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It's Not Me, It's You

A Study of Horizontal Resistance During Digital Transformation
in Large Corporations

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Preface

First and foremost, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, Olof Hallonsten, for his invaluable guidance, insightful feedback throughout this process, and for being a pleasure to work with.

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Finally, we would like to acknowledge the hard work and persistence required to create this thesis. We find the struggles along the journey best captured by the words of a well-known philosopher and lyricist.

”Last but not least, I wanna thank me. I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting. I wanna thank me for always being a giver and trying to give more than I receive. I wanna thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I wanna thank me for being me at all times.”

– Snoop Dogg

Sincerely,

Richard Ekholm, Patric Broad Näsström, Christoffer Sylve

June, 1st, 2026

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Abstract

Thesis Title: It's Not Me, It's You: A Study of Horizontal Resistance During Digital Transformation in Large Corporations

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Research Question: How can horizontal resistance in large corporations undergoing digital transformation be conceptualized and understood?

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to explore how digital transformation (DT) and its rapid development have affected corporations' experience of horizontal organizational resistance to digital change.

Theoretical perspective: Literature review on digital transformation, organizational resistance to change, and the research gap related to both.

Method: The study builds on qualitative semi-structured interviews and applies an abductive approach and a social constructionist perspective.

Empirical foundation: The empirical data consists of 11 interviews conducted with CEOs, CTOs, IT vendors, VPs, technology consultants at large Swedish and global enterprises.

Conclusion: The findings suggest horizontal resistance is prominently affecting DT adoption. To effectively navigate and diagnose the phenomenon, we present a framework categorizing the manifestations of horizontal resistance assumed in DT through two dimensions—the *ownership overlap* dimension and the *barrier* dimension. With the two dimensions, a heatmap of where horizontal resistance occurs is presented with four combinations of manifestations of horizontal resistance: *identity conflicts*, *ownership intrusion*, *disconnected departmental goals*, and *translation failures*.

Twenty-eight years of enterprise transformation distilled into one sentence on why digital transformation projects fail:

*It's very much about... It has to do with... I mean, you're
working with people...*

- Head of Customer Success

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the term "horizontal resistance" within the context of digital transformation. Furthermore, the research question, aim and purpose of the thesis is defined.

Do you want to become an innovative and forward-thinking corporate leader? Do you want to reap the benefits of shiny, revolutionary ERP and CRM systems? Do you feel ready to fully adopt and utilize dynamic AI automation capabilities? If so, chances are that you are also ready to drag your organization into a long and costly digital wrestling match. This thesis is about such wrestling matches.

1.1 Background

The full integration of digital technologies, usually known as *Digital Transformation* (DT), has fundamentally changed the global business environment. DT in itself is not a new concept, and the pressure to digitalize has been a reality for many decades as organizations strive to maintain their competitive advantage. This was the case even before the digital era, where organizational change and the ability to adapt to new technologies were linked to an organization's market position. Today the rapid evolution of digital tools continues, with examples like the new era of artificial intelligence (AI), which is only one example of the quick pace of innovation. With technology today recreating itself at unprecedented speeds, advanced tools today may be completely obsolete to firms in only a few months (Vial, 2019, p. 119); (Yoo et al., 2012, p. 1399).

Organizations have for a long time been compared to machines, particularly in the so-called scientific management tradition, or Taylorism, which has been widely challenged in the past century. For example, Morgan (2006, p.5) argues that this metaphor can result in an incomplete view and therefore runs the risk of misinterpreting the full organizational reality.

Morgan further argues that this mechanistic view has its limitations, which include difficulties adapting to changing circumstances, risking dehumanizing the workforce, and underplaying the human aspects of the organizational dynamics (Morgan, 2006, pp. 27-28).

Still, while the metaphor may fail to show the complicated dynamics of organizations

undergoing change, as is a crucial component of DT, it can still possess considerable analytical value. Given its simplistic nature, the metaphor remains a useful lens for examining how large-scale change initiatives face coordination challenges when interdependent units must operate in sync in order to achieve successful transformation.

Machines depend on precise synchronization. When two cogwheels fail to transfer force smoothly, friction arises, and the performance of the entire system is affected. In large-scale corporations undergoing digital transformation, similar friction emerges when departments fail to align around shared tools, processes, data infrastructures, or even overarching goals.

From this perspective, digital transformation resembles the task of replacing old, worn-out cogwheels in a machine that is still running. New cogwheels, or components, must fit the existing system, and if they do not, the misalignment disrupts the synchronization, and friction becomes visible across the organization. Such misalignment can give rise to *horizontal resistance*, a form of resistance that travels laterally between interdependent departments rather than vertically through formal hierarchy. The complexity of coordinating across different departments to implement shared digital tools—“switching cogwheels”—can strip departmental managers of their autonomy. As Kellogg et al. (2020, pp. 367, 369) show, data-driven systems centralize control and create a “contested terrain” where resistance may emerge. As illustrated in Figure 1, two departments working in sync can be represented with two cogwheels freely moving, leading to low resistance, while departments failing to communicate or collaborate effectively, and thereby generating high horizontal resistance can be represented by cogwheels clashing.

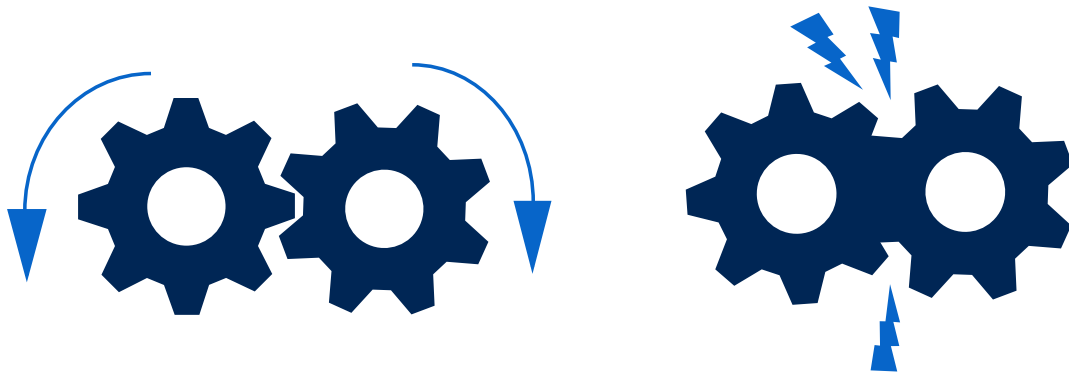


Figure 1: Two conceptualizations of coordination between departments

1.2 Research Problem

As we think of organizations as machines, we imagine departments as connected by cogwheels, divided by functions, performing specialized tasks but interlocking with each other, moving the entire machinery forward. When one part is replaced, others must adjust. The essence of DT is to switch out some of the old cogwheels to achieve a faster, more powerful, and efficient machine, but doing so affects the other horizontally interlocked cogs and the entire machinery.

Yet DT is often treated as a top-down hierarchical issue. Without understanding how *horizontal resistance* in DT works, large organizations risk either undergoing transformations implementing costly digital systems but finding them never achieving their goals or negatively affecting their ability to manage an organization. To further explore these risks, and further understand this phenomenon this thesis is based around the following research question:

How can horizontal resistance in large corporations undergoing digital transformation be conceptualized and understood?

1.3 Research Purpose, Aim, and Scope

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of horizontal resistance, especially how it emerges in the context of digital transformation within large corporations.

Furthermore, the aim of the thesis is to contribute to the current level of academic understanding by offering a nuanced conceptualization of horizontal resistance in the context of digital transformations, with a special focus on how it emerges between different departments and organizational units.

The scope of the research is deliberately narrowed down to look at horizontal resistance from a managerial standpoint in order to gain sufficient depth. This means that the study does not aim to analyze how employees are affected or otherwise interact with horizontal resistance. The empirical focus is limited to large corporations, where horizontal resistance is expected to be particularly prevalent because of the organizational complexity and existing interdependencies.

To address this, the study draws empirical material from qualitative interviews with industry professionals who have worked with digital transformation in large corporate

settings. These accounts reflect the personal experience of change agents regarding the emergence and dynamics of horizontal resistance.

1.4 Disposition

Thesis Structure	
 Literature	This section reviews existing literature on digital transformation and organizational resistance, identifying a research gap provides insights and rationalizes the study's positioning.
 Method	This section outlines our method for data collections and analysis, as well as our workflow during the report process to ensure transparency and recognize any potential limitations.
 Empirical Findings	This chapter introduces our empirical findings, organized by four distinct themes. The analysis consists of interview quotations and key insights derived from them.
 Discussion	The discussion connect our empirical observations to established theory, and the findings are consolidated into a holistic, and nuance the interpretation of horizontal resistance in DT.
 Conclusion	This chapter synthesizes the primary insights from our findings to provide a comprehensive, digestible understanding of the study's contributions and real-world implications.

Figure 2: Disposition

2 LITERATURE

This section reviews the current literature and relevant theoretical frameworks on digital transformation and organizational resistance. We introduce "digital transformation" as a term and its relevance to organizational change. Then, through considering not all but many analytically important manifestations of resistance towards change, we interconnect them with the failure of digital transformation. By identifying a gap in the literature, we motivate our study and define our research positioning.

2.1 Digital Transformation in Large Organizations

Despite extensive scholarly research, digital transformation (DT) lacks a universal definition (Vial, 2019, p. 118); (Kraus et al., 2021, p. 4). Conclusively, it is important we first establish what we refer to in this thesis when we are writing "digital transformation," or simply "DT." Using Vial (2019), we conceptually define DT as "a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies." (Vial, 2019, p. 121). Vial (2019) points out that the definition is, in essence, not organization-centric but recognizes that the target entity often refers to an organization. Applying his definition to this study, we define "entity" as a large corporate organizations to specify its scope.

2.1.1 Why Digital Transformation?

Digitization and digitalization are words closely related and often, wrongly, used interchangeably with DT (Jedynak et al., 2021, pp. 629, 631). It is therefore necessary to clarify that digitization and digitalization are separate concepts from DT. The two are simply just two of many measures to take when carrying out DT. DT, on the other hand, implies a larger overhaul in terms of value creation or ways of working (Kraus et al., 2021, p. 4); (Matt et al., 2015, p. 339-340). Literature further separates IT strategy, which primarily looks inward towards technological infrastructure (Hanelt et al., 2021, p. 1159-1160).

Consequently, with successful DT, an advantageous business model transformation

often follows. In turn, [Hanelt et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that organizational change due to DT is naturally unavoidable and partly the reason as to why most DT initiatives fail ([Cieslak and Valor, 2025](#), p. 2); ([Pacolli, 2022](#), p. 279); ([Li, 2020](#), p. 809). Because of this, DT has become the most common change initiative of today's time, and organizations face generally the same challenges from DT ([Oludapo et al., 2024](#), p. 1) due to the more business-oriented and cross-functional nature of DT.

2.1.2 Unsuccessfully Transforming

First we need to outline what it means for DT to fail, and fortunately, failed DT initiatives are well-documented across both academic and practitioner literature. A widely repeated claim holds that roughly 70% of DT initiatives fail, resulting in \$900 billion of annual loss of investments globally ([Tabrizi et al., 2019](#), p. 1); ([Bucy et al., 2021](#), p. 2-3); ([Forth et al., 2020](#), p. 4). But this figure is best treated with caution. Failure rarely comes down to a doomsday scenario where employee data gets compromised and classified documents are released to competitors. Instead, indicating DT failure is often unachieved KPIs and an organization that quietly reverts to its prior ways of working once a project closes ([Bucy et al., 2021](#), p. 2). One market report from BCG [Forth et al. \(2020\)](#) categorizes the DTs into *wins* (30%), *worries* (44%), and *woes* (26%). *Wins* are those transformations that met or exceeded target goals, in turn creating sustainable advantageous change. *Worries* create only some value but do not meet their target and result in only limited long-term change, whereas *woes* create limited value (less than 50% of the target), producing no sustainable change ([Forth et al., 2020](#), p. 4-5).

The literature diverges when accrediting specific drivers for DT failure ([Oludapo et al., 2024](#), p. 9) but shares common ground in assessing that it rarely fails due to sheer technology inadequacy ([Tabrizi et al., 2019](#), p. 2-6); ([Vial, 2019](#), p. 122-123). Instead, we identify four recurrent themes that previous research consistently credits as explanations for why DT initiatives stall or collapse.

Strategic misalignment. A BCG survey reports that companies approaching DT and treating it as integrated to organizational operations and sufficiently anchoring change in corporate strategy describe only 40% of surveyed actors ([Forth et al., 2020](#), p. 4-5). In rapidly changing markets and ever-evolving technology, companies spend too much time addressing available technology and too little time addressing a digital strategy ([Li, 2020](#),

p. 810).

