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## FROM DIGITAL STRATEGY TO ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE: HRM MICRO-MECHANISMS AT HAIER SMART HOME

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**Article Received: 26 May 2026, Article Revised: 14 June 2026, Published on: 04 July 2026**

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.9859>

### 2. ABSTRACT

Digital transformation can connect data, users and organisational resources, but technology alone does not explain how a manufacturing firm converts digital strategy into action and performance. This study examines the human resource management (HRM) micro-mechanisms through which digital transformation becomes executable in Haier Smart Home, a platform-oriented Chinese manufacturing firm. Using a longitudinal embedded single-case design, the study draws on 35 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025, more than 2,500 minutes of recorded interview material, annual and ESG reports, governance documents, platform rules and public corporate materials. Gioia coding, temporal bracketing, process tracing and pattern matching were used to identify and verify mechanisms. The findings show that digital strategy produced organisational effects only after HRM redesigned decision rights and platform services. Three interacting micro-mechanisms then translated connectivity into action: order-based talent allocation recombined human capital around user opportunities; user-linked incentives internalised market signals into employee behaviour; and platform governance coordinated autonomous internal units and external ecosystem partners. These mechanisms improved response speed, user-oriented innovation and cross-boundary coordination, but they also generated risks of short-termism, income volatility and rule disputes when data quality, attribution and governance legitimacy were weak. The study contributes a mechanism-based explanation of digital HRM and shows that digital value creation depends on the organisational architecture through which people use digital tools.

**3. KEYWORDS:** Digital transformation; strategic human resource management; digital HRM; dynamic capabilities; Rendanheyi; platform governance.

#### 4. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has moved from isolated information-technology projects to the redesign of strategy, organisation and value creation. Digital technologies connect activities, expose real-time data and recombine products, services and stakeholder relationships across conventional boundaries (Bharadwaj, El Sawy, Pavlou, & Venkatraman, 2013; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). However, digital resources create only a potential for performance. They do not decide who may act on information, how expertise is mobilised, what behaviours are rewarded, or how autonomous actors coordinate. The gap between digital strategy and organisational execution is therefore an organisational-design problem as much as a technology problem.

Human resource management is central to this problem. Strategic HRM research shows that coherent systems of staffing, development, appraisal and reward can align employee capabilities and behaviour with firm strategy (Wright & McMahan, 1992; Delery & Doty, 1996; Becker & Gerhart, 1996). Digital HRM research has expanded from electronic administration towards analytics, algorithmic management and digital HR strategy (Bondarouk, Parry, & Furtmueller, 2017; Strohmeier, 2020; Meijerink, Boons, Keegan, & Marler, 2021; Ruiz, Benitez, Castillo, & Braojos, 2024). Yet these two literatures remain incompletely integrated. Strategic HRM often assumes a relatively stable strategy to which HR practices are fitted, whereas digital HRM often treats technology as an instrument for improving HR processes. Neither view fully explains how HRM continually translates changing digital opportunities into resource reconfiguration, employee motivation and platform coordination.

This paper asks the following research question: through which HRM micro-mechanisms does digital transformation become organisational action and performance outcomes? The question is important because many firms invest in digital platforms, data systems and intelligent technologies without obtaining comparable performance effects. A mechanism-based explanation is required because similar technologies can produce different organisational consequences when authority, talent, rewards and governance are arranged differently.

Haier Smart Home provides an information-rich setting for this question. Its Rendanheyi model broadly aligns employees with user orders and user value. During 2020-2025,

digitalisation was accompanied by decentralised micro-enterprises, platform-based talent allocation, user-linked rewards and chain-group collaboration. The case is not treated as proof of a universally superior model. Instead, it is used to identify analytically general mechanisms, proximal outcomes and boundary conditions (Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 2018).

