Research Article

Transforming People, Transforming Innovation: Leadership Mechanisms Driving Innovative Work Behavior in Global ICT Companies

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of transformational leadership in promoting innovative work behavior among employees in leading Information and Communication Technology (ICT) firms. The research specifically examines the internal mechanisms of empowerment, knowledge sharing, and perceived organizational support. The participants included eight individuals – executives, human resource managers, and supervisors – who were interviewed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using content and thematic analysis. The findings indicate that transformational leadership is a critical factor in stimulating creative thinking, providing opportunities for employees to demonstrate their capabilities, and cultivating a work environment conducive to innovation. It also enhances employees' sense of empowerment, autonomy in decision-making, and intrinsic motivation to improve their work. Additionally, knowledge sharing facilitated by organizational structures and culture, along with employees' perceived organizational support in terms of resources and well-being, significantly contributes to the development of innovative work behavior. Therefore, fostering innovation in ICT organizations requires inspirational leadership supported by comprehensive and sustainable employee support systems.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership; Empowerment; Knowledge Sharing; Perceived Organizational Support; Innovative Work Behavior

1. Introduction

The rapid changes in the globalized economic and social environment have led organizations to face volatile, complex, and unpredictable competitive conditions. Consequently, many organizations must continuously build adaptive capabilities and develop innovation for survival and sustainabilit[1], Amidst the wave of disruption, organizations must not only develop new products or services but also seek new business opportunities[2]. Simultaneously, industries worldwide are confronting pressures from global megatrends and the impacts of COVID-19, necessitating organizations to enhance their internal capabilities to initiate innovation promptly in response to change. In this context, "personnel" are considered the most critical resource for driving innovation, as their ability to conceptualize, develop, and implement new ideas is central

to the long-term survival of organizations[3].

However, innovative work behavior among employees does not occur automatically but depends on leadership factors and the internal organizational environment. Particularly, Transformational Leadership is recognized as the most suitable leadership style in environments demanding change and innovation[4-5]. Numerous studies have demonstrated that this leadership style positively influences employees' innovative work behavior[6] by fostering inspiration, stimulating new ideas, and promoting learning. Furthermore, internal mechanistic factors such as Empowerment play a crucial role in enhancing intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy[7-10], all of which encourage employees to express ideas and initiate new endeavors[11] . Moreover, Knowledge Sharing is another significant mechanism that facilitates the creation and development of new organizational knowledge through the SECI process: Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization[12]. Several studies have confirmed that knowledge sharing mediates between leadership and innovative behavior[13,14].

Additionally, Perceived Organizational Support (POS) is a crucial factor that enhances employees' intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment[15-16]. Employees who perceive that the organization values, supports, and recognizes their worth tend to exhibit increased innovative work behavior[17-19] . Considering all these factors, it becomes evident that organizational "innovation" is not solely driven by technology but arises from the interplay among leaders, personnel, and internal organizational support structures. Leading ICT organizations in Thailand, with over 9,000 employees, play a significant role in the nation's digital development. Therefore, studying the internal mechanisms driving innovation is crucial, as these organizations are central to developing digital services, information infrastructure, and technology systems supporting the country's digital economy. Furthermore, this study builds upon previous research by Intongsuk et al.[20] , which quantitatively found that transformational leadership structural equation models influence innovative work behavior through knowledge sharing and perceived organizational support. This reflects human resource development approaches that address digital age challenges, such as the scarcity of highly skilled personnel, the need for innovative adaptation, and the demand for sustainable technological competitive advantage– all critical components in determining a nation's long-term competitiveness.

Therefore, this research article aims to investigate the role of transformational leadership in driving innovative work behavior among employees in leading Information and Communication Technology (ICT) firms. It specifically seeks to understand the underlying internal mechanisms of empowerment, knowledge sharing, and perceived organizational support. This will lead to the synthesis of in-depth knowledge and policy recommendations that effectively and sustainably foster innovative work behavior within Thai ICT organizations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is a concept widely recognized for its crucial role in organizational development within dynamic and complex environments. Leaders exhibiting this style are capable of inspiring, stimulating creative thinking, and encouraging followers to fully develop their potential[21-22]. This aligns with research indicating that transformational leaders are key variables influencing knowledge sharing, perceived organizational support, and employees' innovative work behavior across various organizational dimensions[5-6]. The components of transformational leadership include Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration, all of which contribute to fostering an environment where employees are encouraged to initiate and develop innovations continuously [23-24].