Leadership gaps. Leadership failure seldom resides at the company executive level, but a lack of readiness and communication among top management has shown a correlation to organizational failure factors (Oludapo et al., 2024, p. 9). Ambiguity often trickles down to middle management, who often bear the operational responsibility to implement DT. This in turn can lead middle management, unwillingly at times, to act as barriers for DT (Kusmaryanto and Santoso, 2025, pp. 2, 14).

Shift in talent and priorities. Successful DT requires a shift in workforce, management, organizational know-how, and ways of working (Sousa and Rocha, 2019, p. 327). Organizations must therefore facilitate digital learning (i.e., digital literacy, data capacity, and adaptability) prior to DT initiatives. Viewing it as a prerequisite rather than a by-product as a failure mitigation tactic (Sousa and Rocha, 2019, p. 329) and building these competencies at managerial and employee levels help establish the foundation for successful DT.

Stakeholder resistance towards DT. Running through each of the failure factors above is a common denominator. The pushback from the people within the organization. Cieslak and Valor’s review of 63 papers shows employees view DT as a threat to their job, autonomy, and identity, commonly forming back-stage resistance opposing DT (Cieslak and Valor, 2025, pp. 11-13). Oludapo et al. (2024) confirm this by emphasizing that people and management are root causes and more fundamental to DT failure than any other reason (Oludapo et al., 2024, p. 10). Suggestively, by understanding and addressing organizational and stakeholder resistance, companies may see, according to the sources, significant advancements in successful DT.

2.2 Resistance Towards Organizational Change

Now that the extension of what DT makes up has been established and that stakeholder resistance is commonly cited as the major scapegoat of failed initiatives, we now move forward with introducing literature on resistance to organizational change. While many contrasting definitions coexist (Sveningsson and Sörgärde, 2023, p. 237), moving forward, we use the term ”resistance” as the larger umbrella term to denote the actions of stakeholders and recipients of change that purposefully slow it down. Therefore, holding this holistic yet vaguer explanation will allow for a more nuanced analysis in later chapters.

In the following subsections we scrutinize theories surrounding resistance from multiple dimensions to understand how it emerges, manifests, and interacts between those who experience it.

2.2.1 Reconceptualizing Resistance

As described by [Sveningsson and Sörgärde \(2023\)](#), the term "resistance" can be interpreted across multiple dimensions, meaning its connotation depends on discourse. Commonly, resistance is simply viewed as a nuisance that change agents must understand in order to mitigate it and ensure adoption ([Sveningsson and Sörgärde, 2023](#), pp. 82-84, 238-239). The authors go on to exemplify that employee resistance can be categorized into five dimensions: psychological reasons, political reasons, cultural reasons, a lack of sensemaking or readiness, and process resistance ([Sveningsson and Sörgärde, 2023](#), pp. 238-244). This showcases that resistance is not simply always about unwillingness or corporate inertia (the tendency of large organizations to resist change and maintain the status quo) but rather a complex field needing conceptualizing before analysis. Such categorizations can be helpful to understand one dimension of employee resistance, but the scope of resistance can be further broadened by contrasting with complementary approaches. [Ybema and Horvers \(2017, p.1242\)](#) further breaks down the previous notion by introducing backstage resistance and frontstage compliance, a state where change stakeholders might act compliant in front of change agents all while they withdraw from voicing resistance but practice resistance so change agents do not notice.

As described by [Burnes \(2020\)](#) in [Sveningsson and Sörgärde \(2023\)](#), much of the literature on employee resistance towards change heavily emphasizes Lewin's (1947) *Ice Cube Model* (or *Three-Step Model*). The model lives on the premise that employees either block or embrace change, and as an agent of change, it is your job to rid unwillingness ([Sveningsson and Sörgärde, 2023](#), pp. 91-93, 237-239). However, [Dent and Goldberg \(1999\)](#) critique how practitioners have uncritically applied the model, and propose that resistance is not a property of people but a response to perceived threats such as loss of status, pay, or comfort. Further drawing on this standpoint is [Piderit \(2000\)](#) arguing that employee responses contain three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and intentional, and that most responses are ambivalent, i.e., positive and negative ([Piderit, 2000](#), p. 786). In practice, this means that it is not uncommon for employees to cognitively understand

the strategic necessity for a system change while still experiencing anxiety about losing expertise they built over years, leaving them unsure of how to proceed. "The label of resistance can be used to dismiss potentially valid employee concerns about proposed changes" (Piderit, 2000, p. 784).

2.2.2 Resistance as Productive and Value-creating

In contrast to where one views resistance as a nuisance, other teachings of organization theory employ a different lens, one where it may be seen as productive, helpful, and value-creating. Through this lens, we view resistance not as an organizational disease but as an enlightening component that needs consideration and can provide a constructive contribution to change (Thomas and Hardy, 2011, p. 329). This argument also finds support through peers and Cieslak and Valor (2025) proposes the idea of *productive resistance*, which they label as behavior that protects legitimate employee resources, signals design flaws in transformation programs, and generates organizational learning that top-down implementation would otherwise foreclose. Piderit (2000) argues that what is often labeled as resistance may as well actually be motivated by an individual's ethical principles or a desire to protect the organization's best interests. Taken together, the body of literature brings analytical nuance compared to only looking at the obstacle framing perspective it implies. In turn, setting us up to better understand the reasons behind resistance.

2.2.3 Individual and Relational Drivers of Resistance

Identity Conflicts. A particularly influential driver of psychological resistance towards organizational change, as presented by Eilam and Shamir (2005), is the idea of *self-concepts*. In essence, these are identity constructs deeply rooted in beliefs, self-worth, and values. They identify four dimensions of self-concepts: *self-determination* (perceived autonomy over one's work), *self-distinctiveness* (having a unique and recognized role), *self-enhancement* (feeling competent and valued), and *self-continuity* (a stable identity over time) (Eilam and Shamir, 2005, pp. 401-403). The promises of DT critically challenge all dimensions, especially the latter two, which we will see in the 4 *Empirical Findings* section.

Political and Power Struggle. Taking this a step further, Bateman (1980, p. 202) makes the case that politics plays a huge role in organizational change "because

power is more important than technique in the ability to produce change.” Understanding politically charged dynamics is essential to understand change because a struggle for power will most likely occur because stakeholders want to emerge on the other side more powerful than they were before and they most definitely do want to experience a net loss of power (Bateman, 1980, p. 204). The author continues on to explain how successful change agents, therefore, must become political actors and need to map power, coalitions, and loyalty, especially during more radical transformative ones as they intensify political resistance (Bateman, 1980, p. 199). Since DT often implies radical restructuring of workflows, roles, and authority, one might expect political and power struggles to be highly visible in DT.

Lack of Sensemaking. Another commonly cited cause of resistance is the failure of sensemaking: an active process by which individuals construct meaning from ambiguous or disruptive situations. Ford et al. (2008) argue that this process belongs to both change agents, trying to understand “How will this get accomplished?” and recipients, trying to determine, “What will happen to me?” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 363). Consequently, when the two sensemaking processes fail to align, resistance soon follows. Furthermore, Ford et al. (2008, p. 362) introduces a refreshing argument questioning the overall notion that detrimental resistance always resides “over there, in them [change agents]” and that the change agent-centric view is faulty because the labeling of resistant behavior among recipients may just as well mirror incompetence or ignorance regarding the change agents’ own sensemaking. When justification for change is weak, labeling questioning behavior as resistant is mismanagement.

2.2.4 Structural Drivers of Resistance

Misaligned Discourses. What we previously categorized as individually driven resistance often manifests internally and develops accordingly, but there are also structurally rooted reasons for resistance. Structural drivers for resistance, however, operate and manifest differently. They are instead embedded in collectives rather than individuals. Pieterse et al. (2012) argue that resistance can arise from misalignment of professional discourse between different groups partaking in a change initiative. To succeed, DT needs cross-functional collaboration, which they found to be a key challenge due to how different functions develop language separate from one another, interpreting the same change

differently (Pieterse et al., 2012, p. 799). This disconnect creates a domino effect. First comes confusion, then negative affect, and lastly *mental withdrawal*. Instead of pushing back openly, stakeholders often just "check out" mentally (Pieterse et al., 2012, p. 802). This phenomenon is not uncommon on a horizontal dimension.

Misaligned Departmental Goals. While discursive misalignment focus on how groups interpret change, structural resistance can also arise even when interpretations are aligned, but departmental goals diverge. Bento et al. (2020) problematizes this dynamic by showing how departments that focus too heavily on their own objectives tend to look inward, rather than outward. Over time, units that become highly effective at achieving their local goals may tend to gradually lose alignment with the broader objectives of the organization. This drift creates structural barriers that hinder cross-departmental cooperation and, in turn, can fuel horizontal resistance in DT initiatives.

Culture Clash. A further aspect driving structural resistance is culture, subculture, and the will to preserve them (Gagliardi, 1986, p. 124). Gagliardi (1986) argues that an organization's primary strategy is the maintenance of its cultural identity, implying that considered alternatives will only be those compatible with existing cultures. While the authors do not explicitly argue that deeply rooted company culture or subcultures in teams may resist change, we argue that it should also be considered a potential driver of structural resistance.

Knowledge Boundaries. Lastly, regarding structural drivers of resistance, we consider knowledge boundaries. Carlile (2004) explores how three boundaries, *syntactic* (different vocabularies), *semantic* (different interpretations), and *pragmatic* (different interests embedded in existing expertise), each require greater efforts to dismantle than the last. A critical implication of pragmatic boundaries is that expertise of affected parties is not only expressed through their knowledge but also invested in it, tied to roles, authority, and professional identity, in turn making actors further resistant towards abandoning it even when change demands it (Carlile, 2004, pp. 556-559).

2.2.5 Resistance as Directional

Vertical Resistance. Returning to the argument previously made, we concluded much of prior research is skewed by the Ice Cube of Lewin (1947), viewing resistance as primarily a force created by employees flowing hierarchically upwards in organizations. Further,

using [Bovey and Hede \(2001\)](#) and [Holt et al. \(2007\)](#) we conclude that the literary body on resistance builds heavily on a "vertical" approach to resistance, i.e. that resistance emerge between hierarchical layers. [Bovey and Hede \(2001, p. 379\)](#) argue that resistance, on an individual level, more often than not, is an irrational fear of managerially imposed change and a construct requiring managerial intervention to correct properly. Clearly, a vertical approach.

Horizontal Resistance. Even though much research is marked by a vertical approach, some scholars have mapped horizontal dynamics during change processes. [Alvesson and Sveningsson \(2025\)](#) lay out how change messaging is interpreted, translated, and passed by their own cultural frames and interests. "It has also been suggested that what happens with change initiatives is largely a matter of the sensemaking that occurs laterally (rather than vertically) between middle managers informally through everyday conversations, storytelling, and gossip" ([Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2025, p. 32](#)). Failure means horizontal resistance may manifest. [Lapointe and Rivard \(2005\)](#) directly explain one scenario of horizontal resistance emerging in DT: when IT departments (or consulting firms) introduce systems cross-functionally between departments without co-ownership, resistance brews. They studied how resistance grew, either as passive avoidance, i.e., backstage resistance ([Ybema and Horvers, 2017, pp. 1234-1235](#)), or as active opposition between peers from different departments as a new system got introduced ([Lapointe and Rivard, 2005, pp. 482-483](#)). [Balogun and Johnson \(2005, p. 23\)](#) further confirms this, arguing that the majority of middle-manager sensemaking occurs between peers in the absence of senior managers, and paying attention to language use can benefit sensemaking and reduce horizontal resistance ([Pieterse et al., 2012, p. 799](#)).

2.3 Research Gap

Conclusively, we argue that there does exist a research gap in the literature on resistance to organizational change, especially in the context of DT. This is shown by the review, which concludes that preceding literature, not exclusively but predominantly, assumes a vertical approach, thus somewhat overlooking horizontal dynamics. From Lewin's *Ice-Cube Model* to [Holt et al. \(2007\)](#), the underlying assumption is consistent. Resistance flows upward. This vertical view is not inherently flawed, but we argue that by applying this assumption, other critical dimensions of resistance towards DT may be compromised.

In our review, we have found highly recognized literature, notably the work of [Alvesson and Sveningsson \(2025\)](#) and [Lapointe and Rivard \(2005\)](#), applying a critically important horizontal perspective, from which this thesis builds upon.

2.4 Study Positioning

In sum, this literature review has covered three overarching themes: [2.1 Digital Transformation in Large Organizations](#), [2.2 Resistance Towards Organizational Change](#), and the [2.3 Research Gap](#) between the two, resulting in a concretely defined scope for this study. The literature establishes DT, even though driven by technology, as fundamentally a people-centric process and prone to failure due to resistance.

