Making Sense of Employee Performance In Digital Workplaces: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Psychological Safety and Digital Orientation

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Abstract.
This study explores how employees make sense of performance in digital workplaces through their lived experiences of psychological safety and digital orientation. Adopting a qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews with eight employees working in organizations that have implemented digitally enabled work practices in Indonesia. The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions of employees' experiences. First, psychological safety provides an interpersonal environment that encourages employees to express ideas, ask questions, and learn from mistakes without fear of negative consequences. Second, digital orientation shapes employees' understanding of performance through technological adaptability, digital collaboration, and the continuous development of digital competencies. Third, the interaction between these conditions influences employees' ability to translate their digital capabilities into meaningful workplace contributions. Building on these findings, the study proposes Safe Digital Actualization as an emerging conceptual proposition, explaining how psychological safety and digital orientation converge in shaping employees' understanding and actualization of performance. The study contributes to the literature on organizational behavior and strategic human resource management by highlighting the importance of integrating psychological support with digital capability development in increasingly digitalized workplaces.

Keywords: *Psychological Safety; Digital Orientation; Employee Performance; Digital Workplace; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Safe Digital Actualization.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped how organizations create value, manage business processes, and establish working relationships among employees. The integration of digital technologies, including cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and virtual collaboration platforms, has accelerated the emergence of the digital workplace, an organizational environment in which digital technologies serve as the primary medium for executing business activities. This transformation has not only altered work processes but has also changed how employees interact, collaborate, make decisions, and interpret work success. Within this context, employee performance is no longer understood merely as the achievement of predetermined targets; rather, it increasingly reflects employees' ability to adapt to technological change, engage in effective virtual collaboration, and continuously create value through the utilization of digital technologies (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

These changes in work characteristics have significant implications for human resource management. Hybrid working and remote working arrangements have enhanced organizational flexibility while simultaneously increasing the complexity of coordination, communication, and trust-building among employees. In digital workplaces, employees are expected not only to possess technical competencies but also to demonstrate strong interpersonal skills, the confidence to express ideas openly, and the readiness to cope with rapid technological change. Consequently, organizations must recognize that the success of digital transformation depends not only on technological investments but also on employees' psychological readiness and adaptive capabilities as the primary drivers of organizational change (Kane et al., 2019; Jonathan et al., 2022).

In line with these developments, psychological safety has attracted growing attention in the strategic management and organizational behavior literature. Psychological safety refers to an individual's shared belief that the workplace is safe for expressing opinions, asking questions, acknowledging mistakes, and taking interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. A psychologically safe work environment has consistently been associated with organizational learning, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and improved individual and team performance. Within digital workplaces, psychological safety becomes even more critical because virtual interactions may reduce the quality of interpersonal communication, increase ambiguity, and elevate the likelihood of misunderstandings among employees (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017).

Beyond psychological factors, successful performance in digital workplaces is also influenced by digital

orientation, defined as an individual's tendency to embrace, utilize, and continuously develop digital technologies as an integral part of daily work activities. Digital orientation extends beyond technological competence by reflecting employees' willingness to engage in continuous learning, adapt to digital innovations, and leverage technology as a source of value creation. Previous studies have demonstrated that digital orientation contributes positively to innovation capability, organizational flexibility, and employee performance. Nevertheless, most existing studies conceptualize digital orientation primarily as either an individual competency or an organizational capability, offering limited insights into how employees themselves interpret and experience digital orientation in their everyday work practices (Verhoef et al., 2021; Nambisan et al., 2019).

Although the relationships among psychological safety, digital orientation, and employee performance have been extensively investigated, the majority of prior studies have employed quantitative approaches focusing primarily on testing causal relationships among variables. While these studies have successfully established whether psychological safety and digital orientation influence employee performance, they provide only limited explanations of how employees construct meaning from their experiences while working in continuously evolving digital environments. In other words, the existing literature remains largely dominated by causal explanations, whereas the sensemaking process through which employees interpret performance based on their lived experiences has received relatively little scholarly attention. This condition indicates an important knowledge gap concerning the subjective mechanisms through which psychological safety and digital orientation interact in shaping employees' perceptions and interpretations of performance within digital workplaces (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Despite the growing body of research on psychological safety, digital orientation, and employee performance, important questions remain about how employees themselves experience and interpret performance in digitally mediated work. Existing variable-based studies have provided evidence about associations among these constructs, but they provide less insight into the meanings employees attach to learning, technological adaptation, interpersonal support, and contribution in everyday digital work. In particular, the experiential interplay between psychological safety and digital orientation warrants closer examination: digital capability may remain underused when employees do not feel safe to speak up or experiment, while a supportive environment may not by itself provide the readiness and capability required to use digital technologies effectively.

This study addresses this gap by adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine employees' lived experiences of psychological safety and digital orientation in digital workplaces. Rather than testing causal relationships among variables, the study explores how participants make sense of work performance through their accounts of technological adaptation, virtual collaboration, learning, and professional contribution.

The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do employees experience and interpret psychological safety within digitally enabled work environments? (2) How do employees make sense of digital orientation in relation to their understanding of work performance? (3) How do employees experience the interplay between psychological safety and digital orientation in shaping the meaning and actualization of employee performance in digital workplaces?