The study makes three contributions. First, it reconceptualises HRM transformation as a configurational dynamic capability composed of an enabling architecture and three micro-mechanisms: allocation, incentives and governance. Second, it opens the digital transformation-performance black box by tracing how capability visibility, opportunity orderisation, market-signal internalisation and rule-based collaboration generate organisational responsiveness, innovation and user value. Third, it introduces a conditional account: the same mechanisms can increase autonomy and speed while also producing income volatility, short-termism and coordination disputes when attribution, data quality, talent depth or rule legitimacy are inadequate.

## **5. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **5.1 Research design and case selection**

A longitudinal embedded single-case design was used because the research question concerns how interdependent organisational mechanisms emerge and operate over time (Eisenhardt, 1989b; Yin, 2018). Case-based process research is appropriate when the objective is to explain how a phenomenon unfolds rather than to estimate an average statistical effect. Haier Smart Home was selected as a revelatory and theoretically useful case because it combines large-scale manufacturing, international operations and an extended history of Rendanheyi experimentation. Its transition towards smart-home scenarios, ecosystem services and platform coordination offered a bounded period in which digital strategy, HRM redesign and performance outcomes could be traced together.

The embedded units were the corporate and HR platform, industry and regional businesses, micro-enterprises, chain groups and frontline employees. This design allowed comparison of strategic intent, platform rules and lived experience across organisational levels. The study therefore analysed both formal arrangements and behavioural responses. The unit of analysis was not a single HR practice but the mechanism through which digital strategy, HRM design and employee action were connected.

### **5.2 Data collection**

The case database combined interviews, corporate archives and public materials. Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted through purposive and snowball sampling. The

sample included two top decision-makers, eight functional or platform managers, five industry or regional managers, twelve micro-enterprise or chain-group leaders, six frontline employees and two external experts. Interviews exceeded 2,500 recorded minutes and produced approximately 647,200 Chinese characters of transcripts. Questions covered digital strategy, authority allocation, talent allocation, user-linked rewards, chain-group collaboration, employee responses, performance effects and negative cases.

Corporate archival sources included annual reports, ESG reports, governance documents, HR and platform rules, internal process materials and executive speeches from 2020 to 2025. Public materials included forum transcripts, company releases and secondary case descriptions. These sources were used to construct the case chronology, triangulate interview claims and identify rival explanations. All participants gave informed consent. Identifying information was removed, and role-based codes were used in analytical memos. Quotations were translated into English and checked against the Chinese transcript for meaning accuracy.

**Table 1. Case evidence and analytical use.**

| Source             | Volume and coverage                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Analytical use                                                                      |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interviews         | 35 participants; more than 2,500 recorded minutes; approximately 647,200 Chinese characters; decision-makers, platform managers, regional managers, micro-enterprise leaders, frontline employees and external experts. | Mechanism processes, behavioural responses, negative cases and boundary conditions. |
| Corporate archives | 2020-2025 annual and ESG reports, governance documents, HR and platform rules, internal process materials and operating indicators.                                                                                     | Temporal sequence, formal rules, construct triangulation and performance context.   |
| Public materials   | Executive speeches, forum transcripts, company releases and secondary case materials; approximately 157,000 Chinese characters.                                                                                         | Case chronology, contextualisation and rival-explanation checks.                    |

### 5.3 Data analysis and research quality

The analysis combined Gioia coding, temporal bracketing, process tracing and pattern matching (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Langley, 1999). First-order codes preserved informant language, including statements such as "the order determines the team", "the income dashboard follows the user" and "the platform links resources rather than approving them". Second-order themes identified capability visibility, opportunity orderisation, market-signal internalisation, residual-claim redistribution and rule-based ecosystem coordination.

These themes were then aggregated into dynamic alignment and three operating mechanisms: allocation, incentives and governance.

Temporal bracketing was used to organise events from digital-strategy change to HR architecture, employee action and proximal outcomes. Process tracing examined whether observed outcomes followed the expected sequence. Pattern matching compared the emergent mechanism system with dynamic capability theory, strategic HRM and platform governance theory. Rival explanations were actively considered. Industry growth, brand strength and scale could explain part of company-level financial performance, but they could not by themselves explain the observed changes in task matching, reward attention or cross-unit collaboration. Conversely, interview evidence alone might reflect retrospective sensemaking, so claims were retained only when supported by formal rules, reports or evidence from different organisational levels.