2.2. Empowerment mechanisms

Empowerment is a vital process that reflects leaders' ability to unleash the potential of their followers, leading employees to develop self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, and readiness to experiment with new ideas[7-9]. Although the attached research does not explicitly feature empowerment as a distinct heading, this mechanism is embedded within transformational leaders who utilize intellectual stimulation to challenge existing paradigms, encouraging employees to initiate and drive innovation. Thus, empowerment serves as an intermediate mechanism linking transformational leadership and systematic innovative work behavior [11,25].

2.3. Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing forms a fundamental cornerstone for innovation-driven organizations, particularly in the ICT industry, characterized by intensive technology and information. Research describes knowledge sharing according to Nonaka and Takeuchi's[12] SECI Model, which encompasses the processes of Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization. These processes facilitate the creation of new knowledge within the organization[26-27]. Knowledge sharing enhances work efficiency, reduces errors, and fosters a collaborative learning culture, all of which are factors supporting employees in continuously developing and innovating new ideas sustainably[28] .

2.4. Perceived organizational support

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) refers to employees' belief that the organization values their contributions, cares for their well-being, supports their work, and provides opportunities for growth[15-16]. Research indicates that employees who perceive high organizational support demonstrate greater commitment and dedication, as well as a willingness to initiate new ideas, which is crucial for fostering innovative behavior[17-19]. Therefore, POS acts as a reinforcing factor that influences creativity, experimentation with new ideas, and the successful implementation of innovation within the organization[29].

2.5. Innovative work behavior

Innovative work behavior refers to the process by which employees seek new ideas, create concepts, strive to gain acceptance for them, and implement them in practice[30]. Additionally, contextual factors such as rewards, learning support, and an environment conducive to experimenting with new work approaches play a significant role in stimulating employees to exhibit innovative behavior[31]. Innovative work behavior thus arises from the integrated synergy among leaders, employees, and organizational structural elements, collaboratively driving the creation of new value through continuous innovation.

3. Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, aiming to deeply understand the experiences, contexts, processes, and underlying mechanisms linking Transformational Leadership, Empowerment, Knowledge Sharing, Perceived Organizational Support, and Innovative Work Behavior among employees in leading ICT companies. The research methods are detailed as follows.

3.1. Population and sample

The population for this study comprised senior executives, human resource managers, and supervisors within leading ICT companies in Thailand, which are large organizations playing a significant role in the country's information and communication technology industry. According to internal document references, the primary population across the parent company's 57 affiliates included executives, line managers, and numerous employees, totaling approximately 9,000 individuals. This research specifically selected key

informants capable of providing in-depth insights into the research questions, utilizing purposive sampling in accordance with Hennink and Kaiser's [32] guidelines. This approach emphasizes selecting informants with specific characteristics and direct experience relevant to the research, aiming to achieve data saturation. The sample for this study consisted of 8 participants, all of whom were personnel involved in management processes, human resource development, and innovation initiatives within the organization. These participants were able to provide comprehensive, in-depth information regarding leadership mechanisms, empowerment, knowledge sharing, organizational support, and innovative work behavior.

3.2. Research instrument

The primary tool used for qualitative data collection was a Semi-Structured Interview Guide. This guide was developed based on core theoretical concepts relevant to the study, including Transformational Leadership[21], Empowerment[7, 15], Knowledge Sharing[20], and Perceived Organizational Support[15]. It also incorporated practical considerations such as prevailing issues, development approaches, and managerial recommendations within the ICT industry. The interview questions covered perspectives on transformational leadership and its impact on innovation, the role of empowerment in stimulating potential, knowledge sharing within the ICT organizational context, examples of actual innovative behavior, perceived organizational support and employee experiences, and the overall relationships and perceived influence of each factor. The interview guide underwent a Content Validity check by five experts using the IOC (Index of Item Objective Congruence) criterion (>0.60), ensuring that the instrument possessed content validity and adequately covered the research objectives.