The study's intended contribution is an emerging conceptual proposition termed Safe Digital Actualization. It captures the convergence of (a) psychological safety as an interpersonal condition that enables learning, experimentation, and voice, and (b) digital orientation as employees' readiness and capability to engage with digital technologies. This proposition is presented as an interpretation grounded in the reported participant accounts, not as a validated causal model.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design and Interpretative Positioning

This study employed a qualitative approach using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore how employees construct the meaning of their work performance in digital workplaces through the perspectives of psychological safety and digital orientation. This approach was selected because the study does not aim to examine causal relationships among variables; rather, it seeks to explore the meanings that individuals construct from their lived experiences while interacting within digitally enabled work environments. From the interpretative phenomenological perspective, reality is understood as a subjective construction emerging from individuals' experiences, reflections, and social interactions. Consequently, employee performance should be understood from the participants' own perspectives rather than solely through organizational indicators or objective performance measures. This approach is

particularly appropriate for uncovering how psychological experiences and technological adaptation shape employees' interpretations of work success in the era of digital transformation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Interpretative phenomenology was adopted because it provides a robust framework for exploring the sensemaking process through which individuals assign meaning to their work experiences within continuously evolving organizational and social contexts. Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped communication patterns, collaboration mechanisms, decision-making processes, and performance evaluation systems, making employee experiences difficult to explain solely through productivity indicators or performance outcomes. Instead, these experiences emerge from the dynamic interaction between employees' psychological conditions, their social environments, and their ability to adapt to digital technologies. Accordingly, a phenomenological approach enables this study to capture the complexity and depth of these experiences more effectively than quantitative approaches that primarily focus on identifying causal relationships among variables (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Van Manen, 2017).

Within an interpretative phenomenological framework, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument (human instrument), actively engaging in data collection, interpretation, and critical reflection throughout the research process. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher applied the principle of reflexivity by consciously identifying and temporarily suspending personal assumptions, prior experiences, and pre-existing knowledge that could potentially influence data interpretation through a process commonly referred to as bracketing. This strategy was implemented to ensure that the meanings generated genuinely reflected the participants' lived experiences rather than interpretations dominated by the researcher's perspectives. Consequently, data analysis was conducted iteratively through an ongoing dialogue between participants' narratives, the contextual circumstances surrounding their experiences, and the researcher's interpretative reflections, resulting in a rich and contextualized understanding of how employees construct the meaning of work performance within digital workplaces (Tufford & Newman, 2012; Finlay, 2012).

Based on this interpretative paradigm, the present study conceptualizes employee performance not merely as the achievement of organizational objectives but as a socially constructed experience emerging from the interaction between psychological safety, digital orientation, and the digital work context experienced by each individual. Therefore, the adoption of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis design is expected to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how employees interpret psychological safety, develop readiness to adapt to digital technologies, and collectively construct the meaning of work performance through the interaction of these experiences. Furthermore, this approach is expected to provide a deeper conceptual contribution to the Strategic Human Resource Management literature by offering a phenomenological explanation of employee performance dynamics in the era of digital transformation—an area that remains insufficiently explained by conventional positivist approaches (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019).

2. Participants and Sampling Strategy

Phenomenological research does not seek to achieve statistical representation of a population; rather, it aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who have encountered a particular phenomenon. Accordingly, this study employed purposive sampling, a sampling technique in which participants are intentionally selected based on their ability to provide information-rich cases concerning their experiences of working in digital workplaces. This strategy was chosen because it enables the researcher to obtain rich and meaningful narratives regarding how employees construct the meaning of employee performance through their experiences of psychological safety and digital orientation. Within the interpretative phenomenological tradition, the richness and relevance of participants' experiences are considered more important than the number of participants. Therefore, participant selection focused on individuals who had directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022; Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016).

The participants in this study were full-time employees working in organizations that had implemented digital work systems through hybrid working arrangements, remote working practices, or digitally transformed business processes in which technology served as the primary medium for conducting work activities. To ensure that all participants possessed relevant experiential knowledge, the following inclusion criteria were established: (1) permanent employment status; (2) a minimum of one year of experience working in a digital workplace, ensuring that participants had progressed beyond the initial adaptation stage of organizational digital transformation; (3) regular use of digital platforms as the primary means of communication, collaboration, and task completion; (4) willingness to participate voluntarily in in-depth

interviews; and (5) the ability to openly reflect on and articulate their work experiences. These criteria enabled the study to capture rich narratives concerning how psychological safety and digital orientation were perceived and interpreted in shaping employees' understanding of performance within digital work environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Participant recruitment followed an iterative purposive sampling strategy, whereby participant selection occurred concurrently with data collection and analysis. Following each interview, the researcher conducted preliminary reflection and analysis to evaluate whether the emerging data had sufficiently enriched the understanding of the phenomenon or whether additional participants with different characteristics were required. This iterative process enabled the researcher to capture diverse experiences across variations in age, job type, organizational position, intensity of digital technology use, and length of work experience. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, this strategy was intended to achieve a richer and more comprehensive interpretation of employees' experiences within digital workplaces (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

The number of participants was determined based on the principles of information power and data saturation. The concept of information power suggests that the more specific the research aim, the more homogeneous the participant characteristics, the stronger the quality of dialogue during interviews, and the more appropriate the analytical approach, the fewer participants are required to generate meaningful findings. Data collection was subsequently discontinued when no new categories, meanings, or themes emerged from the interview data, indicating that data saturation had been achieved. Based on these principles, the study involved eight participants, as the major themes related to psychological safety, digital orientation, and employee performance consistently recurred during the final interviews, suggesting that additional participants were unlikely to contribute substantial new insights relevant to the research objectives (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Malterud et al., 2016; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017).