Research quality was strengthened through source triangulation, an evidence database, coding memos and anonymised evidence matrices. Construct validity was improved by comparing interview accounts with corporate rules and public materials. Internal validity was addressed through temporal sequencing and rival-explanation analysis. External validity was approached through analytical generalisation: the purpose was to derive transferable mechanisms and boundary conditions rather than to claim statistical representativeness.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Enabling architecture: from static fit to dynamic alignment

The 2020-2025 evidence shows that digital strategy first altered the allocation of authority and the role of HRM. Strategy increasingly emphasised smart-home scenarios, ecosystem value and direct user interaction. Fixed functional hierarchies were poorly suited to opportunities that crossed product and departmental boundaries. In response, personnel, appraisal and distribution rights were moved closer to business and micro-enterprise units, while HR activities were consolidated into shared digital platforms. HRM therefore shifted from an approval centre towards a provider of rules, data and services.

This change was not simply empowerment. Decision rights were accompanied by visible operating data and responsibility for outcomes. A business manager described the shift by noting that after the HR platform transferred the three rights, the platform role became resource connection rather than approval. The enabling architecture linked strategy to action by making frontline units simultaneously more autonomous and more accountable. It also

created the conditions under which allocation, incentives and governance could operate together.

This finding supports the first proposition conditionally: digital transformation contributes to organisational performance when decentralised decision rights and platformised HR services create dynamic alignment between digital strategy and frontline action. The condition is important. Decentralisation without reliable data and rules can create fragmentation; platformisation without real decision rights can become symbolic digital administration. In Haier, the performance-relevant change was the combination of authority redistribution and platform support.

## **6.2 Allocation mechanism: making capabilities and opportunities recombining**

The allocation mechanism replaced job ownership with temporary access to opportunities. Corporate materials described a six-step process of publishing an order, voluntary application, open competition, appointment, commitment contracting and dynamic adjustment. Capability profiles and opportunity maps made both employees and tasks visible beyond departmental boundaries. One former HR manager summarised the logic as follows: "Traditionally, a position determined the person. Now the order determines the people. Talent belongs to the group-wide pool and moves according to the order."

This mechanism created three proximal outcomes. First, it enlarged the matching set because a project could draw from capabilities outside the sponsoring unit. Second, it shortened reconfiguration time by allowing employees to self-select and teams to form around a specified user problem. A frontline engineer reported joining three different micro-enterprise projects in one year after applying through the internal opportunity map. Third, it made team boundaries reversible: contributors could disperse when the order was completed rather than preserving a permanent structure.

The performance effect was most visible in response speed and problem-solving variety rather than in an isolated financial coefficient. For example, a regional manager described a sterilisation solution for a mother-and-baby user segment that moved from idea to product proposal within one week through online coordination. Allocation also created search and adjustment costs. Employees with weak capability signals or low tolerance for uncertainty could be disadvantaged, and frequent movement risked underinvestment in long-term learning. The allocation mechanism therefore works when capability data are credible and the organisation retains sufficient talent depth.

### **6.3 Incentive mechanism: internalising attributable user value**

The incentive mechanism changed the source, timing and object of performance information. Traditional supervisor-centred appraisal was supplemented by user feedback, order results, repeat purchase, service quality and team contribution. Digital dashboards shortened feedback cycles and made estimated returns visible. An employee explained that the income dashboard changed in real time and was linked to user feedback and repeat-purchase data. This shifted attention from waiting for quarterly appraisal to monitoring user value.

The mechanism operated through market-signal internalisation. External outcomes entered internal evaluation, and a portion of value above an agreed target was shared through gain-sharing or commitment contracts. This redistributed some residual claims and encouraged cross-functional cooperation because no single function could produce a complete user outcome. Interviewees repeatedly contrasted being responsible to a superior with being responsible for a user result. This finding extends agency logic beyond a manager-employee dyad towards a user-platform-team relationship (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989a).