The research field on resistance towards change is extensive and well-established but somewhat skewed on the assumption that resistance flows hierarchically upwards ([Balogun and Johnson, 2005](#), p. 23). Many recognized scholars have, because of this, laid much groundwork in understanding organizational resistance to change as a predominantly hierarchical issue. Apart from the ones disclosed in [2.2](#), studies that touch on horizontal resistance dynamics rarely theorize the phenomenon extensively. Resultingly, we ask ourselves the question whether organizational change agents experience horizontal resistance and if it plays a part in how one must approach DT strategy and implementation. Additionally, if they do, how can we conceptualize and understand it? We believe that answering these questions will contribute to the academic understanding of peer-centric organizational resistance. In doing so, we hope to nuance what organizational resistance means and especially what horizontal resistance manifests as in DT.

By employing a qualitative approach drawing on semi-structured interviews with organizational change agents and using a social constructionist perspective, we treat practitioners' accounts as the analytical body and in turn nuance the research field. We study the subject in the context of DT across multiple industries, companies, and roles, adding perspective to the extensively researched subject. This becomes our contribution to the academic discussion on organizational resistance.

3 METHODOLOGY

The following section presents our data collection as well as method of analysis. It also outlines our way of working throughout the process in order to be transparent with the research and possible limitations of our approach.

3.1 Methodological Decisions

Figure 3 illustrates a summary of all main methodological decisions made during the thesis. These are categorized into [3.1.1 Research Approach](#), [3.1.2 Research Design](#), [3.1.3 Theoretical Approach](#) and [3.1.4 the Ontological and Epistemological Foundation](#)

Methodological Decisions	
Research Approach	Qualitative
Research Design	Semi-Structured Interviews
Theoretical Approach	Abductive
Ontology	Social Constructionist
Epistemology	Interpretative

Figure 3: Summary of methodological choices

3.1.1 Research Approach

To answer the research question successfully, this thesis employs a *qualitative research approach*. The choice is supported by [Bryman et al. \(2017, p. 384\)](#) when one tries to see the world from the perspective of interviewees and gain deeper understanding for the few rather than achieve shallower statistical significance for the many. Given that the aim of the study is to understand how a certain phenomenon is experienced and understood, a qualitative approach is only natural. Contrastingly, outlining behavior and experiences is not reducible to a number of variables, which renders the quantitative approach impractical ([Bryman et al., 2017, p. 166-169](#)).

3.1.2 Research Design

Building on the qualitative approach, the research design consists of *semi-structured interviews*. These are based on a list of relatively distinct themes that are covered during the interview while still ensuring flexibility and freedom for the interviewer to steer the conversation (Bryman et al., 2017, p. 454). Given the exploratory nature of the study, a semi-structured interview format was preferred to ensure reflexivity and the capture of emerging themes. Researching a conceptual phenomenon requires moving beyond interviewees' traditional knowledge and uncovering experiences and perceptions related to our research question.

All interviews were conducted through video calls. The use of video calls was an active choice in ensuring quality during the interviews, as body language and conversations flow better in a face-to-face environment (Bryman et al., 2017, p. 623). In total, 11 interviews, between 40 and 60 minutes, were conducted and transcribed, resulting in well over 200 pages of transcription of interviewee answers.

3.1.3 Theoretical Approach

This study adopts an *abductive theoretical approach*, meaning theory is developed by selecting the most plausible explanation among competing interpretations of empirical material (Bryman et al., 2017, p. 46). The reasoning behind this methodological choice follows directly from the framing and novel nature of the research question. This thesis aims to propose one interpretation of how horizontal resistance can be understood and builds on limited, explicitly framed theory, making a deductive approach unfit. Meanwhile, adjacent literature on organizational resistance offered rich foundational research to build upon. Therefore, an abductive approach allows for empirical patterns to emerge naturally through repeated engagement with interviewees while enabling iterative assessment of which theoretical explanation best fits our observations.

Conclusively, the literature review provided great insights to our best theories regarding our research problem and sharpened our intuition on certain themes. But reasoning always ran from data to theory and not the other way around.

3.1.4 Ontological and Epistemological Foundation

As for *ontological positioning*, this study takes a *social constructionist* perspective. According to [Bryman et al. \(2017, pp. 53-55\)](#), social constructionism holds that social phenomena are built on socially constructed conceptions maintained by conversation and interactions. Through this lens, resistance can never be treated as a predictable metric of an organizational transformation. Instead, it is viewed as something that stakeholders experience and respond to, and even labeling resistance "resistance" is itself an act of social constructionism, as [Thomas and Hardy \(2011\)](#) shows.

Consequently, our proposal of horizontal resistance, in contrast to vertical resistance, is an analytical concept constructed specifically to help understand patterns in our empirical findings. With this ontological position, it follows that our findings represent interpretations of the interviewees' experiences rather than an organizational truth.

Following the ontology, we employ an *interpretive epistemological stance*. From this perspective, the researcher's task is not to uncover the order of social interaction but rather to interpret the meaning behind actors' experiences ([Bryman et al., 2017, pp. 49-50](#)). This implies that change agents' testimonies are not universal truths of organizational reality. Rather, they are to be viewed as subjective constructions, shaped by identity, memory, and context. Our goal is to interpret their accounts through this lens in order to better understand their perceived reality. This puts us in an active position of co-creating meaning together with the interviewees.

3.2 Sample Selection

This study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method where interviewees are handpicked based on their relevance, competence, and relation to the research question ([Bryman et al., 2017, p.406](#)). Coming back to the exploratory nature of the formulated research problem, we argue that this sampling technique is the appropriate one. Even though using non-probability sampling will not allow for generalizing, further discussed in [3.5 Limitations](#), that was not in the scope of this thesis' purpose. Instead, our aim was to reveal accounts related to horizontal resistance from change agents in our target population, not total transferability.

The first selection criterion was organizational scale. All interviewees were either

employed or newly retired from enterprises with at least 25.000 employees. The one exception to this was two interviews where the interviewees worked at a smaller technology vendor selling B2B SaaS solutions (software-as-a-service) to very large clients (i.e. more than 25.000 employees). Our justification for this was that they collect exposure from an outside perspective, therefore making them beneficial to include. Our hypothesis was founded on the idea that the phenomenon of horizontal resistance becomes more prominent with scale and through decentralized departments or subsidiaries, hence why we selectively approached employees at very large firms.

The next criterion was to establish common grounding among all interviewees ([Bryman et al., 2017](#), p. 205). DT as a shared contextual parameter was therefore chosen. The reasoning behind this was that through anchoring a comparable base scenario between all interviewees, we could then more precisely single out common denominators related to resistance, independent of the specific type of change initiative. Practically, this meant that each interviewee had to be associated with an organization that had undergone major DT initiatives or, alternatively, had consulted other large companies and implemented DT initiatives in the last five years.

As for regional constraints, we mostly restricted our samples to those with at least one regional office in Sweden. This kept the cultural dimension, another organizational parameter, consistent through the entire research. Relatedly, all interviews were conducted in Swedish to mitigate misunderstandings and to lower cultural barriers as much as possible to get as close to internal experiences as we could. As such, all quotes presented in the findings have been translated, neutrally, to English.

Roles and titles differed among the interviewees but followed an overarching theme. The interviewee had to hold a position where they could be seen as an agent of change during DT. Whether this meant that the role was a VP of operations, CEO/CTO, consultant, or account manager mattered less. Subsequently, this study takes the perspective of change agents and not change recipients. Industry did not intrinsically matter either, and sectors covered automotive, defense, consulting, manufacturing, and enterprise software.

Taken together, we interviewed 11 participants who met the selection criteria described above, and they made up the empirical foundation for our analysis. A detailed overview of the participants is provided in [Appendix B](#), and includes their formal roles, departments, industries, and which interview guide they were subject to.

3.3 Data Analysis

This subsection describes in steps, the approach to data analysis taken. Its disposition is constructed to address what [Rennstam and Wästerfors \(2011\)](#) identify as the three main challenges with analysis of qualitative data: the chaos problem, the representation problem, and the authority problem. Accordingly, we consider [3.3.1 Sorting](#), [3.3.2 Reducing](#), and [3.3.3 Arguing](#) to appropriately handle all problems stated above.

3.3.1 Sorting

One of the largest difficulties with qualitative research is the vast amount of unwieldy data needing sorting ([Bryman et al., 2017](#), p. 537); ([Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2011](#), pp. 221-222). As mentioned previously, our interviews had resulted in well over 200 pages of interviewee responses. To effectively synthesize analysis of the material, we employed the *open coding* process, where authors break down, study, compare, conceptualize, and categorize data ([Bryman et al., 2017](#), p. 543). This choice is also supported by [Rennstam and Wästerfors \(2011, p. 224\)](#) and resonates with the exploratory formulated research problem.

The coding process was initiated early on the recommendation of [Bryman et al. \(2017\)](#) and conducted iteratively through the entire interview process and began with the authors skimming each transcript cover to cover. This was partly to make sure that all intricacies of each interview were ingested but also to get a sense of when and where to look out for certain themes. In the second passing, each paragraph was broken down line-by-line and was assigned a descriptive label, e.g. *ownership tension*, through Google Documents' comment function.

3.3.2 Reducing

Following the sorting process, the resulting code was then grouped into broader themes, interconnecting interviewee responses' conceptualization processes based on similarity. Central and telling quotes were also saved to later undergo further scrutiny. The reduction followed an abductive approach, meaning an iterative back and forth between the empirical data gathered and the literature ([Bryman et al., 2017](#), p. 46). Instead of relying on themes to emerge from the empirical data, as would be the case in an inductive

approach, the reduction relied on looking at the empirical data and trying to find theories that best explain the patterns. The reduction process resulted in the creation of four distinct themes related to the research problem: *ownership intrusion*, *identity conflicts*, *translation failures*, and *disconnected departmental goals*.

These themes were not chosen at random, nor were they the first to appear, but they underwent diligent requirements and many iterations of examination. This is in order to recount the material selectively but in a representative manner (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2011, p. 228). A theme was retained if it (i) appeared as evidence from at least four separate interviewees, (ii) was analytically distinct in relation to the others, and (iii) either confirmed, contrasted, extended, or exposed gaps in current literature.

Once a theme for horizontal resistance had been identified, we expanded the machine metaphor for organizations by conceptualizing it using a set of cogwheels. Each theme was represented by a specific configuration of cogwheels that, in some way, failed to synchronize with each other. The cogwheel analogies and the reason for their misalignment were chosen to depict the empirical characteristics of the observed theme. This served two analytical and pedagogical purposes: Firstly, this allowed us to more intuitively understand how a theme created conditions for horizontal resistance during DT. Secondly, it helps us distinguish each theme visually and conceptually from each other.

3.3.3 Arguing

Lastly, we address what Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011, p. 220) label as the authority problem, which describes the challenge in moving beyond descriptive analysis to ensure a valuable theoretical contribution to the academic discourse on the topic. Most resources spent synthesizing analysis were directed to this step and involved making interpretive claims and placing it in relation to existing literature.

Practically, this meant returning to each overarching theme multiple times to study what was actually being said about resistance in general but specifically horizontal resistance in the context of DT. When themes mapped to previously established theoretical concepts, we asked ourselves: "Does this extend, refine, contrast, or expose gaps in the literature?" When themes seemed to resist or contradict established research, we treated them as informative and analytically nuancing rather than inconvenient or problems needing solving.

Quotes retained from the reduction phase serve as a foundation for our interpretive reasoning, as reported by [Ryan and Bernard \(2003, pp. 85-86\)](#) arguing that the quality and credibility of argumentation build on the transparency when moving from data to claim. We further put the argumentation under scrutiny during a peer-review session where peers and supervisors could question the line of reasoning and presentation of our findings.

3.4 Reflexivity

During the entire research, a reflexive approach was adopted given the novel nature of the research question. Had we approached the research gap with a more rigid structure, it is highly plausible that many of our current findings would have been neglected.