The participants were intentionally selected to represent diverse experiences of working in digital environments, including variations in age, gender, educational background, organizational position, tenure, industry sector, and the intensity of digital technology use in daily work activities. This diversity was not intended to achieve population representativeness but rather to enrich the range of perspectives through which the researcher could identify different ways employees develop psychological safety, cultivate digital orientation, and construct the meaning of employee performance within the context of organizational digital transformation. Consequently, the findings are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of employees' lived experiences in increasingly digitalized work environments (Tracy, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Context and Participant Profile

This study was conducted across several organizations in Indonesia that had implemented digital workplaces as part of their organizational transformation initiatives. These work environments were characterized by the extensive use of digital technologies, including online collaboration platforms, digital project management systems, real-time communication applications, and cloud-based information systems to support daily organizational activities. Such technological transformation has not only reshaped organizational operational processes but has also altered how employees interact, collaborate, make decisions, and evaluate work success. Within this context, employee performance is no longer viewed merely as the achievement of individual performance targets; instead, it increasingly reflects employees' ability to adapt to technological change, engage in effective virtual collaboration, and continuously create value through the strategic use of digital technologies (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The participants consisted of eight employees drawn from various industry sectors, all of whom worked in organizations that had adopted digital work practices through hybrid working arrangements, remote working systems, or digitally transformed business processes. Each participant had at least one year of experience working in a digital workplace, ensuring that they had progressed beyond the initial adaptation phase associated with organizational digital transformation. Diversity in industry sector, organizational position, work tenure, and digital work experience was intentionally maintained to capture a broad range of lived experiences, thereby enabling the study to explore multiple perspectives on how employees interpret psychological safety, digital orientation, and employee performance across different organizational contexts. This diversity was not intended to achieve statistical representativeness but rather to enrich the phenomenological interpretation of participants' experiences (Malterud et al., 2016; Tracy, 2020).

The following presents Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the

participants involved in this study:

Tablel 1. Qualitative Informant Profile

Informant Code	Age	Position / Level	Working Period	Department
INF01	32	Senior Staff	1.5	Operations
INF02	28	Specialist	2.2	Sales
INF03	45	Manager	1.1	Human Resources
INF04	25	Junior Staff	1.2	Information Technology
INF05	38	Analyst	1.8	Finance
INF06	30	Coordinator	2.1	Customer Service
INF07	41	Supervisor	1.9	Production
INF08	27	Specialist	1.7	Logistics

Source: Researcher's thematic analysis results (2026).

To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a unique identification code ranging from INF1 to INF8 throughout the processes of data analysis and reporting. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 45 years and had between 1.1 and 2.2 years of experience working in digitally enabled environments. The eight participants included both male and female employees with diverse educational backgrounds, organizational positions, and industry affiliations, thereby providing a broad spectrum of experiences related to organizational digital transformation. Such diversity enabled the researcher to examine how different career stages, levels of responsibility, and intensities of digital technology use influenced employees' interpretations of psychological safety, their readiness to adapt to digital technologies, and the meaning they attributed to employee performance in their everyday work experiences. Within phenomenological inquiry, participant diversity is regarded as a valuable source of experiential richness that facilitates the emergence of multiple perspectives on a shared phenomenon, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences (Levitt et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022).

Analysis of the narratives provided by the eight participants revealed that experiences of working in digital workplaces extended far beyond the use of technology itself. Rather, these experiences were shaped by how employees developed the confidence to express their opinions, learned from mistakes, collaborated effectively in virtual environments, and continuously enhanced their digital capabilities as integral components of their work practices. Despite differences in organizational settings and occupational backgrounds, the participants demonstrated remarkably consistent experiential patterns. The thematic analysis consequently generated three overarching themes: (1) psychological safety as the foundation for openness and learning in digital workplaces; (2) digital orientation as a driver of adaptation and the construction of performance meaning; and (3) the interaction between psychological safety and digital orientation in shaping new understandings of employee performance in the era of digital transformation. These themes provide the foundation for the subsequent discussion and represent the essential lived experiences through which participants constructed the meaning of employee performance within digital workplaces (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

2. Findings on Employees' Experiences of Psychological Safety in the Digital Workplace

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) revealed that psychological safety was perceived by participants not merely as the absence of fear in the workplace, but as an experiential condition that enabled them to learn continuously, adapt to technological change, and reconstruct the meaning of employee performance within a digital work environment. Participants consistently described psychological safety as an organizational climate that encouraged them to express ideas, ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, and engage in collaborative learning without fear of embarrassment or negative interpersonal consequences. These findings indicate that psychological safety functions as an essential psychosocial resource that facilitates organizational learning and strengthens employees' adaptive capacity during digital transformation. Such findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that psychological safety promotes learning behaviors, knowledge sharing, innovation, and employee effectiveness in technology-intensive workplaces (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017; Frazier et al., 2017).

The thematic analysis identified three overarching themes that consistently represented participants' lived experiences: (1) openness in sharing ideas and engaging in digital learning; (2) confidence in expressing opinions as part of virtual collaboration; and (3) willingness to acknowledge mistakes as a process of collective learning. Together, these themes illustrate that psychological safety extends beyond interpersonal comfort and becomes a fundamental mechanism through which employees construct positive meanings of work performance in digitally mediated environments. Rather than interpreting performance solely through task accomplishment, participants associated high performance with continuous learning,

collaborative problem-solving, and the confidence to experiment with new technologies. This interpretation supports the argument that psychological safety enhances employees' capacity to navigate uncertainty and complexity in digital workplaces by fostering adaptive learning and proactive behaviors (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017; Parkin, Jeong, & Lee, 2023).