The same immediacy generated risks. Where user value could not be attributed reliably, teams disputed contribution weights. Where short-term transaction indicators dominated, employees could neglect capability building or difficult users. Income variability also transferred business risk to individuals. Therefore, user-linked incentives are not equivalent to letting customers determine wages. They require auditable data, transparent contribution rules, income protection and appeal procedures.

### **6.4 Governance mechanism: coordinating autonomous actors through platform rules**

Decentralised micro-enterprises increased local initiative but also created interdependence. Smart-home scenarios require hardware, software, logistics, service and external ecosystem partners to contribute to a common outcome. Haier's chain-group arrangements addressed this problem by connecting internal units and external partners through shared orders, contribution records and value-sharing contracts. Coordination relied less on a superior assigning tasks and more on platform rules specifying entry, commitments, interfaces, data visibility and distribution.

This produced a hybrid form between hierarchy and market. Corporate platforms retained architectural control over standards and data, while micro-enterprises selected partners and negotiated contributions around user scenarios. The arrangement resembles platform ecosystem governance, but it operated inside and across a manufacturing firm rather than only in an external multisided market (Gawer, 2014; Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018;

Tiwana, 2014). Its performance contribution was the ability to combine specialised resources without absorbing every participant into a permanent hierarchy.

Governance became more demanding as autonomy expanded. Ambiguous interfaces led to duplicated effort; opaque algorithms or contribution measures weakened trust; and powerful units could shape rules in their favour. Platform governance improved cross-boundary coordination when work could be decomposed, contributions could be recorded and dispute-resolution procedures were credible. Otherwise, platform language could conceal unresolved hierarchy or uncontrolled fragmentation.

### 6.5 Integrated mechanism system and performance outcomes

The mechanisms formed a sequence rather than three independent HR practices. Dynamic alignment gave frontline units the authority and platform support to act. Allocation assembled the relevant capabilities around an opportunity. Incentives directed attention towards user value and shared outcomes. Governance coordinated autonomous contributors and distributed value. Together, they enabled repeated sensing, seizing and reconfiguration, which is the organisational logic of dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007).

The case showed multiple forms of performance. Proximal outcomes included faster task formation, substantially higher processing capacity in selected platformised functions, more rapid development of user solutions and stronger cross-unit coordination. At company level, Haier Smart Home reported 2025 revenue of RMB302.347 billion and net profit attributable to shareholders of RMB19.553 billion. These financial results establish that the transformation occurred in a commercially viable organisation, but they do not isolate the causal effect of HRM mechanisms from brand, market, acquisition or industry factors. The strongest inference is mechanism-based: specific HRM changes were consistently connected to changes in action and proximal outcomes, while company-level financial performance remained contextual corroboration rather than a treatment effect.

**Table 2. HRM micro-mechanisms, evidence and performance implications.**

| Micro-mechanism   | Core process                                                        | Representative evidence                                                                                                                   | Performance implication and risk                                                                                               |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dynamic alignment | Decentralise decision rights and platformise HR rules and services. | Transfer of personnel, appraisal and distribution rights to business and micro-enterprise units; HR becomes a resource and rule platform. | Faster strategic response and clearer accountability; risk of pressure if unit capability or platform service quality is weak. |

|            |                                                                                 |                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Allocation | Codify capabilities, publish opportunities as orders, and form temporary teams. | Six-step order process; employees compete for projects across departmental boundaries.      | Reconfiguration speed, wider expertise combinations and innovation variety; risk of weak capability signals, talent shortage and fragmented learning. |
| Incentives | Link rewards to attributable user and market outcomes.                          | Real-time dashboards, gain-sharing contracts, user feedback and repeat-purchase indicators. | User focus, delivery discipline and voluntary cooperation; risk of attribution disputes, income volatility and short-termism.                         |
| Governance | Coordinate autonomous internal and external actors through platform rules.      | Chain groups, shared orders, contribution records and value-sharing contracts.              | Cross-boundary coordination and scalable ecosystem participation; risk of opaque rules, weak dispute resolution and power asymmetry.                  |