3.3. Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using a combination of Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis to deeply understand the meaningful structure of the information. The analytical process involved several steps: Transcription of interviews, Familiarization with the entire dataset through repeated reading, Coding of the data, Generating Themes by grouping codes, Reviewing Themes for completeness and coherence, and finally, Synthesis and Reporting of the findings.

4. Research results

The sample for this study consisted of 8 individuals: a Chief Financial Officer, a Chief People Officer, an Academic Head, a Head of Human Resources, a New Business Development Manager, a Senior Finance Officer, a Change Management Executive, and a Head of Customer Experience. The majority of interviewees were female (6 individuals), and two were male. The results of the content and thematic analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Content and Thematic Analysis from Interview Data

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Interview Data Codes
Transformational Leadership as an Innovation Driver	1. Leaders stimulate creative thinking	"Think outside the box," "Dare to try new things," "Leader provides space for ideas"
	2. Leaders build confidence and inspiration	"Manager's praise boosts morale," "Feel motivated to develop further"
	3. Leaders create a safe environment for new ideas	"Not afraid of criticism," "Mistakes are opportunities to learn"
Employee Empowerment	1. Confidence in abilities	"Leader trusts our capabilities," "Given opportunities to demonstrate abilities"
	2. Participation in decision-making	"Team gets to design work methods," "Can choose certain approaches"

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Interview Data Codes
Knowledge Sharing in ICT Organizations	3. Support for self-development	"Given opportunities for skill training," "Company supports new learning"
	1. Structured knowledge exchange	"Weekly exchange meetings," "Quarterly internal seminars"
	2. Collaborative learning culture	"Knowledge must be shared," "Credit given to idea proposers"
Perceived Organizational Support	1. Individual care and development	"Leader listens to problems and helps solve them," "Received support for work-related issues"
	2. Resource support system for innovation	"Budget available for idea testing," "Opportunity to try new technologies"
	3. Psychological safety	"Dare to propose ideas knowing the organization listens," "Not afraid of criticism"
Innovative Work Behavior	1. Idea initiation	"Think of new ways for customers," "Propose new projects"
	2. Experimentation and work improvement	"Try prototypes," "Continuously improve based on team feedback"
	3. New product and service development	"Ideas are further developed into actual projects"

Table 1. (*Continued*)

From Table 1, all eight interviewees stated that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in driving innovative work behavior in leading ICT organizations. Employees perceive that leaders who are open to change stimulate creativity and courage in thinking and acting, as evidenced by statements like "think outside the box" and "the leader provides space for ideas," reflecting an environment that supports real experimentation. Employees also noted that leaders who provide encouragement and praise, such as "manager's praise boosts morale," positively impact their confidence and readiness to initiate innovation. Furthermore, executives viewing mistakes as part of learning, such as "mistakes are opportunities to learn," foster psychological safety, a critical condition for creative thinking in technology organizations.

Regarding empowerment, most employees indicated that they received ample opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities, with comments such as "the leader trusts our capabilities" and "can choose certain approaches," making them feel involved and having autonomy in decision-making. This working style fosters a sense of ownership and motivates employees for continuous self-development, supported by leaders and the organization, for instance, through opportunities to attend digital skills or new technology training, as mentioned by interviewees who "were given opportunities for skill training." This reflects the relationship between empowerment and readiness for innovation.

In the dimension of knowledge sharing, it was found that ICT companies possess both clear knowledge exchange structures and a culture that supports collaborative learning, through activities such as weekly meetings, internal seminars, inviting external speakers, and practical workshops. Employees confirmed that "knowledge must be shared" and "credit is given to idea proposers," which are factors that encourage knowledge flow within teams and the organization, leading to continuous development into new innovations. This culture of sharing also helps reduce work duplication and increases team efficiency.

Concerning perceived organizational support, most interviewees reflected a feeling that the organization provides close care, covering well-being, work, and development, with examples like "the leader listens to problems and helps solve them" and "budget available for idea testing." This indicates that employees are aware of concrete organizational support. The presence of such support systems instills confidence in employees to create new ideas and dare to experiment with new things without fear of negative outcomes.