The following section summarizes the thematic analysis of employees' experiences regarding psychological safety in the digital workplace:

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Analysis Results Regarding Employee Experiences of Psychological Safety in the Digital Workplace Production Logistics

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Experience Indicator	Example of Informant Statement	Phenomenological Meaning
Openness in Sharing Ideas and Digital Learning	Openness to asking questions	Informants feel comfortable asking questions about using new technology without fear of being perceived as incompetent.	*"If there is a new feature, I don't hesitate to ask the IT team or colleagues who are more knowledgeable." (INF03)*	Psychological safety fosters a learning culture, enabling employees to feel more confident in exploring digital technologies.
	Exploration of technology	Mistakes made while trying out technology are viewed as part of the learning process.	*"My boss actually teaches me the right way to do things instead of placing blame." (INF03)*	Interpersonal support boosts confidence in adapting to digital changes.
Freedom to Express Opinions in Virtual Collaboration	Freedom to share ideas	Informants feel safe expressing dissenting views during virtual discussions.	*"I once offered a different perspective, and it was well-received." (INF07)*	Psychological safety encourages active participation and the courage to share new perspectives.
	Trust within the team	Mutual trust reduces the fear of interpersonal risks when working virtually.	*"When a team trusts one another, differing opinions actually lead to better ideas." (INF07)*	Trust serves as the foundation for productive and innovative virtual collaboration.
Courage to Admit Mistakes as Part of the Collective Learning Process	Reporting of errors	Informants do not hide errors made while using digital systems.	*"I report it immediately if I accidentally delete data." (INF01)*	Mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities rather than threats to professional reputation.
	Organizational support	Supervisors provide assistance and solutions rather than punishment.	*"My supervisor steps in right away to help recover the data." (INF01)*	Organizational support strengthens collective learning and builds trust in the work environment.

Source: Researcher's thematic analysis results (2026).

2.1. Theme 1: Openness in Sharing Ideas and Digital Learning

The first theme demonstrates that participants perceived openness in expressing ideas, asking questions, and learning new digital technologies as the most salient manifestation of psychological safety within their organizations. Nearly all participants emphasized that a supportive digital work environment encouraged them to seek clarification, discuss technological challenges, and explore unfamiliar digital tools without

fearing criticism or negative evaluation. In this context, asking questions was not interpreted as evidence of inadequate competence but rather as an integral component of continuous learning that facilitated technological adaptation and improved work quality. These findings reinforce Edmondson's (1999) proposition that psychological safety promotes learning behavior by reducing interpersonal risk and encouraging employees to actively participate in knowledge exchange and collaborative problem-solving. Within digitally transformed organizations, such learning behavior becomes increasingly critical because employees are expected to continually update their digital competencies in response to rapid technological change (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF03:

"Whenever a new feature is introduced in our applications, I never hesitate to ask the IT team or colleagues who know more about it. Once I accidentally used a feature incorrectly, but instead of blaming me, my supervisor showed me the correct way to use it. That experience made me much more confident to keep experimenting and learning."

From a phenomenological perspective, this narrative illustrates how interpersonal support from supervisors and colleagues shapes employees' interpretations of mistakes as valuable learning opportunities rather than threats to their professional identity. Participants interpreted constructive responses to errors as evidence that the organization valued learning over blame, thereby strengthening interpersonal trust and increasing their willingness to experiment with emerging technologies. This finding extends the concept of psychological safety within digital workplaces by demonstrating that supportive interpersonal interactions not only encourage knowledge-sharing behaviors but also facilitate employees' technological adaptation and strengthen their perceptions of competence and performance. Consequently, psychological safety becomes a key mechanism through which employees continuously reconstruct the meaning of successful performance in environments characterized by rapid technological change (Newman et al., 2017; Vial, 2019; Parkin et al., 2023).

2.2. Theme 2: Freedom to Express Opinions in Virtual Collaboration

The second theme illustrates that psychological safety empowered participants to express dissenting opinions, even when interacting with supervisors or colleagues occupying higher organizational positions. Within digital workplaces, this confidence became particularly important because virtual communication often reduces the availability of social cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and spontaneous interpersonal feedback, which ordinarily help individuals interpret others' reactions. Consequently, mutual trust emerged as the primary mechanism enabling open, respectful, and productive communication despite the limitations of technology-mediated interactions. Participants perceived psychological safety as a form of social capital that fostered constructive dialogue, encouraged intellectual diversity, and facilitated collaborative problem-solving in virtual environments. These findings support previous studies suggesting that psychologically safe environments strengthen collaboration, learning, and innovation by minimizing interpersonal risk and encouraging employees to contribute their perspectives regardless of hierarchical differences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017; Verhoef et al., 2021).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF07:

"Discussions through online meeting platforms are certainly more challenging because we cannot read each other's body language. However, when there is mutual trust within the team, differences of opinion actually generate better ideas. I once proposed an alternative solution that was completely different from the original proposal, and it was well received."

