readiness

Digital capability is the organization's ability to acquire, combine, deploy, and reconfigure digital technologies, data, skills, and governance structures to support its business objectives. It is different from technology ownership in that capability entails strategic alignment, employee skill, integration into processes, and the capacity to learn from digital experimentation. Consequently, digital transformation is not a mere technology acquisition decision but an organizational change process facilitated by technology (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Digital capability has the potential to enhance readiness by enhancing the availability of quality information, facilitation of communication, scenario analysis support, increased transparency of processes and the provision of rapid feedback. And it can actually serve to enhance collective efficacy when employees are armed with useful utilities, training, data, and technical support. SME digital transformation: A systematic review of studies and studies in the field suggest organizational learning, leadership, information system alignment, collaboration and financial capacity as critical factors for successful digital transformation, with evidence that technology only adds value by complementing organizational capabilities (Sagala & Őri, 2024). Recent research highlights that SMEs require dynamic capabilities, digital leadership, and a culture of experimentation to execute effectively the digital transformation (Held et al., 2026). Digital capability therefore corresponds to the technological and informational dimension of readiness. It allows SMEs to perceive external

change, respond synchronously and be aware of transformation, yet its effect might even be limited from the disengagement of employees and lack of process discipline.

Complementary Capability Argument

The key argument of this paper is that the three capabilities are complementary due to the fact that each mitigates a source of transformation failure, as its the key difference between them. Employee involvement leads to reduced resistance behaviorally and knowledge exclusion. Lean management removes operational ambiguity and process discontinuities. Digital capability bridges the informational void and technological disconnection gap. To achieve sustainable transformation, no single capability can serve the complete human, operational, and technological needs. Employee involvement helps in tacit and frontline sensing through employees' experiential understanding of operational problems and emerging customer needs; on digital capability, data will be used to enable technology-based sensing by means of obtaining, integrating and analyzing ongoing information. (Teece, 2007). The extent of employee involvement expands sensing through integrating frontline knowledge while lean management enhances seizing and reconfiguration through formal problem solving and digital capability fortifies sensing, coordination and rapid reconfiguration through data and technology. As such, this should help drive a configuration that is more useful than the sum of individual practices in isolation. Complementarity does not rule that each SME must have the same level of each capability. Instead, it implies that the substantive weakness in one of the dimensions might limit the use of the others. For instance, advanced technologies or applications may not be employed where labor is marginalized, with high involvement producing frustration when the processes and information necessary for implementation prove not to be available. Sustainable change thus relies on capability fit and alignment.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a conceptual research structure underpinned by a structured narrative review. It was theory building, not statistical estimation. This literature review concentrated on peer-reviewed research on employee involvement, organizational change readiness, lean management, digital capability, SME digital transformation, and sustainable performance. Priority was given to research from 2019 onward, while established theoretical studies were retained where necessary to define change readiness and dynamic capabilities. A literature search was conceptually grouped by combinations of the following terms: employee involvement, employee voice, change readiness, lean management, continuous improvement, digital capability, digital transformation, SMEs, sustainability performance, and sustainable transformation. Relevant studies were identified from established academic publishers and databases including ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald, SAGE, Taylor & Francis, and multidisciplinary indexing sources. Official World Bank evidence was used to establish the Iraqi SME context. Studies were included if they met at least one of three criteria: they explained an antecedent of change readiness; they examined employee involvement, lean management, or digital capability in transformation; or they connected organizational capabilities with SME sustainability, resilience, or transformation outcomes. The evidence was structured into four analytical categories: human behavioral capability, operational-process capability, technological-informational capability, and readiness/outcome mechanisms. The categories were evaluated for overlap, complementary functions, and unresolved relationships. The synthesis proceeded in three phases. First, the constructs and the theoretical boundaries of these constructs were clarified. Second, results were organized according to how each capability could impact change readiness. Third, using the dynamic capabilities view and organizational readiness theory, the relationships were integrated. The analytical process then produced the conceptual propositions and framework articulated in the results section. This is a conceptual study; therefore, no respondents, statistical tests, or descriptive statistics are reported.