Ultimately, innovative work behavior truly emerges when all three mechanisms—transformational leadership, empowerment, and knowledge sharing—work in synergy. Employees explained that transformational leadership, empowerment, and knowledge sharing enable them to "think of new ways for customers" and "try prototypes," leading to the development of products and services that better meet market demands. Interviewees further confirmed that team collaboration and an open-minded attitude foster rapid and continuous idea development, reflecting that innovative work behavior is a result of systemic collaboration among leaders, employees, and an organizational culture that truly supports change.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The study highlights that transformational leadership is a critical mechanism driving innovative work behavior among employees in leading ICT organizations. Leaders who are open to change, possess a clear vision, and support new initiatives can instill inspiration, self-confidence, and a readiness for out-of-the-box thinking, which forms the foundation of innovation. Data from all eight interviewees confirmed that transformational leadership empowers employees, giving them autonomy in decision-making, involvement in work design, and readiness to experiment with new methods. It was also found that knowledge sharing, both structurally and culturally, facilitates the flow of knowledge within teams and the organization, fostering new ideas and continuous innovation development. Furthermore, employees perceive strong organizational support in terms of welfare, development, and well-being, leading to confidence and dedication in generating tangible innovation.

The results clearly demonstrate that innovative work behavior does not arise from a single factor but is a cumulative outcome of three main mechanisms: Empowerment, Knowledge Sharing, and Perceived Organizational Support, all driven by transformational leadership. This study expands the understanding of the in-depth processes underlying the relationship between leadership, support, and innovation within ICT organizations and addresses the interpretation of variables in the real operational context, as illustrated in Figure 1.
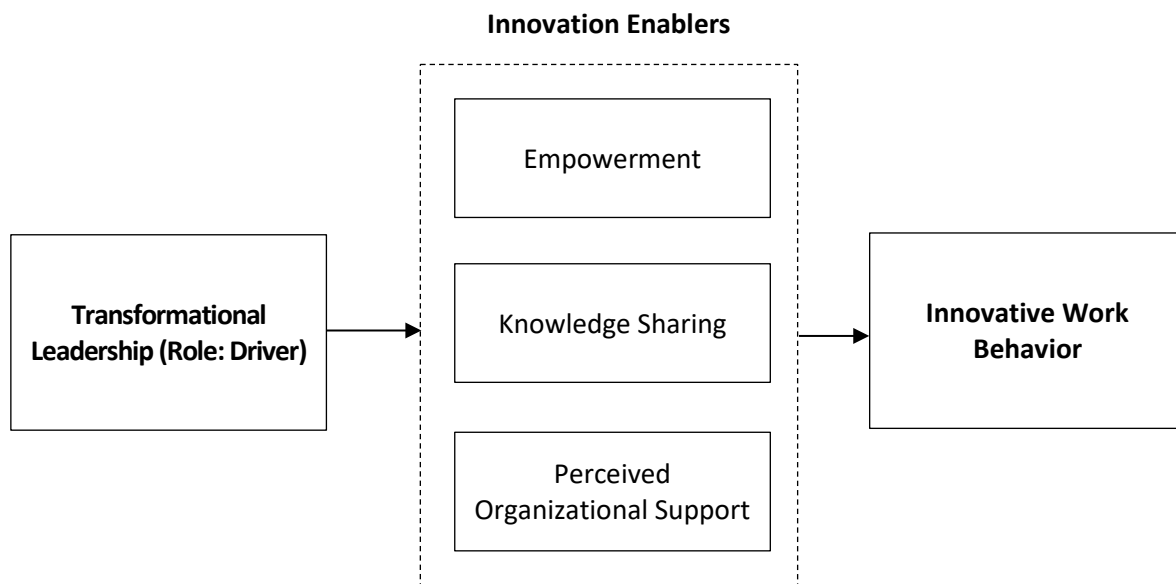
Figure 1. The Role of Transformational Leadership in Driving Innovative Work Behavior Model

The qualitative findings reflect the strategic role of transformational leadership in promoting innovative work behavior among ICT employees. Employees perceive that leaders who can communicate vision, inspire,

provide space for experimentation, and offer continuous support encourage the courage to propose new ideas and the readiness to adapt to work challenges. This aligns with[33], who found that transformational leadership is a key factor stimulating innovative behavior through commitment to change and organizational support for creativity, significantly enhancing the leader's impact. Karimi et al. [34] also found that leaders capable of coaching, supporting, and developing employee potential increase the likelihood of innovative behavior, especially when leaders play a role in developing psychological capabilities at an individual level. The findings of this study clearly reflect such patterns.