From a phenomenological perspective, this narrative demonstrates that participants' willingness to voice contrasting viewpoints was influenced not merely by individual personality traits but by their perception that the organization genuinely valued diverse perspectives. Positive responses to differing opinions reinforced participants' professional identity and strengthened their belief that their intellectual contributions were appreciated regardless of organizational hierarchy. This experience fostered greater confidence to participate actively in virtual discussions, collaborative decision-making, and organizational problem-solving. Consequently, participants interpreted psychological safety as an enabling condition that enhanced both their sense of belonging and their perception of work performance in digital environments. These findings align with the sensemaking perspective, which argues that employees continuously construct the meaning of their work experiences through social interaction, organizational responses, and reflective interpretation. Thus, psychological safety not only facilitates open communication but also shapes how employees interpret their value and effectiveness within digitally mediated organizations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Parkin, Jeong, & Lee, 2023).

2.3. Theme 3: Willingness to Acknowledge Mistakes as a Process of Collective Learning

The third theme reveals that participants perceived the willingness to acknowledge mistakes as a defining characteristic that distinguishes a psychologically safe digital workplace from one characterized by a blaming culture. Participants consistently explained that errors occurring during the use of digital systems were viewed as valuable opportunities to improve work processes, provided that the organization responded with support rather than punishment. Instead of concealing mistakes to protect their professional image, employees felt encouraged to report them openly because they believed that transparent communication accelerated problem resolution, minimized potential organizational risks, and prevented similar incidents from recurring. These findings indicate that psychological safety contributes significantly to the development of organizational learning, where mistakes are interpreted as shared learning opportunities rather than individual failures. Such an environment enables employees to engage in reflection, experimentation, and continuous improvement, all of which are critical capabilities for organizations undergoing digital transformation (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017).

This experience is illustrated by the statement of INF01:

"I once accidentally deleted important data from the company server. I immediately reported it to my supervisor because I was worried that the consequences would become more serious if I kept it to myself. Instead of blaming me, my supervisor immediately helped recover the data and turned the incident into a learning opportunity for the entire team."

From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, this narrative demonstrates that organizational support following an error fosters a sense of security that strengthens employees' trust in both organizational systems and interpersonal relationships within their teams. Rather than perceiving mistakes as threats to their professional identity, participants interpreted supportive managerial responses as evidence that the organization prioritized learning and continuous improvement over assigning blame. Consequently, psychological safety emerged not only as a condition that encourages employees to admit mistakes but also as a critical mechanism for promoting collective learning, strengthening digital adaptation, and reconstructing the meaning of employee performance as an ongoing process of reflection, improvement, and capability development rather than merely the achievement of predefined performance outcomes. These findings extend previous research by demonstrating that, within digital workplaces, psychological safety reinforces employees' willingness to learn from technological failures while simultaneously cultivating resilient and adaptive work practices that support sustainable organizational performance (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017; Vial, 2019; Parkin, Jeong, & Lee, 2023).

3. Findings on Digital Orientationand the Meaning of Employee Performance

The interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed that digital orientation was perceived by participants not merely as the technical ability to operate digital devices or applications, but as a broader work orientation that shaped how they understood, evaluated, and constructed the meaning of employee performance within digitally transformed workplaces. For the participants, being a high-performing employee no longer meant simply completing assigned tasks or achieving organizational targets. Instead, performance was increasingly associated with the ability to adapt to technological change, leverage digital technologies to strengthen collaboration, and continuously develop digital competencies that enabled greater contributions to organizational success. These findings suggest that digital transformation has fundamentally expanded the meaning of employee performance from the achievement of work outputs to the integration of technological capabilities, adaptive learning, and digital competence into everyday work practices. This interpretation is consistent with the digital transformation literature, which argues that digital technologies reshape not only organizational processes but also employees' perceptions of value creation and work performance (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Nambisan, Wright, & Feldman, 2019).

The thematic analysis identified three major themes that explain how participants interpreted digital orientation in relation to employee performance: (1) adaptability to technological change as an indicator of effective performance; (2) the utilization of digital technologies to enhance collaboration and work outcomes; and (3) digital competence as a source of professional value and performance identity. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that digital orientation is not merely an individual capability but also a cognitive framework through which employees interpret what it means to perform effectively in an increasingly digital work environment. Rather than viewing technology as an external requirement, participants regarded it as an integral component of professional competence, continuous learning, and sustainable performance in the era of digital transformation (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The following section presents a summary of the thematic analysis regarding the role of digital orientation in shaping employees' perceptions of performance.:

Table 3. Summary of the Results of the Thematic Analysis of Digital Orientation on the Meaning of