RESULTS

Conceptual Synthesis and Propositions

The literature synthesis indicates that sustainable SME transformation requires the alignment of human, operational, and technological capabilities. Table 1 summarizes the main evidence streams and the gap addressed by the proposed model.

Table 1. Synthesis of Literature and Identified Conceptual Gap

Evidence stream	Main conclusion from prior research	Limitation addressed by this paper
Employee involvement and readiness	Participation, voice, and commitment can increase acceptance of change and provide operational knowledge (Potnuru et al., 2023; Mumtaz et al., 2024).	Usually examined separately from lean and digital capabilities.
Lean management and improvement	Lean effectiveness depends on management behavior, employee involvement, training, and a shared improvement method (van Assen, 2018, 2021).	Often treated as operational performance rather than an antecedent of transformation readiness.
Digital capability and SME transformation	Technology value depends on learning, leadership, culture, alignment, and complementary organizational resources (Sagala & Őri, 2024; Held et al., 2026).	Digital transformation research may underspecify the operational and employeeinvolvement foundations.
Evidence stream	**Main conclusion from prior research**	**Limitation addressed by this paper**
Sustainable SME performance	Lean, innovation, and digital transformation can contribute to economic, environmental, and social outcomes (De et al., 2020; Dey et al., 2020; Martínez-Peláez et al., 2024).	The mechanism translating multiple capabilities into sustainable transformation remains insufficiently integrated.
Emerging-economy context	SMEs face resource, infrastructure, knowledge, and financing constraints; Iraq has notable digital infrastructure and privatesector constraints (World Bank, 2023).	Limited integrated frameworks designed for resource-constrained SMEs.

Direct Capability–Readiness Propositions.

Employee involvement is thought to be related to change readiness, because participation presents information, enhances ownership, and improves perceptions of fairness and support. Employees who contribute to diagnosing problems and designing solutions are more likely to be convinced that change is warranted and can be brought to life. Accordingly:

Proposition 1 (P1): Employee involvement has a positive impact on change readiness in SMEs.

Lean management should raise the level of readiness for change since its routines enable continuous problem-solving, process transparency, standardization, and learning. Such practices enhance collective efficacy and mitigate the ambiguity that comes with change. Accordingly:

Proposition 2 (P2): Lean management enhances change readiness in SMEs.

Digital capability should enhance the ability to adapt to changes by strengthening information, communication, coordination, and the technical ability to execute change. More than anything else, employees and managers are more confident that change is possible when digital resources are aligned with skills and processes. Accordingly:

Proposition 3 (P3): Digital capability has a positive impact on SMEs' readiness to change.

Complementarity Proposition

The three capabilities should all feed into each other. Employee participation assists in realizing valuable technology and process requirements; lean management establishes organized systems where technological mechanisms can be integrated; and digital capability provides information and connectivity which in turn can accelerate employee participation and continuous improvement. That means their alignment should lead to a more robust readiness than disparate capability development.

Proposition 4 (P4): Alignment among employee involvement, lean management, and digital capability produces a complementary positive effect on change readiness in SMEs.

Change Readiness and Sustainable Transformation

Change readiness converts capability potential into coordinated implementation. Shared commitment maintains effort and collective efficacy supports problem solving when difficulties arise. Ready organizations are more likely to change routines, use technology, retain improvement initiatives, and embed transformation within economic, environmental, and social imperatives. Accordingly:

Proposition 5 (P5): Change readiness plays a positive role in SMEs towards sustainable transformation.

Because the three capabilities shape transformation partly through readiness, the framework also suggests indirect links. An example of this is capability ownership without readiness: technology may run unused, lean projects may be isolated, or employees who are not ready to implement change may contribute too little or only hand over ownership. Accordingly:

Proposition 6a (P6a): Change readiness mediates the impact of employee involvement on sustainable transformation.