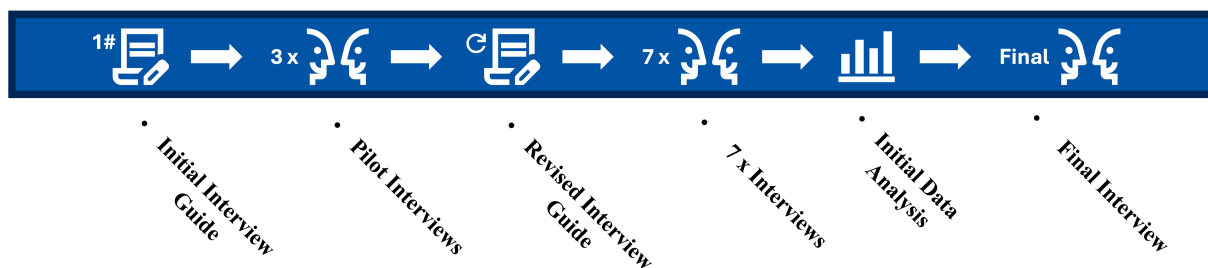


Figure 4: Overview of interview process

Initially, a first draft of an interview guide was created, focusing on three rather different themes: *change management and resistance*, *artificial intelligence*, and *selling change*. This interview guide, as can be seen in [Appendix C \(Interview Guide I\)](#), was kept the same for the first three pilot interviews, with each theme having an equal part of the interviews. After the pilot interviews we concluded that the most interesting topics that emerged during the interviews were related to change management in general and resistance towards digital transformation in particular. Therefore, the interview guide was revised to better facilitate research on resistance in the context of change and digital transformation. The interview guide now mainly focused on resistance. Additionally, a few questions related to digital transformation and artificial intelligence were also kept in order to fit the emerging topics from the pilot interviews.

With the revised interview guide completed, as can be seen in [Appendix D \(Interview Guide II\)](#), the main bulk of the interviews was held during a one-week period. Thereafter,

the initial data analysis was begun, intentionally keeping the last interview on hold for a week. This was done in order to be able to discover if there was a gap in any of the themes, allowing us to put emphasis on any question from the revised interview guide if needed. Since no gap in the collected data was found, the final interview was held using the exact same format as the main part of the interviews.

3.5 Limitations

[Bryman et al. \(2017, p. 554-555\)](#) underline that there exist limitations in our choice of sorting given that open coding generally does not account for context. This risks distorting interviewee responses and misinterpretation of context-dependent accounts, and to mitigate this risk, we made sure to always have at least two interviewers present at each interview as a preventive control against misinterpretation.

By using non-probability sampling, we cannot guarantee any sort of generalizability of the findings of this study ([Bryman et al., 2017, pp. 207-208](#)). This is further compounded by the relatively small sample size ($n=11$) inherent to qualitative research reaching it, and no statistical significance is ever to be drawn from this study. Furthermore, limiting the scope to only include change agents introduces skewness to the findings, resulting in the risk of a wrongful picture being drawn through interpretation and analysis. Additionally, restricting our sample size to only Sweden puts national context on the conclusion and may limit applicability of findings to other cultural contexts given the sampling error ([Bryman et al., 2017, p. 208](#)).

Lastly, to promote transparency, we would also like to disclose that given the sensitive and political nature of the research question, interviewees would occasionally refrain from answering certain questions and sharing specific examples. While this was not a recurring issue and only on a minimal scale, it did affect the outcome of our findings.

3.6 Ethical Aspects, Trustworthiness, and Authenticity

To evaluate trustworthiness in qualitative research, we employ, [Guba and Lincoln \(1994\)](#) as cited in [Bryman et al. 2017, p. 380](#). They base their criterion on *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. Credibility concerns whether empirical findings accurately reflect social perceptions of respondents. The interviewer, to ensure this, posed follow-up questions as ambiguity arose, and participants were also given time to ask ques-

tions, add, or modify answers at the end of each interview. Further, interviewees were informed they may be contacted afterwards to clarify their answers, and all authors extensively discussed and reached consensus about the data’s implications, as per [Bryman et al. \(2017, p. 380\)](#).

Transferability was cultivated mainly through language use and transparency around contextual parameters. By continuously framing analytical claims as "we argue" (or similar) and clarifying roles, industries, and geography, we allow for readers to make their own assessments of the study’s transferability. No claim is made that the results are generalizable in a statistical sense ([Bryman et al., 2017, p. 382](#)).

Dependability was protected through full presentation and abidance of the research process, including appendices containing interview questions and generative AI prompts. Additionally, the thesis was put under scrutiny from peer review and supervisor feedback.

Interviewees were always encouraged to share their own experiences and perceptions and were asked to avoid generalizing their role but instead give concrete examples. This ensured that data were kept as sanitary as possible and that the bulk of data analysis was conducted by the authors. Thereby, confirmability was also taken into account ([Bryman et al., 2017, pp. 382-383](#)). Anonymization also assisted in freeing responses from hidden agendas or partisanship.

Finally, with regard to authenticity, the study aimed to faithfully represent all diverging perspectives brought up during data gathering. The use of the abductive approach supported this, as differing, novel, or contradictory accounts helped refine our back and forth between data and literature, as opposed to forcing the data into a pre-set narrative. To achieve ontological, pedagogical, catalytic, and tactical authenticity, we offered to send all participants the final thesis in hope of helping them understand, view, and reflect on their own environment ([Bryman et al., 2017, p. 383](#)).

Conducting interviews always comes with the responsibility of managing personal data. In our case, in the form of names, transcriptions, and audio recordings. All interviewees have participated on the grounds of full anonymity, both about their name and the company they are representing.

Interviews have been recorded and transcribed using the service Klang AI, which guarantees confidentiality by encrypting the data and storing it on servers located entirely within the European Union ([Klang, 2026](#)). To ensure the privacy of participants

all recorded material was deleted from Klang AI following transcription. Lastly, the transcriptions themselves were deleted once the essay was fully graded, in order to uphold the commitment of full confidentiality.

3.7 AI-Usage

The AI service Klang was used to help with transcribing interviews, although the transcriptions have also been checked manually by the authors.

During the research process, Scopus AI has been used in gathering and sorting articles relevant to the research question. Notebook LM was also used to help find gaps and sort articles in an early stage.

Lastly, large language models have been used to help review and refine grammar and improve the structure of the text. This has been done using Grammarly, OpenAI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, and Microsoft's Copilot. All suggestions from AI-based tools have been carefully reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for all parts of the text. For a more detailed account, see [Appendix A](#).

4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the different empirical findings categorized by four themes. The analysis integrates quotes and key ideas that were gathered during the interviews. Specifically, we demonstrate how horizontal resistance takes shape, emerges, and is experienced among various industry professionals in the context of digital transformation through said themes.

Recurring patterns emerged from the empirical material and analysis related to horizontal resistance in the context of DT. We contrast and compare this against the literature review, aiming to interconnect, nuance, and contribute new findings to the current knowledge landscape. From the literature, resistance is commonly portrayed as a vertical matter, especially during DT.

By employing a social constructionist approach, analyzing how change agents talk about their challenges, success, and experiences, we construct a map of how, where, and when horizontal resistance in DT occurs. In methodology, specifically in [3.3.2 Reducing](#), we identified four variations of horizontal resistance. They should not be understood as mutually exclusive or contradictory, but rather as different manifestations of peer-level resistance.

This chapter revisits the idea, introduced in [1.1 Background](#) and [1.2 Research Problem](#), viewing organizations as machines and business units interlocked by cogwheels, arguing that DT is the process of switching old cogwheels to better-performing ones. We consider [Figure 5](#) the ideal scenario, where low horizontal friction resists DT, and we compare our findings to this baseline.

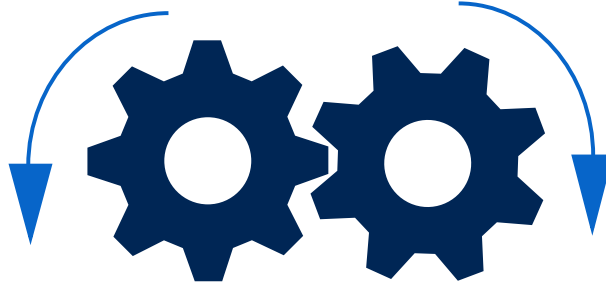


Figure 5: Low horizontal resistance as cogwheels spinning frictionless in unison

4.1 Ownership Intrusion

In the literature section [2.1.1 Why Digital Transformation?](#), we established that the literature on DT categorizes it as a holistic transformation affecting business functions interdepartmentally, requiring respective adaptation to succeed. Interviewees consistently echoed this perception and emphasized how critically important interdepartmental collaboration is for DT. However, change agents also repeatedly described scenarios where ownership crossed business function boundaries without sufficient negotiation of who owned the change. We label this *ownership intrusion* and define it as the experience that a department, organizational unit, or external partner restructures what legitimate area of mandate now belongs to your team. Coming back to the metaphor, Figure 6 proposes this as our first horizontal "mechanical failure," where the manifestation can be imagined as cogwheels fighting for the same space and in turn jamming up.

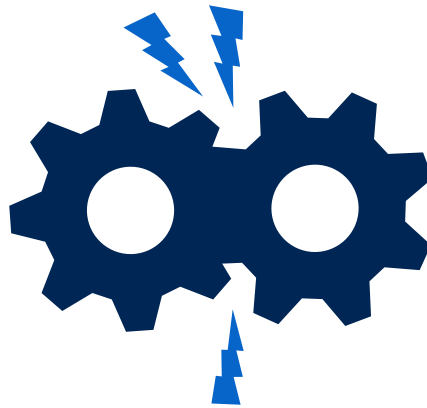


Figure 6: Ownership intrusion as cogwheels jamming

We show later that what further distinguishes this driver of horizontal resistance is that it is rooted in structural barriers, as discussed in [2.2.4 Structural Drivers of Resistance](#). One very articulate example came from the Sales Capture Manager at a major global consulting firm, recounting the opinions of clients and departments that experienced the neglect.

"They haven't even talked to us. They haven't even discussed it with us. They haven't asked us what we think or what we'd actually want to use. Instead, they just decided: 'This is the new system, it'll happen in two years, this is how we'll do it.' "

- Sales Capture Manager

As highlighted by this quote, the system itself is not what stirs emotion and discontent but rather the political act of reorganizing legitimate power, authority, or, in this case, what system to enforce upon peers. Political legitimacy of the process seems to be a big factor determining acceptance before any technical assessment is ever made. When departments experience that their ownerships' sovereignty has been violated, horizontal resistance grows.

The empirical data shows that this dynamic intensifies in larger, decentralized enterprises. When there exist subsidiaries, geographically distributed divisions, and complex organizational charts with ambiguous responsibilities, DT becomes particularly vulnerable to this horizontal resistance. The Head of Customer Success at a major ERP (enterprise resource planning) software vendor, with nearly three decades of experience implementing cross-functional software capabilities, explains challenges with dealing with large decentralized corporations, which is also highlighted by the Client Director at a globally leading software company.

"When driving change from the group level, you encounter significant resistance because these companies see themselves as autonomous. They have their own CIOs, their own CEOs or group managing directors, their own IT organizations — very much their own everything. When you try to drive that kind of change across such a large company, you get a strong horizontal dimension where everyone wants a degree of self-determination. You see this in other large companies too, whether across different business areas or different functions within the company that aren't aligned." - Head of

Customer Success

"It comes down to these two parts of the organization needing to collaborate. A classic example is data ownership: who actually owns the data in a company? It tends to become a blame game, IT says the business side needs to own its own data, while the business side says they don't understand what that means or what they're supposed to do with it."

- Client Director

They describe how resistance in this case flows laterally rather than vertically, between subsidiaries, departments, or business units toward the group-level initiative. Every sub-

sidiary experiences itself as an independent entity and considers its system ownership autonomous, viewing the imposed change as initiated by an external party, triggering the perception of being overstepped. Our research also synthesizes findings disclosing that subsidiaries, horizontally, many times resist group-level change as they experience ownership intrusion due to their perception of sovereignty.

What is particularly nuancing with the quote by the Client Director is how ownership intrusion, in this case, works the other way around. They describe a situation where essentially more governance mandates and ownership are met with resistance. This suggests that it is not necessarily the loss of ownership causing horizontal resistance, but rather the shift or change of ownership. We argue one explanation may unsurprisingly be the implication of perceived increased responsibility and workload associated with the ownership transfer. This would explain why it goes both ways: on one hand, business units may be reluctant to relinquish responsibility and authority, but on the other, they may be hesitant towards undertaking a greater workload.

Ownership intrusion can also emerge from multiple entities claiming legitimate ownership of an issue, a problem especially prominent in larger organizations. The Chief Technology Officer for a digital asset management company explains how new digital tools rarely fall into one single organizational unit's domain but instead affect many. When asked about what the most common driver of resistance due to digital change is, the CTO explains:

"Ownership is a major problem we face. In a large organization, there can be multiple owners of a single problem. Our primary customer, for example, is marketing — they own the material. But then you have IT, who own security and implementation. And then there are a whole range of other departments. The problem is that we'll meet with marketing and they say: 'This is fantastic. You're solving exactly the problems we want solved. We're buying it' — and we celebrate, thinking we've closed the deal. Then it goes to IT and they say: 'No, we're not having this.' And suddenly you're left thinking — who actually owns this? That's a major problem."