Employee Performance

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Experience Indicator	Example of Informant Statement	Phenomenological Meaning
Adaptability to Technological Change as a Form of Effective Performance	Openness to technological change	Informants view updates to software, applications, and digital systems as part of the work dynamic that should be addressed positively.	*"I'm always excited when there's a new software or application update. I immediately try to learn how to use it." (INF05)*	Digital orientation shapes adaptive capabilities as part of the meaning of performance. Employees perceive themselves as performing well when they are able to adapt to rapid technological changes.
	Technology learning and exploration	Informants actively learn new features and try to integrate them into their work.	*"The more proficient I am in using digital tools, the faster I get work done, and the more I can contribute." (INF05)*	Performance is no longer defined simply as task completion, but as the ability to complete work more effectively and efficiently through the use of technology.
Utilizing Digital Technology as a Contribution to Collaboration and Work Outcomes	Technology-based collaboration	Informants use digital platforms to share information, communicate, distribute documents, and coordinate work.	*"With collaboration tools, team communication is smoother. We can share files and have discussions directly there." (INF01)*	Digital orientation broadens the meaning of performance from individual achievement to the ability to make contributions through technology-mediated collaboration.
	Contribution to team productivity	Informants assess the success of technology use based on its impact on team members' productivity and effectiveness.	*"If my team is productive thanks to these tools, it means I'm contributing." (INF01)*	Performance is understood as the creation of shared value. The value of an individual's contribution is seen not only in personal results but also in their ability to help the team achieve better results.
Digital Competence as a Source of Value and Professional Identity	Mastery of digital competencies	Informants view the ability to use analytical software, dashboards, and digital systems as a critical competency in carrying out their work.	*"In our industry, if you're not proficient in analytics or dashboard software, you feel like you're out of your depth." (INF02)*	Digital competency becomes part of professional identity and shapes employees' perceptions of their ability to remain relevant in a digitalized work environment.
	Perception of professional value	Informants link technological mastery with the ability to deliver valuable results and contributions to the organization.	*"I'm constantly striving to hone my digital skills because that's what makes me feel valuable to the company." (INF02)*	Digital orientation plays a role in shaping professional self-efficacy and perceptions of self-worth. Employees define performance through their ability to maintain relevance and make valuable contributions.

Source: Researcher's thematic analysis results (2026).

3.1. Theme 1: Adaptability to Technological Change as an Indicator of Effective Performance

The first theme demonstrates that participants regarded adaptability to technological change as one of the primary ways they interpreted effective performance in digital workplaces. Participants with a strong digital orientation did not perceive updates to software, digital platforms, or organizational information systems as disruptions to their daily routines. Instead, they viewed technological change as an inherent aspect of modern work and as an opportunity to improve efficiency, productivity, and professional competence. They actively explored new digital features, experimented with emerging technologies, and continuously adjusted their work practices in response to evolving technological demands. From the participants' perspectives, the ability to adapt quickly to technological changes served as a personal indicator that they were capable of maintaining, and even improving the quality of their performance despite continuous digital

transformation. These findings align with the digital transformation perspective, which emphasizes adaptive capability as a critical organizational and individual competence for sustaining performance in rapidly changing technological environments (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF05:

"I always get excited whenever there is a software or application update. I immediately try to learn how to use it. For me, the better I become at using digital tools, the faster I can complete my work and the more I can contribute. That's what I consider good performance."

This narrative illustrates that the participant did not define performance solely in terms of the volume of completed tasks but also through the ability to utilize technology more effectively to produce meaningful outcomes. From a phenomenological perspective, this experience reflects a shift in the meaning of performance, from merely "getting the job done" to "accomplishing work more adaptively and efficiently through technology." In this context, digital orientation becomes an essential component of employees' sensemaking regarding what constitutes effective work performance. Participants interpreted continuous technological learning not as an additional responsibility but as an inseparable element of professional growth and organizational contribution. These findings support previous research suggesting that digital competence functions as a strategic resource for enhancing employee effectiveness and organizational competitiveness. More importantly, this study extends the existing literature by demonstrating how employees themselves construct and internalize the relationship between digital competence and performance through their lived experiences rather than through objective performance indicators alone (Ingsih et al., 2024; Sulaiman et al., 2025; Nambisan et al., 2019).

3.2. Theme 2: Utilizing Digital Technology as a Means of Contributing to Collaboration and Work Outcomes

The second theme demonstrates that digital orientation was also interpreted through participants' ability to utilize digital technologies to foster collaboration and achieve more effective work outcomes. Participants did not perceive communication platforms, document-sharing applications, or digital collaboration tools merely as technical resources but as integral components of how they contributed to their teams and organizations. Their ability to manage digital communication, exchange information efficiently, coordinate tasks, and maintain seamless information flow was regarded as an essential dimension of individual performance because the success of their work was closely intertwined with the quality of collaboration among organizational members. These experiences indicate that, within digital workplaces, employee performance has become increasingly relational, where individual effectiveness is inseparable from the capacity to integrate digital technologies into collaborative organizational processes. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that digital transformation reshapes work by promoting collaborative innovation and value co-creation through technology-enabled interactions (Nambisan et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF01:

"With collaboration tools, communication within the team becomes much smoother. We can share files and discuss issues directly on the platform. For me, the ability to manage virtual collaboration is an important part of performance. If my team becomes more productive because of these tools, then I know I have made a meaningful contribution."

This narrative illustrates an important shift in the meaning of employee performance—from an emphasis on individual achievement toward value creation through digital interdependence. Participants perceived themselves as high-performing employees not only when they completed their own tasks successfully but also when the technologies they utilized enabled the entire team to work more efficiently, coordinate more effectively, and achieve better collective outcomes. From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, this experience suggests that digital orientation shapes employees' understanding that professional value is generated through the integration of technology, information sharing, and collaborative relationships rather than through isolated individual accomplishments. Consequently, performance in digital workplaces is interpreted not merely as the completion of assigned responsibilities but as the ability to create organizational value by facilitating technology-mediated collaboration, strengthening team effectiveness, and supporting collective learning. These findings reinforce the view that digital orientation extends beyond technical proficiency to encompass employees' capacity to leverage digital technologies as strategic resources for organizational collaboration and sustainable performance (Nambisan et al., 2017; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

3.3. Theme 3: Digital Competence as a Source of Professional Value and Identity

The third theme reveals that, for many participants, digital competence had become an integral part of

how they understood their professional value and the quality of their contributions to the organization. Proficiency in using analytics software, information systems, digital dashboards, and various workplace applications was perceived not merely as an additional technical skill but as a core capability that determined their effectiveness in increasingly digitalized organizational environments. Participants regarded digital competence as an essential component of their professional identity because it influenced their confidence in delivering meaningful results and creating organizational value. Consequently, digital competence was interpreted not simply as a functional requirement but as a strategic capability that enhanced their credibility, employability, and perceived relevance within the organization. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that digital competence has become a critical determinant of employee performance, service quality, and organizational competitiveness in the context of digital transformation (Ingsih et al., 2024; Sulaiman et al., 2025; Verhoef et al., 2021).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF02:

"In our industry, if you are not proficient in using analytics software or dashboards, it feels like going into battle without a weapon. That's why I continuously improve my digital skills, because they make me feel valuable to the company and capable of delivering the results that are expected."