Proposition 6b (P6b): Change readiness mediates the relationship between lean management and sustainable transformation.

Proposition 6c (P6c): Change readiness mediates the relationship between digital capability and sustainable transformation.

Table 2. Roles of the Constructs in the Proposed Framework

Construct	Capability dimension	Primary contribution	Expected relationship
Employee involvement	Human and behavioral	Voice, ownership, trust, commitment, and frontline knowledge	Positive effect on change readiness
Lean management	Operational and process	Process visibility, problem solving, waste reduction, standardization, and continuous improvement	Positive effect on change readiness
Digital capability	Technological and informational	Data, connectivity, digital skills, integration, and rapid feedback	Positive effect on change readiness
Change readiness	Integrating mechanism	Shared commitment and collective confidence to implement change	Positive effect on sustainable transformation
Sustainable transformation	Outcome	Durable economic, environmental, and social value creation	Outcome of aligned capabilities and readiness

Table 3. Research Propositions

Code	Proposition
P1	Employee involvement positively influences change readiness in SMEs.
P2	Lean management positively influences change readiness in SMEs.
P3	Digital capability positively influences change readiness in SMEs.
P4	Alignment among employee involvement, lean management, and digital capability produces a complementary positive effect on change readiness.
P5	Change readiness positively influences sustainable transformation in SMEs.
P6a–c	Change readiness mediates the relationships of employee involvement, lean management, and digital capability with sustainable transformation.

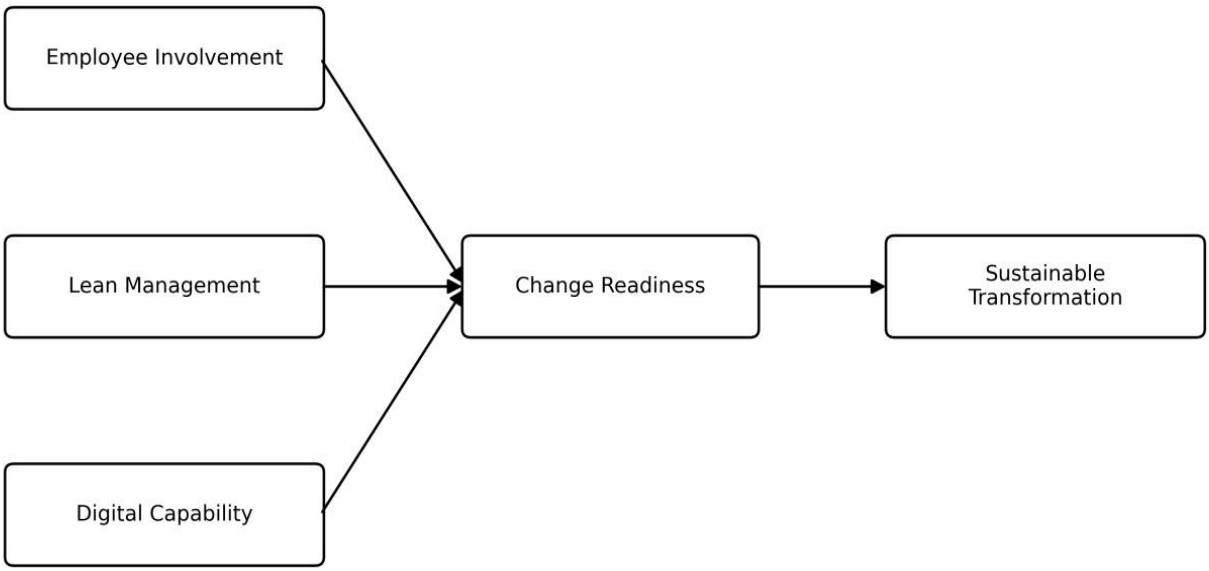

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Note. The model also proposes a complementary capability effect among the three antecedent capabilities and indirect effects through change readiness.