- Chief Technology Officer

The Client Director also echoes this standpoint when asked about why they believe that DT is prone to failure.

*"I think you haven't from the start decided exactly what you want to measure.
And then you haven't had a clear owner and governance."*

- Client Director

When no single clear owner has been established for the change, each stakeholder will likely argue for their claim and say. The conflict seems structural and territorial in essence, and our data suggests it runs further than a disagreement over technicalities.

"It feels like the IT department carries a lot of weight in terms of what they want and what feels right to them."

- Key Account Manager

"Retail wants to keep their data. It's their DNA and know-how that's at stake."

- Chief Executive Officer

"The friction arose even more in the subgroups. Where they argued: if we choose that system, HR will have a much harder time with process X."

- Senior Analyst

"IT absolutely actively [resists]. They can choose to say: well, we have a PowerPoint here. Why should we have [the tool]? I've uploaded it to my SharePoint. Here's a link."

- Chief Technology Officer

A consistent pattern throughout was the us-vs.-them discourse taking place in many organizations. While it did not seem coercive in nature, the narrative still exists and helps build structural drivers of resistance. This in combination with the demand for change of cross-functional responsibility creates the equation for ownership intrusion. In short, we suggest ownership intrusion as the first manifestation of horizontal resistance in the context of DT, characterized by overstepping and structural drivers of resistance.

4.2 Identity Conflicts

With this, our empirical analysis has shown how ownership intrusion is categorized by high levels of cross-functional mandate shifts and a structural perception that your collective

has been mistreated by another entity. However, our empirical findings suggest that resistance is also internalized on individual levels but has roots in the same issue of ownership. We observed how *identity conflicts* emerged as personal values, beliefs, and identities were challenged as ownership shifts or ambiguities arose relative to DT. Figure 7 illustrates how one might imagine this finding, where cogwheels erode and break down because of their incompatible materials, causing horizontal resistance.

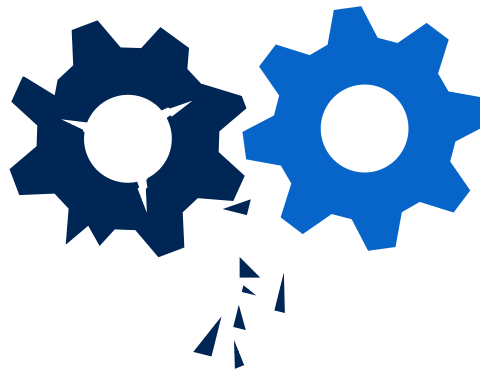


Figure 7: Identity conflicts as cogwheels eroding due to incompatible materials

Below the collective resistance, in the same ownership tension dimension, exists a personal construct of horizontal resistance rooted not in conservatism or politics but in the disorientation of having your expertise scrambled or even risk obsolescence. With a combined experience of over 25 years of change management work, a VP of product planning at a global automotive part manufacturing company expresses the following as the fundamental mechanism:

"Change means you no longer know how to do a good job. So it becomes resistance. And what you need to remember is that the resistance bottoms out in an uncertainty: in the new, I don't know how to be successful. It's not just self-interest, wanting to perform well, it's also that people are genuinely loyal to their employer and want it to succeed. So when we constantly talk about resistance, it takes on an almost negative tone. But if you flip it: the resistance stems from not knowing how to make things work. That's actually a fairly positive force."

- VP of Product Planning

This quote articulates a recurring key feature, echoed by other interviewees, as to how identity conflicts emerge and take shape. Namely, its footing in a performative dimension. Perceived threats and uncertainties of how DT will affect you on the job are more often than not linked to an uncertainty of "How well will I do in this new context professionally, and will I succeed?" Stakeholders and change recipients, when losing ownership of previously mastered parts of their jobs, doubt whether their abilities and skills will transfer into the landscape's new playbook and worry their expertise might no longer be valued.

Understanding identity conflicts as expressions of performative uncertainty, rather than failures of individual attitude helps shine light on why, where, and how horizontal resistance emerges. The same interviewee reflects over the notorious workflow switch DT often implies and describes how informal authority gets flipped in the process.

"I realize that digital transformation is as transformative for us as a company as going from hardware-driven to software-driven vehicle design. You turn all [informal] hierarchies upside down."

- VP of Product Planning

Customers may, to a greater extent, now demand autonomous driving or a 20-inch screen to stream Netflix instead of the most premium steering experience. Suddenly, a hardware engineer with years of mastery in her field, used to having her voice be primary, finds herself deferring to software architects deciding on key features of the vehicle systems. They do not experience this as organizational adjustment, to her, it is a demotion. This shift of informal hierarchy challenges both the individual's professional standing and her relationship to peers, understandably, negatively so.

"There's an enormous amount driving people's resistance to transformation — personal security, understanding, prestige, all sorts of things. And if you don't grasp that aspect of change work — that it's people you're trying to change — you'll struggle. That hasn't changed in the last seventy thousand years. People are as they are."

- Head of Customer Success

"Purely from their roles, people absolutely work against each other."

"I genuinely believe internal politics plays a crucial role. You have to approach everything with the right political angle to get a purchase approved. I'm absolutely convinced of that."

- Chief Technology Officer

These observations regarding prestige and roles extend our previous understanding of identity conflicts by highlighting that this theme goes beyond only doubt of technical skills. By introducing pride, roles, prestige, and essentially politics as another foundation for them to stand upon. Identity conflicts might also be considered a defense of one's achievements and what has been organizationally valued, historically. When DT reshapes distributions of informal power across business units and people, it changes more than just workflow. It changes unspoken social contracts governing who is important and why. We understand this through considering that DT may go deeper than just challenging expertise but also stir status and power.

Consequently, challenging deeply internalized values, beliefs, and power dynamics can, according to many interviewees, result in emotional reactions.

"The older ones had four bookshelves full of course literature and binders. I have seen grown adults cry because they were forced to throw away their binders. Some people actually left the company because they couldn't handle the dynamic — not knowing where they'd sit, not having the same colleagues beside them anymore. It was probably the most difficult change project I've seen over the years."

- VP of Operations

"Everyone is terribly sensitive... And if a person feels someone is disrespectful or has gone past them, they put a spoke in the wheel of digitalization and transformation."

- Chief Technology Officer

"Someone who is afraid doesn't necessarily recognize it as fear — they just feel a vague discomfort, and it comes out in other ways."

- Senior Analyst

The drastic reactions that the interviewees witness can be rationalized. Coming back to the opening statement from the VP of Product Planning addressing how much of the resistance they experienced came rooted in how people want themselves and their employer to succeed, this is expanded upon later in our interview.

"This was something I was passionate about — it's a core issue for me, and it's deeply tied to everything else I still have on my plate. How do I now succeed with what I have left if I've lost this strategic piece? And that feeling comes up every time. Every time. But maybe we don't talk about it enough. I think that's a shame, because we sometimes expect managers to be inhuman, purely logical, like Spock from Star Trek. But we're not. We're human. And we should allow ourselves to grieve a little. [...] So, in every change process, you also have horizontal friction. But as a manager, you're expected to handle it on your own."

- VP of Product Planning

DT is much more than only changing of tools, enhancing value propositions, or optimizing processes. Because in the transformation of bringing in the new, it is inevitable to get rid of the old. As shown by the quote, the old might be something of passion, truly important to the enjoyment of your daily work. Suddenly branding the grief that follows as friction or backwardness and demanding acceptance for the best of the company may be considered setting inhuman standards for managers to deal with. What makes identity conflicts so durable and recurring, according to the VP, is that organizations almost never create space for it. Managers, especially, are held to the highest of professional standards and are expected to model composure and enthusiasm for change. But at the end of the day, even those managers are human, internalizing the sorrow of the loss, leading to unattended horizontal resistance.

To recap, identity conflicts arise when DT threatens the individual's values, beliefs, sense of competence, or power/mandates, creating disorientation relative to their professional identity and sorrow over the ownership loss. As we discovered, the phenomenon can also occur as informal hierarchies shift dynamically, and this may result in greatly emotional or politically charged horizontal resistance.

4.3 Translation Failures

Interviewees repeatedly described organizations undergoing DT as divided into two or more distinct camps that struggle to cooperate because they cannot effectively communicate their ideas and reasoning. We refer to this phenomenon as *translation failures*, which are situations where departments or individuals struggle to articulate their needs, constraints, or perspectives in ways that others can understand. Even when intentions are aligned, the inability to translate ideas across departmental and domain-specific boundaries can lead to misunderstandings, stalled decisions, and resistance in joint initiatives, such as in DT. Figure 8 illustrates this dynamic by portraying departments as different cogwheels that fail to mesh together due to the absence of a shared language for interpreting and communicating problems and solutions.

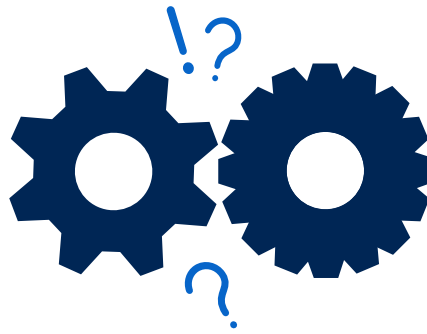


Figure 8: Translation failures as cogwheels being unable to transfer rotation

This division creates an absence of a shared language, making cross-functional collaboration difficult. As discussed in the literature review, specifically in [2.1.1 Why Digital Transformation?](#), and in the empirical findings, [4.1 Ownership Intrusion](#), DT requires holistic, interdepartmental coordination and collaboration, yet our findings show that such coordination often fails because these two camps interpret the overarching goals and objectives differently.

"Yes, it's an enormous undertaking, and even after 19 years in this role I'm still struck by how wide the gap is between these two types of organizational units. I work with [Large Retailer], and I've been at [Large Consumer Electronics] and [Large Heavy Industry]. It's exactly the same everywhere. It's like two different camps."

- Client Director

"I believe that understanding each other's perspectives is essential: the tech side needs to invest in understanding value realization, just as the business side must invest in developing technological understanding in order to even have that kind of dialogue. When you know nothing about something, you don't even know what it is you're failing to understand."

- Client Director

These accounts illustrate how deeply rooted the divide can be and how consistently it appears across industries. Interviewees suggested that asymmetric understanding contributes to this divide, emphasizing that departments actively must invest in understanding each other's perspectives. Without this shared language and mutual understanding, departments struggle to motivate, justify, or legitimize decisions across functional boundaries and departments. This makes cross-functional sensemaking particularly challenging in DT, where well-informed and sustainable decisions require alignment between the technical and business domains. In such situations, the absence of a shared language and understanding becomes a barrier to coordinated cooperation rather than simply a communication issue.

"Whereas if you speak with someone who is far behind in their development, they can't even articulate their problems. I often compare it to prompting: those who can't prompt don't really understand their own problem to begin with."

- Senior Analyst

"The IT department is singing the praises of this, they think it's fantastic. But what happens is that the marketing people end up with it in their lap and have no idea how any of it is supposed to help them in the first place."

- Key Account Manager

"IT loves SharePoint [common cloud storage platform], largely because of all the permissions and control it offers. Marketing absolutely hates SharePoint. You send someone a link and immediately it's: 'Ah, you don't have access. You

need to request permission,’ and so on. [...] But IT they refuse to acknowledge the problem.”

- Chief Technology Officer

Here, the inability to express and translate problems leads to confusion, skepticism, and even irritation. More importantly, this is not because actors inherently disagree with the change but because they lack the ability to make sense of it from the other inter-departmental points of view. The case example from IT and Marketing illustrates this dynamic where IT enthusiastically promotes a solution that Marketing struggles to understand, leaving Marketing unable to articulate its needs and IT unable to recognize the underlying problem. This mismatch reinforces the sense that the two units speak different languages, making cross-functional justifications and compromises nearly impossible.

Interviewees further emphasize that this divide is not static but widening, particularly between digital specialists and more business-oriented units. They point to AI being a catalyst for this phenomenon where the gap increases exponentially as a result of the rapid advancements in new technologies that are predominantly used by digital specialists, rather than more traditional business-oriented units. As digital competencies diverge, translation becomes increasingly difficult, reinforcing misunderstandings and deepening the divide.

”I’d say things are moving incredibly fast now, and the gap has really widened between those who embrace the technical side and those who don’t. Just three years ago when I started, it was much more even, everyone was on the same level. But now the people who run their whole projects through Copilot and AI are pulling far ahead, becoming far more efficient than those who don’t. So yes, the divide is growing, and people without technical profiles, like HR and admin, are falling far behind. In our company, they simply aren’t getting the automation support they would have needed.”