## 6.6 Theoretical discussion

First, the study reframes digital HRM as a configurational dynamic capability. Existing research has shown that digital HRM can affect operational, relational and organisational outcomes, although effects vary across contexts (Theres & Strohmeier, 2023). The present findings explain this variation by separating technology from mechanism. Digital data and platforms become valuable when HRM redesigns authority and repeatedly operates allocation, incentive and governance processes. This moves digital HRM research beyond a catalogue of tools towards an account of how HRM participates in organisational reconfiguration.

Second, the study specifies human-capital microfoundations of digital transformation. Dynamic capability theory identifies sensing, seizing and reconfiguration at a high level (Teece, 2007), but it often leaves the human and organisational processes underexplained. The Haier case shows how these capacities are enacted: capability labels make resources visible, orders convert opportunities into contestable tasks, self-selection and temporary teams recombine expertise, user-linked indicators focus effort and platform rules stabilise collaboration.

Third, the findings qualify celebratory accounts of decentralisation and algorithmic management. Platforms can expand employee opportunity and reduce hierarchical delay, but they also redistribute risk and intensify visibility (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020). The

same dashboards that make contribution measurable can promote short horizons; the same internal market that mobilises talent can disadvantage less visible capabilities. Boundary conditions are therefore part of the theory, not implementation details. Rendanheyi contributes to general management theory when translated into mechanisms and failure conditions rather than presented as a transferable label (Wang, 2018).

### **6.7 Managerial implications**

Managers should sequence HRM transformation rather than digitise isolated HR practices. A firm should first clarify decision rights and build reliable HR platform services. It can then pilot opportunity-based allocation in work that is modular and measurable, introduce user-linked rewards where attribution is credible and establish governance rules before expanding cross-boundary autonomy. Copying labels such as micro-enterprise, internal market or user-paid compensation without the underlying data and dispute-resolution infrastructure is likely to create symbolic decentralisation or uncontrolled pressure.

Measurement design also requires restraint. User indicators should be balanced with quality, learning and team-development measures. Employees need predictable income floors and appeal channels, and algorithms should remain auditable. Platform governance must specify who can change rules, how contributions are valued and how conflicts are resolved. The practical objective is not maximum marketisation inside the firm but a workable balance between autonomy and integration.

### **6.8 Limitations and future research**

The single-case design supports process explanation but not statistical generalisation. The evidence is concentrated in one large Chinese manufacturer with an unusually long history of organisational experimentation. Interview data may contain retrospective bias, and access to complete algorithmic rules and individual-level performance records was limited. Future studies should compare firms with different digital maturity, test the propositions using longitudinal multi-firm data and examine employee well-being alongside organisational performance. Research should also investigate when internal talent markets complement rather than undermine occupational communities and long-term capability development.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Digital transformation does not travel directly from technology investment to organisational performance. In the Haier case, digital strategy became executable through an HRM architecture that redistributed decision rights and supplied platform rules, data and services. Three micro-mechanisms then converted connectivity into action: order-based allocation

recombined human capital, user-linked incentives internalised market signals and platform governance coordinated autonomous contributors.

The joint operation of these mechanisms created a dynamic capability for repeated reconfiguration. However, the effects depended on demanding conditions: data quality, outcome attribution, talent depth, legitimate rules, credible dispute resolution and sustained leadership. The central implication is precise: digital value creation depends less on possessing digital tools than on designing the organisational mechanisms through which people use those tools. For manufacturing firms seeking digital transformation, HRM should therefore be treated not as a supporting administrative function but as a core architecture for strategy execution and performance creation.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the interview participants and organisational informants who contributed to the study. No external funding was received for this manuscript. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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