DISCUSSION

There are three theoretical contributions from the proposed framework. First, it combines human, operational, and technological perspectives frequently divided in SME transformation research. The literature on employee involvement explains motivation and ownership; lean management literature explains disciplined operational improvement; digital transformation literature explains data, technology, and strategic reconfiguration. Linking these streams gives a fuller understanding of why transformation works or doesn't. Second, instead of being merely a checklist, the framework positions change readiness as an integrating mechanism. Through repeated participation, problem solving, learning, and technology use, readiness emerges. Readiness, therefore, is both psychological and organizational. It involves employees' willingness to support transformation and the collective capacity to carry it out. This explains why firms using similar technology or lean tools can have different outcomes. Third, the complementary capability argument changes the focus from isolated best practices to alignment. Before redesigning processes, SMEs often adopt technology or apply lean tools without sufficient employee involvement. The framework predicts that such fragmented approaches lead to weaker readiness when used in isolation. Stronger transformation should occur with the inclusion of employees in identifying needs, implementation organized along lean routines, and digital capabilities providing data and connectivity. The framework has great relevance to Iraqi SMEs. This is consistent with World Bank evidence on how lack of digital infrastructure, access to finance, and institutional constraints limit the capacity of small firms to harvest productivity benefits (World Bank, 2023). Managers must avoid technology-led transformation that dismisses people and processes under these circumstances. A phased strategy is much more practical: involve employees in identifying critical problems, apply lean methods to stabilize and simplify priority processes, and subsequently deploy digital solutions that support those processes directly. The model provides practical diagnostic questions as well. Managers might ask whether employees comprehend and influence transformation decision processes; whether improvement routines exist to convert ideas into stable processes; whether digital systems provide timely and usable information; and whether the organization has shared commitment and confidence to implement change. Any weakness in any dimension indicates a readiness gap that needs to be addressed before large-scale transformation occurs. The model can be tested in future empirical research based on survey data of owners, managers, and employees of Iraqi private-sector SMEs. Change readiness can be

assessed using change commitment as well as change efficacy; sustainable transformation can be operationalized using measures of economic resilience, environmental efficiency, and social outcomes. Partial least squares structural equation modeling would be suitable for testing direct, complementary, and mediating relationships, especially when the model is prediction-oriented and the research context is developing. Multi-group comparisons might focus on sectors, firm size, digital maturity, and owner-managed versus professionally managed SMEs. This framework has limitations. It is conceptual and does not establish causality. Capability relationships can also be recursive: readiness can foster further employee involvement, lean learning, and digital investment. External influences such as government support, competitive pressures, access to finance, and digital infrastructure may reinforce or diminish the suggested relationships. There is thus a need for longitudinal and mixedmethod research to characterize capability development over time as well as to gain insight into how transformation plays out in specific SME contexts.

CONCLUSION

This article explores how SMEs become ready for sustainable transformation through an integrated framework. It suggests that employee involvement, lean management, and digital capability are complementary organizational capabilities which respond to the human-behavioral, operationalprocess, and technological-informational aspects of change. These capabilities should augment readiness, and their alignment will be a better basis than individual adoption. Change readiness is suggested as the core mechanism through which these capabilities create a foundation for sustainable change. It takes participation, improvement routines, technology, and information and converts them into shared commitment and coordinated implementation capacity. It explains why resources and practices do not, by themselves, automatically translate into transformational results. The key message for Iraqi SMEs and other firms similarly constrained by limited resources is that sustainable transformation does not start with acquisition of technology. It has to start with aligned capability building – involve employees as part of the process, instil disciplined improvement, develop the right digital capabilities, and assess readiness before a transformation is scaled. Future empirical verification may validate the propositions, and also identify what configuration of capabilities works best across sectors and at all SME development stages.

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