This narrative illustrates that participants interpreted digital competence not only as the ability to accomplish work tasks but also as a source of professional self-efficacy and perceived personal value within the workplace. From a phenomenological perspective, this experience demonstrates that digital orientation has become deeply embedded in the process of constructing employees' professional identities. Participants evaluated their relevance and contribution to the organization through their ability to master and effectively utilize digital technologies in response to continuous organizational change. In this sense, digital orientation shaped not only their understanding of "what I do as an employee," but also "who I am as a professional" and "how valuable my contribution is" within a digitally transformed organization. This perspective extends the existing discussion of digital competence by demonstrating that its significance goes far beyond technical proficiency. Instead, digital competence emerges as a multidimensional construct encompassing identity formation, professional confidence, adaptive capability, and the subjective construction of employee performance. Accordingly, participants perceived continuous digital learning as an investment in both their professional identity and their long-term organizational relevance, highlighting the central role of digital orientation in sustaining individual performance amid ongoing digital transformation (Vial, 2019; Nambisan et al., 2017; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

4. Interaction Between Psychological Safety and Digital Orientationin Shaping Employees' Perceptions of Performance

The cross-theme analysis revealed that psychological safety and digital orientation were not experienced by participants as two separate constructs but rather as mutually reinforcing conditions that jointly shaped how employees understood and interpreted performance in digitally transformed workplaces. Psychological safety provided an interpersonal environment in which employees felt comfortable asking questions, experimenting with new ideas, acknowledging limitations, and learning from mistakes without fear of negative consequences. At the same time, digital orientation represented employees' willingness and readiness to utilize that supportive environment to explore, adopt, and continuously develop digital technologies. Consequently, participants perceived effective performance as emerging from the interaction between feeling psychologically safe to learn and possessing the motivation to grow digitally, rather than from technological proficiency or target achievement alone. This finding aligns with recent studies demonstrating that psychological safety enhances employee performance through proactive behaviors such as job crafting, thriving, and continuous learning, while digital capabilities and digital orientation function as strategic mechanisms linking technological resources to organizational outcomes during digital transformation (Lee, 2022; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024; Vial, 2019).

The following section presents a summary of the thematic analysis regarding the interaction between psychological safety and digital orientation in shaping employees' perceptions of performance:

Table 4. Summary of the Results of the Thematic Analysis of the Interaction of Psychological Safety and Digital Orientation in Shaping the Meaning of Performance

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Experience Indicator	Example of Informant Statement	Phenomenological Meaning
Psychological Safety as a Safe Space for Developing Digital Orientation	Safe space for learning technology	Informants feel confident learning new technologies because they can ask questions,	*"I used to be a bit technologically illiterate, but because the work environment here is supportive, I've become*	Psychological safety creates an interpersonal space that allows employees to develop

(Interaction Pattern: Psychological Safety → Digital Orientation)		experiment, and make mistakes without fear of judgment.	*more willing to learn. If I make a mistake, there's someone to help me." (INF06)*	digital orientation through learning and experimentation.
	Courage to experiment	Informants are more willing to try new features or systems because mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.	*"If I'm confused, I can ask. Over time, I get used to it and even like technology." (INF06)*	A sense of security transforms technology experiences from a source of anxiety into an opportunity to learn and grow.
Digital Orientation Strengthens Confidence to Contribute in a Safe Environment **(Interaction Pattern: Digital Orientation → Contribution to Psychological Safety)**	Digital competence and self-confidence	Informants feel more capable of completing work and contributing when they possess adequate digital competencies.	*"I feel most optimal when my work can be completed efficiently using technology." (INF04)*	Digital orientation provides a sense of competence which is the basis for self-confidence in actualizing work abilities.
	Courage to convey digital ideas	Informants are more confident in proposing technology use when they believe the work environment welcomes ideas and experimentation.	*"I'm more confident in proposing ideas for utilizing new technology if I know my work environment will accept them." (INF04)*	Psychological safety allows digital competence to be translated into initiative, innovation and real contribution.
The Absence of Either Condition Creates Gaps and Barriers to Performance **(Interaction Pattern: Inadequate Psychological Safety or Digital Orientation → Suboptimal Performance)**	Competence without security	Employees possess digital skills but are reluctant to share ideas or experiment for fear of making mistakes or being rejected.	*"There are some people who are tech-savvy but are afraid of saying the wrong thing or being rejected. In the end, they just keep quiet." (INF08)*	Digital capacity that is not supported by psychological safety can become a capability that is not actualized in work behavior.
	Willingness to learn without support	Employees have a desire to learn technology but are hampered by a lack of support, facilities, or development opportunities.	*"There are also those who want to learn but lack the facilities and support from management, so they get stuck there." (INF08)*	Digital orientation requires contextual support so that the willingness to learn can develop into actual competence and contribution.