- Senior Analyst

This widening knowledge gap means that departments lacking technical expertise struggle both to articulate their needs and challenges and to understand the implications of digital initiatives. As a result, translation failures become more entrenched, making cross-functional alignments in DT increasingly more difficult.

Taken together, our data shows that translation failures arise in large interdepartmental DT efforts when different departments lack a shared language, operate with an asymmetric understanding, and diverge in their digital competencies. What begins as a difference in vocabulary often escalates into structural barriers that hinder departments from fully articulating needs, understanding each other's decisions, or coordinating joint action in the pursuit of unified goals. In the context of DT, where aligning business logic with technical bottom lines, these failures act as a powerful form of horizontal resistance, not through opposition but through misalignment, stalled decisions, and mutual misunderstandings between departments.

4.4 Disconnected Departmental Goals

Disconnected departmental goals occur when departments pursue misaligned objectives, creating a cross-functional gap between them. This phenomenon is illustrated in Figure 9 by two cogwheels, positioned so far apart they no longer interlock. Consequently, they fail to engage, thus disrupting the broader organizational machinery.

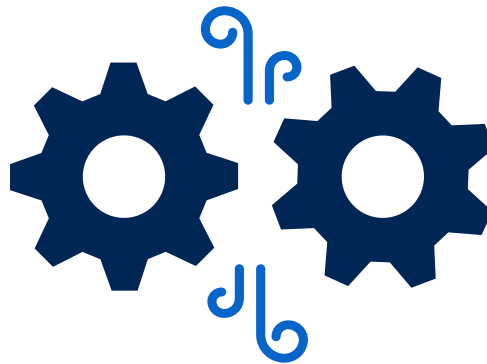


Figure 9: Disconnected departmental goals as cogwheels being too far apart

One example of how disconnected departmental goals appear is from the use of different KPIs, or metrics. Having different departmental KPIs risks introducing a gap between what the departments see as the final destination for the organization as a whole.

”Yes, and I think it’s always a difficult thing – how do the incentive or metrics, the KPI models, look for each individual employee? Because in the end, we’re human beings, and if you have a KPI and can get a bonus for achieving a certain KPI, that’s probably what you’re going to focus on [...] And those

will absolutely look very different between business and IT. And they may not always be aligned with what you're actually trying to accomplish. Because usually the KPIs or incentives lag behind the whole change effort. So you start rolling out a new system that doesn't really benefit your KPI, [...] Are you interested then? Not so much."

- Sales Capture Manager

Here, the Sales Capture Manager highlights a conflict between individual motivation from bonuses and the collective change implementation goal. Furthermore, the interviewee identifies a "lag", where the implementation of new systems and the update in reward structure may not be synchronized. The resistance in this case is not a rejection of the change itself, but rather a response to how the direction of change does not align with the departmental incentives in place. This illustrates one type of *departmental disconnect* where the measurement systems and KPIs work against the implementation of change.

One reason for managers feeling so strongly for their own departments is brought up in one of the interviews.

"Above all, we are only human. If you feel a sense of ownership over a certain part of a company, and another team suddenly shocks you with a demand like, 'We want this,' you might take it personally or feel insulted. You might find it disrespectful that they didn't consult you earlier, and as a result, you say no."

- Chief Technology Officer

The CTO links the issue to human aspects and emotions, especially the feeling of being overrun by another department. This provides a psychological explanation for why disconnected departmental goals are so difficult to bridge. When departments focus exclusively on their own isolated metrics and objectives, a request from another team may not be seen as a way to create a new shared objective but rather as a demand that disrupts the previous boundaries. While the CTO's observation explains the psychological barrier, the following accounts demonstrate how formal structures lead to friction.

"We come in to optimize a product. There are different managers involved: a product manager, an engineering manager, a data manager, an experience manager. They're all on the same level, but they all have their own priorities:

'This is what matters most to me, this is my core issue' – and they can't really understand each other. So there's clearly a lot of resistance "

- Business Architecture Analyst

"The conflict was usually between the head of the project offices – those responsible for driving customer projects and development projects on budget and on time – and the development side. When the development side came with new processes and new directives to be used in the projects, that could spark some friction."

- VP of Operations

The Business Architecture Analyst describes a setting where different managers exist on the same hierarchical level but are driven by different core issues or objectives. The horizontal resistance is not only the result of poor communication but rather competing priorities. When goals are set at the departmental level without a shared higher objective, one department's optimization may actively work against another's main objective. Similarly, the VP illustrates an actual structural clash with the project office against the development side. While the project office is output-oriented, wanting to adhere to budget and timelines, the more process-oriented development side has metrics that instead mean working strictly towards implementation goals. The disconnect between the two leads to friction.

"And I think everyone struggles to have KPIs and metrics that keep up to date with the change. Very difficult actually. But absolutely something I think lags behind for each respective area and is different for each respective area. IT and business."

- Sales Capture Manager

The Sales Capture Manager observes that the cycle of creating KPIs is a dynamic and changing process, again pointing out the "lag" where KPI creation falls behind the organizational change. They also point out the functional divergence between departments, in this example IT and business, similarly to the previous two quotes. This differs from

the divergence in the sense of departmental ownership, as previously brought up in 4.1 *Ownership Intrusion*, instead the focus is on the goals that the department has set out.

To conclude, the disconnect between departmental goals is a structural failure, rather than a communicative one. Such misalignment leads to competing priorities, where diverging objectives and incentives force departments toward different end goals, ultimately resulting in horizontal resistance.

4.5 Summary of Horizontal Resistance

Ownership Intrusion



Ownership intrusion captures situations where one department expands its mandate into another unit's domain, creating horizontal friction over “who owns what” in DT processes.

Identity Conflicts



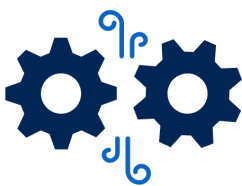
Identity conflicts arises when DT threatens an individual's sense of competence, expertise or professional identity. Even when structural ownership is clear, friction emerges because the change disrupts how people understand their role and what it means to perform well in their role.

Translation Failures



Translation failures occur when different departments struggle to articulate their needs, constraints, or perspectives in ways that others can properly make sense of. This misalignment can generate friction from misunderstandings, stalled decisions and resistance in cross-functional collaboration that DT often depends on.

Disconnected Departmental Goals



Disconnected departmental goals reflect misalignment between overarching transformation objectives and local, departmental incentives and objectives. When units are measured and evaluated on incompatible outcomes, they tend to pull in different directions, producing horizontal resistance even when intentions are aligned.

Figure 10: A summary of the four themes we presented through our analysis.

5 DISCUSSION

The discussion bridges the gap between our empirical observations and established theory. The primary themes from the empirical findings are refined to observe how well our data aligns with, or differs from, the current academic understanding.

5.1 Ownership Overlap Dimension

In chapter 4, *Empirical Findings*, we discovered how many recurring themes in accordance with horizontal resistance emerge but not how they relate to one another. Considering the four themes identified—ownership intrusion, identity conflicts, translation failures, and disconnected departmental goals—we argue that these lie pairwise at opposite ends of a spectrum. Revisiting the literature, we find support that the findings map onto a scale of ownership overlap.

On one end we observed how horizontal resistance emerges as stakeholders of change perceive change as intrusive and overstepping. This is confirmed by the literature arguing that actors do not resist change per se but resist the specific losses that change implies, alternatively, if they do not see great benefits in rearranging (Dent and Goldberg, 1999, p. 26); (Cieslak and Valor, 2025, p. 15); (Holt et al., 2007, pp. 236-237). This includes loss of territory, status, autonomy, and power (Sveningsson and Sörgärde, 2023, p. 239). On the individual level, Eilam and Shamir (2005, p. 417) confirm the empirical findings by arguing the concept of self, meaning people’s interpretation of who they are, is another large driver of resistance. An aspect that the VP of Product Planning was especially articulate about in accordance with Sveningsson and Sörgärde (2023, p. 249). If the ownership of self is challenged through DT, horizontal resistance is imminent, according to our data. This was discovered to manifest both individually and structurally.

Opposite the overstep, located on the overlap dimension, resides the cross-functional gap. Here interdepartmental conversation and coordination are vastly insufficient, creating a no-man’s-land of ambiguous ownership. In DT this gap manifests as a failure, not of will, but of shared goals, meaning, or language. Literature confirms that when professional or business logic diverges, organizational knowledge does not transfer interdepartmentally naturally (Carlile, 2004, p. 555). Corporations undergoing DT rarely invest in translating

and interlinking knowledge, in turn letting lateral sensemaking go unsupervised, creating silos, cross-functional gaps, and horizontal resistance (Carlile, 2004, pp. 555-556); (Pieterse et al., 2012, p. 798); (Balogun and Johnson, 2005, pp. 23-25).

Taken together, the two poles span a dimension of *ownership overlap*. At the leftmost end, we observe how the risk of horizontal resistance increases as cross-functional gaps grow larger. Conversely, at the opposite point, higher risk of resistance is instead driven by overlaps of cross-functional ownership, i.e., where multiple actors might possess ownership over a contested area. Conclusively, Figure 11 depicts the first tension affecting horizontal resistance in the context of DT.

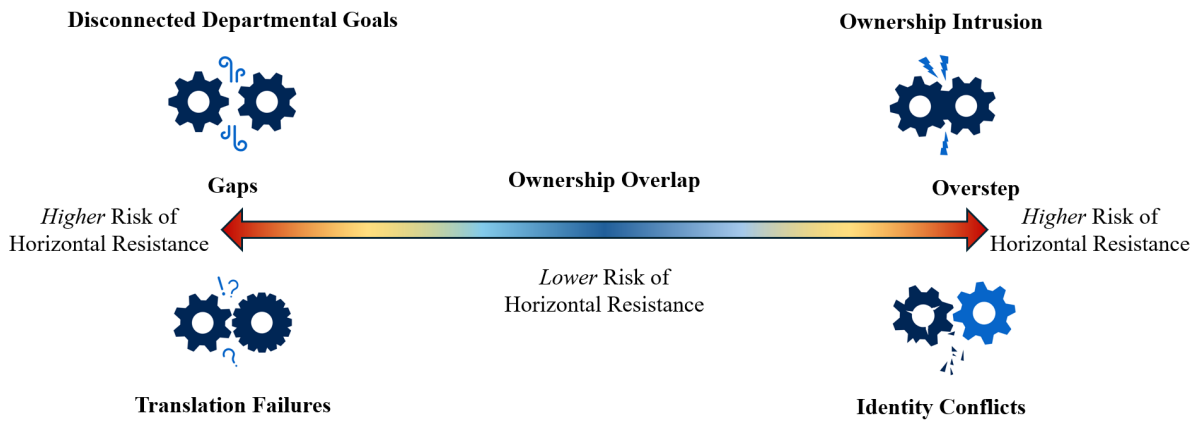


Figure 11: Ownership Overlap Dimension

In summary, the ownership overlap dimension illustrates that horizontal resistance in DT and ownership are related. We show it is not constituted by a single structural prerequisite but by extremes of cross-functional ownership. The findings resonate especially strongly with the literature in regard to this dimension, including both extremities and contrast mainly through the horizontal rather than the vertical lens.

5.2 Barrier Dimension

Beyond the ownership overlap dimension, a second pattern that emerged from the empirical analysis is how different types of barriers impact the perceived horizontal resistance. Lapointe and Rivard (2005, pp. 482-483) show that horizontal resistance can manifest as either passive avoidance or active opposition during digital transformation. Building on this, our analysis reveals that these manifestations come from different sources that can be plotted as a dimension, which we label the *barrier dimension*.

This dimension positions the four themes along a new spectrum. On one end, we find structural barriers where resistance is rooted in rigid organizational structures and misaligned systems. Both ownership intrusion and disconnected departmental goals reside on this side of the spectrum. On the opposite side of the spectrum lie individual and relational barriers, resistance driven by miscommunication, psychological threats, and identity conflicts. Consequently, this is where the two themes, identity conflicts and translation failures, find themselves on the spectrum.