Regarding psychological capital and empowerment, the qualitative findings indicate that employees who feel autonomous, trusted, and have received support experience internal motivation and readiness to initiate innovation. This is consistent with Karimi et al.'s[34]concept that psychological capital (e.g., hope, self-efficacy, resilience, optimism) acts as an intermediary mechanism between leadership and innovation. Chen[35] et al. further confirmed that employee psychological capital not only directly affects innovative behavior but also indirectly through knowledge sharing, especially knowledge collection, which helps employees connect information, synthesize new ideas, and develop innovation systematically. The qualitative results of this study are consistent with this evidence, as ICT employees reported feeling confident and recognized by leaders, making them willing to dedicate more effort to creative work.

In terms of knowledge sharing, the study confirms that mechanisms for knowledge exchange, collaboration, and a culture that supports knowledge within ICT organizations significantly drive innovative work behavior. Employees perceive that meeting systems, experience sharing, and systematic access to information help them build upon perspectives and continuously develop new approaches. This aligns with Chen[35] et al. , who stated that both knowledge sharing and collection processes serve as mechanisms linking psychological capital to innovative behavior. Furthermore, Munir and Beh[36] suggested that creating an environment that fosters creativity alongside knowledge sharing can enhance innovation at both the team and organizational levels. Nugroho[37] emphasized that knowledge sharing is a "key driver" enabling employees to move from data perception to generating practical, innovative ideas in daily work. The qualitative results of this study clearly align with these three works.

Regarding perceived organizational support, the study found that employees perceive support in terms of resources, capability development, creating a blame-free environment for failure, and encouraging creative expression. These are crucial factors for confidence and a positive attitude towards experimenting with new things. This finding directly reflects the results of Jun and Lee [33], who affirmed that organizational support for creativity strongly empowers teams for tangible innovative behavior. It also aligns with El-Kassar et al. [38], who found that supportive elements, such as providing resources, accepting new ideas, and designing creative-enabling work systems, reduce knowledge hiding and increase the display of innovative behavior within organizations.

6. Recommendations

1) Organizations should develop and provide training programs specifically for Transformational Leadership for managers, executives, and high-potential employees to foster a leadership culture that is open, stimulating to followers, and ready to cope with rapid changes in the ICT industry.

2) Organizations should design work systems that provide employees with autonomy in decision-making, such as granting permission to design work methods, assigning challenging projects, establishing two-way feedback systems, and setting KPIs that measure creativity.

3) Organizations should develop internal Knowledge Management platforms, such as a Data Hub or Learning Platform, along with regularly scheduled knowledge exchange activities like Innovation Talks, Internal Hackathons, or Cross-team Learning.

4) Organizations should create work systems that ensure employees feel psychologically safe, such as a system for experimenting with ideas without blame, providing platforms for idea submission, and rewarding creative ideas even if they are not yet successful.

5) Organizations should continuously invest in employee development programs, especially in Digital Skills, Innovation Skills, Critical Thinking, and Soft Skills, to support the transition to a digital economy.

7. Recommendations for future research

1) Future research should extend the scope of the study to other types of ICT organizations or multiple companies to compare contextual differences. Cross-organizational studies would help in understanding the diversity of organizational cultures, leadership styles, and support systems that may impact innovative behavior differently, thereby increasing the validity of explaining variables in the actual context of the ICT industry.

2) Future research should investigate additional mediating or moderating factors, such as Psychological Safety, Digital Mindset, Organizational Agility, or Digital Maturity, to gain a deeper understanding of the complex mechanisms linking transformational leadership to innovative work behavior.

3) Future research should collect data from a wider range of informants, especially at the team and operational levels, to gain a holistic view of innovation creation. Since innovative work behavior arises from the interaction of team members, team-level analysis or operational-level insights would provide a deeper perspective on innovation development processes in real-world situations.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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