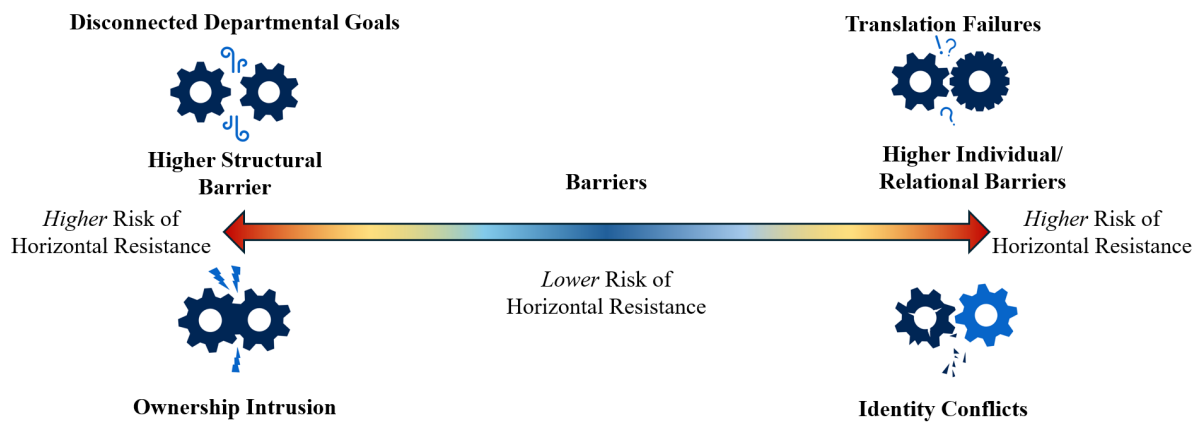


Figure 12: Barrier Dimension

Structural barriers are characterized by both ownership intrusion and disconnected departmental goals. The resistance here comes from how the organization itself is constructed. This is seen in our data with examples of IT systems that are imposed across departments without a clear co-ownership of the system. As Lapointe and Rivard (2005, pp. 482-483) observe, resistance between structural departments can occur before it reaches down to the individual layer. This means that structural ownership intrusions, where these are threatened, can become fatal for the organization, regardless of how individuals perceive the intrusion (Carlile, 2004, pp. 556-559).

Additionally, we speculate that cultural aspects may contribute as a structural driver of horizontal resistance. As Gagliardi (1986, pp. 124-125) argues, the concept of cultural identity maintenance could act as a structural barrier, and even though culture often works on a collective level, it affects the individual as well. Previous successes may also be further cementing resistance towards change due to the confirmation that current cultural paradigms are advantageous (Gagliardi, 1986, p. 123).

Considering disconnected departmental goals, we observe that even though business

strategies must stay vigilant for the company to stay competitive, the different goals and metrics used to measure the change can become static and slow to evolve. Resulting in what the Sales Capture Manager describes as a "lag" in the implementation of new metrics. In a sense, the metrics become the structural barrier against the change they were originally intended to support. This follows the ideas of [Bento et al. \(2020\)](#), with how departments that focus on their internal objectives lose the ability to understand the bigger picture of the company, leading to structural barriers.

Furthermore, if the set-out goals between departments are disconnected, they may risk incentivizing different departments to work against each other, leading to even further horizontal resistance. In that case, the organization drifts further to the left of the barrier dimension in Figure 12.

Individual and relational barriers include the remaining two themes: identity conflicts and translation failures. Here, resistance comes from psychological and personal dynamics instead of organizational structure.

Identity conflicts represent a clear form of highly individual barriers. [Eilam and Shamir \(2005, p. 417-419\)](#) found psychological drivers as reasons for resistance and identity conflicts, which our empirical findings confirm. When DT challenges managers' professional identities, their individual psychological defenses activate, causing resistance.

We characterize translation failures as relational, as they connect the individual and their thoughts during interdepartmental communication. [Pieterse et al. \(2012, p. 811\)](#) showed that subgroups within departments develop distinct discourses, resulting in a specific change that can be interpreted differently across individuals and departments. In our data, we have seen many examples of this as a divide between IT and business units. In one way, it becomes a sensemaking breakdown, where individuals (such as managers from each department) speak different professional languages. [Ford et al. \(2008, pp. 362-363\)](#) frames this as a dual sensemaking failure. Change agents fail to find an answer to "How will this get accomplished?" and recipients fail to find an answer to "How will this affect me?". When these two conversations are never held, like when IT professionals continue preaching about system architecture and business obsesses about customer outcomes, resistance emerges. Consequently, this becomes a relational barrier. It may happen even when organizational structures are perfectly organized, instead it is about how people communicate and make sense of change.

5.3 Typology of Horizontal Resistance

The preceding sections outline two isolated dimensions, mapping recurring empirical themes onto their extremities. Sections 5.1 *Ownership Overlap Dimension* and 5.2 *Barrier Dimension* established the risk of horizontal resistance increase at both ends.

We argue that the two dimensions do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they interact with one another, spanning a 2D space. In turn, this creates a typology of horizontal resistance, characterized by the four combinations of extremities possible. A framework interconnecting the empirical findings and the spectra of drivers of horizontal resistance. Conclusively, we suggest Figure 13 as an analytical proposition to understand and categorize the typology of horizontal resistance.

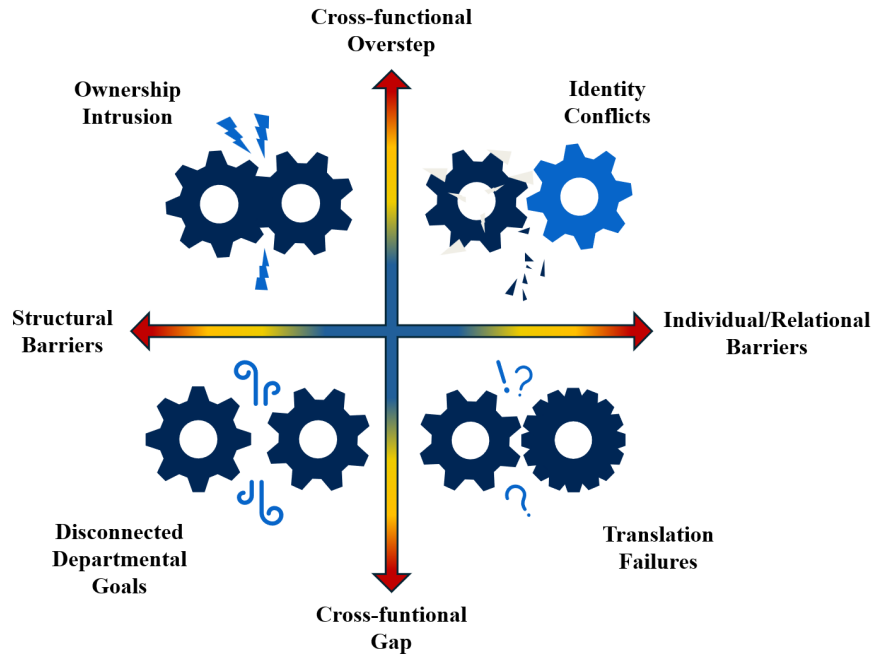


Figure 13: Typology of horizontal resistance: four themes positioned across the ownership overlap and barrier dimensions

We uncovered that the explored empirical themes fit neatly into quadrants. The justification of the framework is based on the two axes serving analytically distinct purposes and answering separate questions. Cross-functional overlap asks, "Is this change likely intrusive or divisive?" while the barrier dimension contrasts, "Is resistance structurally or individually/relationally rooted?" For example, cross-functional overlap may cultivate identity conflicts given that resistance is individually rooted. However, it may equally produce ownership intrusions if mainly structural barriers fuel it.

5.3.1 Quadrant I Identity Conflicts: $Overlap \times Individual/Relational$

Exploring the first, top right quadrant, put together through high overlap and individual/relational barriers, we trace back to one of our four manifestations of horizontal resistance, identity conflicts. What matters here is not who formally owns what, but what the change says about *who you are*. Horizontal resistance occurs when the sense of self is challenged and scales with how deeply and strongly internalized it is (Eilam and Shamir, 2005, pp. 405–408). Even the most technically simple DT rollouts may meet crippling resistance should they affect deeply internalized relational and personal power (Bateman, 1980, p. 202).

5.3.2 Quadrant II Ownership Intrusion: $Overlap \times Structural$

This space is occupied by what we previously categorized as ownership intrusion and is heavily grounded in literature treating resistance as a response to the loss of power, identity, and authority (Dent and Goldberg, 1999, p. 26). And when this loss is structural, e.g., having shifts of ownership dynamics written into existence, Lapointe and Rivard (2005, pp. 466, 482–483) predict that group-level resistance follows, which our findings confirm. Having multiple departments as owners of a singular field asks for friction if not carefully curated.

5.3.3 Quadrant III Disconnected Departmental Goals: $Gaps \times Structural$

This quadrant is less dramatic than the others, but arguably more common. As Bento et al. (2020, p. 17) argues, business functions using different success metrics may start pulling in different directions, which DT may accelerate. Recalling the Client Director’s comment on how business and IT often are two different camps with completely different goals helps us paint a picture on how this plays out in practice. Managers need to fill this gap by investing heavily in lateral sensemaking with peers from other units as a strategy to promote collaboration towards the organization’s mission (Balogun and Johnson, 2005, p. 22). In short, misaligned incentive structures and insufficient lateral interaction/communication create opposing missions, resulting in horizontal friction and disconnected departments.

5.3.4 Quadrant IV Translation Failures: *Gaps × Individual/Relational*

While similar to the preceding quadrant, translation failures, characterized by cross-functional gaps and individual/relational barriers, are not structural but conversational. The reality is that the technical complexity that DT implies is simply semantically difficult to translate between technical and nontechnical stakeholders and departments (Carlile, 2004, pp. 558-559); (Pieterse et al., 2012, pp. 802-803). Being lost in translation risks frustration tipping into disengagement, resulting in stakeholders mentally checking out, a symptom of relational barriers and cross-functional gaps.

5.4 Heatmap: Rethinking the Findings

Through the discovered horizontal resistance typology and the analogy of cogwheels, we aimed to intuitively provide a mental map of how one may approach the very complex field of organizational resistance. However, this approach does have its limitations. Mainly, it presents the manifestations as rigid groupings, as if one could proclaim, "Here is a clear-cut case of ownership intrusion." Through our empirical findings we argue that reality is more nested and floating than what the proposed typology implies.

The friction heatmap, presented in Figure 14, is our proposed solution of a more accurately depicted version of real organizational lateral resistance. This interpretation treats horizontal resistance as a gradient of intensity growing as organizations drift toward extremities. The four themes from the empirical findings should not be understood as categories but as danger zones.

Reframing our empirical findings into this framework matters because the very nature of DT pushes organizations toward all four corners. DT redefines processes, tools, and products, threatening identities. It demands cross-functional accountability, risking ownership intrusions. However, it may also further alienate departments from one another through clashing incentive structures and risk translation issues and mental checkouts of change stakeholders. And nothing in our empirical material would indicate that the scenarios stated above cannot occur simultaneously; hence, this interpretation is necessary.

As paradoxical as this may be, Vial (2019, p. 131) also identify how important cross-functional collaboration is for DT and label functional silos as structural challenges, highlighting the difficult balancing act of the framework's y-axis. As for the x-axis, Carlile

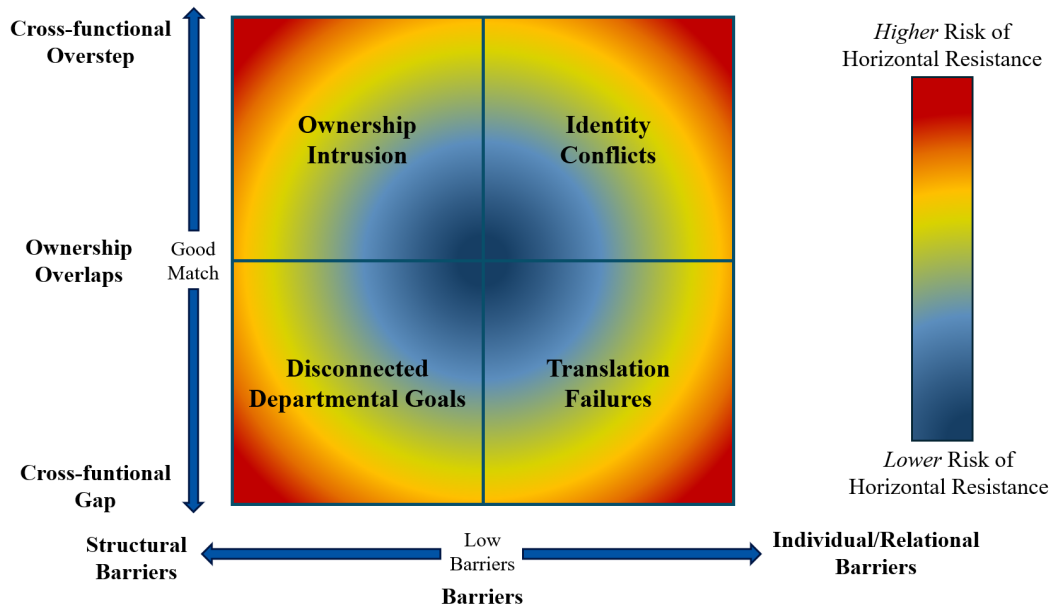


Figure 14: Horizontal resistance heatmap mapping friction in digital transformation

(2004, pp. 556–559) and Piderit (2000, pp. 784–785) lay out that structural and individual barriers are better understood as a spectrum rather than fixed categories.

What about the center? Is it all sunshine and rainbows? **No.** We argue, together with Li (2020, p. 813), that resistance from stakeholders, even from those who will ultimately benefit from DT, is unavoidable. The center should instead be considered a state enabling productive and value-creating resistance. Drawing on Thomas and Hardy (2011, p. 329), Cieslak and Valor (2025, p. 19), and Ybema and Horvers (2017, pp. 1243–1244), we believe our findings point at the center as a zone representing resistance becoming negotiation rather than stoppage. Skepticism toward DT does not completely cease but may take the shape of voicing practical concerns combined with sensible backstage compliance. Here DT gains legitimacy because it survived scrutiny or gets pulled back because it did not. A reminder from Sveningsson and Sörgärde (2023, p. 249): *”An absence of reaction actually means an absence of potentially valuable contributions. If employees do not involve themselves in a change process and fail to provide their opinions on matters that concern their knowledge and business area, important modifications may be overlooked.”*

6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the main takeaways from the research are integrated to provide an overall picture of the study's impact and findings. The following subsections summarize the core results, outline the contribution to the academic field, and evaluate the validity and limitations of the thesis.

6.1 Synthesis of Findings

This study set out to explore the research question: *How can horizontal resistance in large corporations undergoing digital transformation be conceptualized and understood?* Put simply, our findings across eleven qualitative interviews suggest it can be understood through four interrelated manifestations, which we summarize as the typology of horizontal resistance and the heatmap, presented in Figure 15. The overarching analogy describes these manifestations as incompatible cogwheels as a result of DT switching them out and having them fail while interacting. We label the different manifestations as: *identity conflicts*, *ownership intrusion*, *disconnected departmental goals*, and *translation failures*.

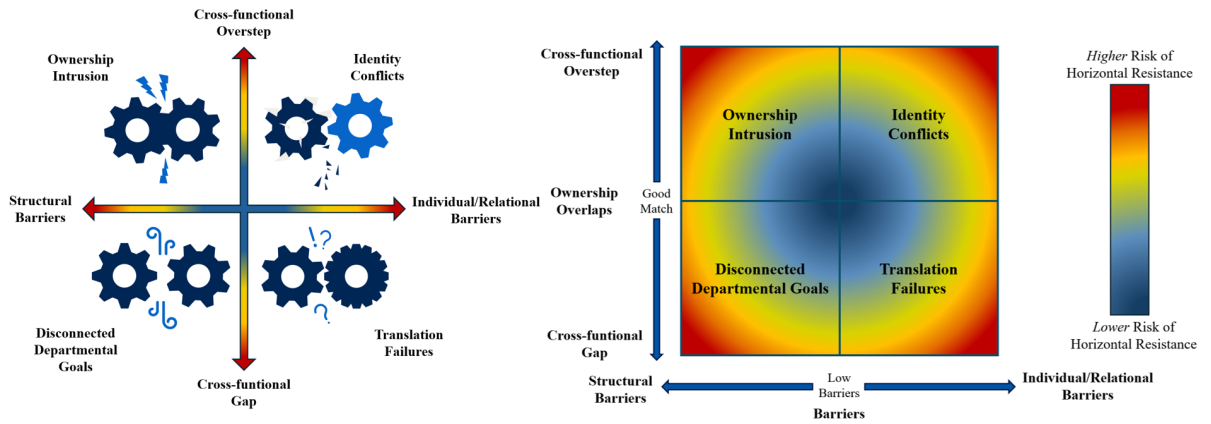


Figure 15: This Thesis' Contribution

We show that these manifestations reside along two independent axes: The *Cross-functional Overlap Dimension* runs from gaps to overstep, and the *Barrier Dimension* from structural to individual/relational.

The central implication of these findings is diagnostic. DT pushes business units towards the extremities of the dimensions, putting change initiatives at risk of failure should change agents only attend to vertical resistance.

Lastly, we do not argue that change agents can completely get rid of lateral friction in its entirety. However, we believe that through mitigating strategies of unproductive horizontal resistance, reaching the middle of the heatmap, change agents may turn friction into value-creating productive resistance to generate healthy scrutiny and legitimize DT. Understanding horizontal resistance means learning how to navigate it, not eradicate it.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides in-depth insights into the phenomenon of horizontal resistance, there are several limitations to acknowledge. First, the choice of a qualitative approach and small sample size ($n=11$), therefore limits any statistical generalizability of the findings. The results should therefore be viewed as exploratory rather than representative of a population. Furthermore, the interviewees had an over-representation of the tech industry, which could mean that different patterns might exist in other sectors. An interesting case to potentially look further into in future research.

The data-collection process was characterized by a reflexive approach, where the interview guide was refined following the pilot phase. This evolution of the interview guide meant that the empirical focus shifted slightly throughout the process. Consequently, this may have led to nuances caught in the later interviews being missed in the first interview round, possibly leading to an imbalance in empirical depth. Lastly, this study focused on the managerial perspective, meaning it represents only one part of organizations. With this comes an opportunity for future research to adopt a more employee-centric perspective in order to investigate how employees observe and experience horizontal resistance. By doing so, one could also look at whether horizontal resistance is perceived differently depending on the employee position within the organizational hierarchy.

Furthermore, we found some empirical support indicating mitigation strategies specific to each extremity of the respective dimensions of horizontal resistance. Cross-functional gaps require clarity of governance and shared metrics. Overstep may be countered through the involvement of change recipients early on. Individual and relational barriers require identity-sensitive leadership and deliberate sensemaking. Structural barriers, or silos, can be broken down through shared reference points. However, following the methodology section [3.3.2 Reducing](#), and the scope of this thesis, these suggestions did not emerge sufficiently during the interviews. Consequently, these mitigation strategies are empirically

underdeveloped and are not fit for analytical scrutiny as of now but are appropriate for future research.

6.3 Concluding Remarks: So What?

Having outlined this study's contributions and limitations, we will now turn back to the research question and look at the broader implications of our findings. The concluding remarks below are a distilled version of the essential insights this thesis offers about *how horizontal resistance in large corporations undergoing digital transformation can be conceptualized and understood*:

- Digital transformation, through the lens of organization theory, is not primarily a technological challenge but a challenge about people and a process that aims to switch out a corporation's old processes, tools, and products (cogwheels) to improve the total organizational performance.
- Horizontal resistance is an effect of organizational change that is often overlooked compared to traditional vertical resistance. It occurs not because the new technology fails, but because the alignment between new and remaining artifacts within the organization is overlooked.
- Our proposed heatmap serves as a diagnostic tool that can help change agents understand horizontal resistance through two dimensions, *ownership overlap* and *barriers*. We identify four manifestations of horizontal resistance that emerge from digital transformation: *ownership intrusion*, *identity conflicts*, *translation failures*, and *disconnected departmental goals*.
- Horizontal resistance is a natural effect of large organizational change. The core takeaway is the necessity to shift the mindset from trying to eradicate resistance to safely navigating it and taking advantage of the organizational scrutiny it provides.

"It's a human thing to address, not a technical one."

- Sales Capture Manager

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Appendix A: AI-Usage

Here are examples of AI prompts used during the creation of this thesis.

- "Can you list 3 synonyms to this word"
- "Is there a more intuitive way to phrase this: "
- "Give me two examples of how I could phrase this sentence better: "
- "Does this reasoning make sense to you?"
- "Does this follow a clear red thread?"
- "Critique this section:"

Appendix B: List of Participants

Role/Title	Department	Interview Guide #
Tech Architecture Analyst	Consultant	1
Client Director	Sales	1
Chief Executive Officer	Executive Management	1
Senior Analyst	Consultant	2
Business Architecture Analyst	Consultant	2
VP of Operations	Operations	2
VP of Product Planning	Product	2
Head Of Customer Success	Sales	2
Key Account Manager	Sales	2
Chief Technology Officer	IT	2
Sales Capture Manager	Sales	2

Note: While interviewees worked in different departments, all worked close to technology and digital transformation regardless of their department.

Appendix C: Interview Guide I

Intro

1. What is your role/title and what type of projects dominate your daily work right now?
2. Tell us about your background/career
3. How long have you worked in your current role?
4. To what extent are you involved in change or digital transformation projects in your work? Both external and internal?
 - (a) If yes, what does a typical team look like for a digital change initiative?

Change management/Resistance

1. What is the most common type of resistance to digital change right now? Any examples?
2. In what ways do you/your organization generally work to reduce/meet resistance to change initiatives?
 - (a) How has this changed in the last 5, 10 years?
 - (b) If yes, what do you think is the reason for this change?
3. What specific tools, frameworks, methods, or other frameworks are used to drive change?
 - (a) Is this something provided by the company, or can you develop your own?
4. What distinguishes a change project that succeeds from one that fails?
 - (a) How do you measure success for change management?
5. What trends do you perceive emerging today regarding digital transformation?

AI/GenAI

1. What would you say is the biggest challenge related to change management in 2026?

- (a) Would you say this is something new, or has this always been a major challenge?
- 2. Do you notice any difference in how organizations work with change management now compared to 5, 10 years ago?
 - (a) If yes, can you describe these differences?
- 3. Do you feel that AI and AI tools have influenced change management work?
 - (a) If yes, how?
- 4. What are the biggest key enablers for successful change management related to the implementation and changes resulting from AI in a large organization?
 - (a) Are these key enablers new or old?
- 5. Should all companies use GenAI?
- 6. What is your favorite use case for GenAI?

Selling Change

- 1. How do you identify the need for digital transformation/change? What signals trigger this? Can this be quantified?
- 2. Which values resonate most strongly with clients? Cost savings? Time? Any other?
- 3. Who are typically the decision-makers regarding this type of change?
- 4. How is "black-box" problematic handled in relation to AI, when selling change that customers might not fully understand?
- 5. Can you see any general change in how much knowledge companies have about AI if you compare now with 1-2 years ago?

Conclusion

- 1. What do you find most interesting about what we have talked about today?
 - (a) What makes it interesting?
 - (b) Anything else?

2. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think we should discuss to understand the subject?
3. Given your position and what we have discussed in this interview, what would you want to investigate if you were in our shoes?
4. According to an article in Harvard business review 70% of digital transformation fail. What do you think is the reason?

Appendix D: Interview Guide II

Intro

1. What is your role/title and what type of projects dominate your daily work right now?
2. To what extent are you involved in change or digital transformation projects in your work? Both external and internal?
 - (a) If yes, what does a typical team look like for a digital change initiative?

Change management/Resistance

1. What is the most common type of resistance to digital change right now? Any examples?
 - (a) Job insecurity, how is that addressed? What does that resistance look like? Does it occur? Any gaps between technology and skills? Politics?
2. In what ways do you/your organization generally work to reduce/meet resistance to change initiatives?
 - (a) How has this changed in the last 5, 10 years?
 - (b) If yes, what do you think is the reason for this change?
3. What would you say is the biggest challenge related to change management in 2026?
 - (a) Would you say this is something new, or has this always been a major challenge?
4. Does horizontal friction/resistance ever arise? For example, if a CIO or IT Manager faces pushback from a CHRO or CFO, etc.?
 - (a) How does that resistance differ from what you encounter from the bottom of the organization? Is it more political? Is it harder to handle? Are there strategies to reduce this type of friction?
 - (b) Do the strategies work, and why?
 - (c) Do you feel that internal politics play a role within digital transformation?

- (d) Does it happen / have you ever experienced people actively working against each other? What was the reason? Examples?
- 5. If you want to persuade an organization to pursue digital transformation, ignoring hierarchy, which strategies work best? How do you motivate a digital change?
 - (a) Is this something provided by the company, or can you develop your own?
- 6. Can you think of a specific occasion where a digital initiative was stopped by internal resistance - what actually happened?
- 7. What trends do you perceive emerging today regarding digital transformation?
- 8. What type of KPIs do you use?

AI and Change

- 1. Do you notice any difference in how organizations work with change management now compared to 5, 10 years ago?
 - (a) If yes, can you describe these differences?
- 2. Do you feel that AI and AI tools have influenced change management work?
 - (a) If yes, how?
- 3. What are the biggest key enablers for successful change management related to the implementation and changes resulting from AI in a large organization?
 - (a) Are these key enablers new or old?

Conclusion

- 1. What do you find most interesting about what we have talked about today?
 - (a) What makes it interesting?
 - (b) Anything else?
- 2. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think we should discuss to understand the subject?

3. Given your position and what we have discussed in this interview, what would you want to investigate if you were in our shoes?
4. According to an article in Harvard Business Review 70% of digital transformation fail. What do you think is the reason?