Source: Researcher's thematic analysis results (2026).

4.1. Theme 1: Psychological Safety as a Safe Space for Developing Digital Orientation

The first theme demonstrates that psychological safety functioned as a social and interpersonal condition that enabled employees to develop their digital orientation. Participants consistently described that their willingness to learn new technologies was influenced not only by their initial digital competence or personal interest in technology but also by their confidence that they had a safe environment in which to ask questions, experiment, and make mistakes. When organizations responded to employees' digital limitations with support rather than criticism, participants became more willing to take learning risks, explore unfamiliar technologies, and gradually build confidence in their digital capabilities. These findings extend the concept of psychological safety by illustrating that, within the context of digital transformation, a psychologically safe environment serves as a catalyst for technology-related learning and adaptive behavior. Rather than simply reducing interpersonal anxiety, psychological safety creates conditions in which employees can engage in continuous digital learning and experimentation, both of which are essential for sustaining performance in rapidly evolving digital workplaces (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017; Parkin, Jeong, & Lee, 2023).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF06:

"I used to struggle with technology, but because the work environment here is very supportive, I became confident enough to learn. If I make a mistake, someone helps me. If I'm confused, I can ask questions. Over time, I became comfortable with technology and eventually started to enjoy using it. That sense of safety is what motivated me to continue developing my digital skills."

From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, this narrative demonstrates that participants' experiences of psychological safety extended far beyond simply feeling comfortable at work. Instead, psychological safety became a transformative experience through which participants moved from fear of incompetence to confidence in learning and experimentation. This transition illustrates that digital orientation was not developed solely through formal training or technological exposure but also through supportive interpersonal interactions that normalized mistakes as part of the learning process. Within this context, psychological safety functioned as a developmental space where digital orientation evolved through direct experience, social interaction, constructive feedback, and reflective learning. These findings are also consistent with recent technology acceptance research suggesting that psychological factors, emotional experiences, and organizational support significantly influence employees' willingness to embrace technological change and engage in continuous digital learning within the workplace (Del Valle et al., 2024; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

The findings further indicate that digital orientation should not be understood merely as a pre-existing individual characteristic but rather as a capability that develops progressively through workplace experiences characterized by trust, learning opportunities, and psychological support. Psychological safety therefore serves as the social context within which employees gradually strengthen their readiness to adopt, experiment with, and effectively utilize digital technologies. Within this experiential process, participants no longer interpreted performance simply as being able to use technology, but as the continuous capacity to learn, adapt, and grow alongside technological change. In other words, employee performance was constructed as an evolving adaptive capability that emerges through ongoing digital learning rather than as a static measure of technical competence or task completion. This interpretation enriches the literature on digital transformation by demonstrating that employees' lived experiences of psychological safety shape not only their willingness to embrace digital technologies but also their broader understanding of what it means to perform effectively in an increasingly digital work environment (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

4.2. Theme 2: Digital Orientation Strengthens Confidence to Contribute in a Psychologically Safe Environment

The second theme reveals a complementary interaction between psychological safety and digital orientation. While psychological safety encourages employees to learn, experiment, and engage with new technologies without fear of negative consequences, a well-developed digital orientation provides them with the confidence and competence to contribute more actively within the workplace. Participants who perceived themselves as digitally capable reported greater willingness to propose technology-driven improvements, introduce innovative ideas, and take initiative in enhancing work processes. Nevertheless, such confidence became substantially stronger when they worked in an environment that welcomed diverse opinions and viewed unsuccessful experiments as opportunities for learning rather than grounds for criticism. These findings suggest that the value of digital orientation is amplified when embedded within a psychologically safe interpersonal climate, where employees are encouraged to transform digital competence into meaningful organizational contributions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Nambisan et al., 2017).

This experience is illustrated by the statement of INF04:

"I feel that I perform at my best when I can complete my work efficiently by using technology. I also feel more confident proposing new ideas about using technology when I know my workplace welcomes those ideas and will not judge me if an experiment fails. For me, being digitally skilled and working in a supportive environment must go hand in hand."

The participant's narrative demonstrates that employees' perceptions of performance are shaped by the interaction between competence and psychological security. Digital competence provides confidence in one's ability to contribute effectively, whereas psychological safety creates the interpersonal conditions that enable those contributions to be openly expressed, tested, and refined without excessive fear of interpersonal risk. From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, this interaction gives rise to what may be conceptualized as confident contribution—a condition in which employees not only possess the technical capability to utilize digital technologies but also feel psychologically empowered to propose innovations, experiment with new work practices, and actively participate in organizational improvement. This interpretation is consistent with recent research demonstrating that digital capabilities generate organizational value only when supported by enabling organizational conditions, adaptive change processes, and a culture that encourages employee participation (Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024; Vial, 2019).

The findings further indicate that digital orientation alone does not automatically translate into superior performance. Rather, its contribution depends on organizational contexts that allow employees to deploy

their digital capabilities constructively and collaboratively. This observation provides a more nuanced understanding of previous research, which has reported inconsistent direct relationships between digital orientation and organizational performance. For example, Brahmana and Kontesa (2024) found that digital orientation did not significantly improve several dimensions of firm performance directly, suggesting that contextual and behavioral mechanisms play a crucial mediating role. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that employees interpret psychological safety as one of the key contextual conditions that enables digital orientation to be translated into proactive behaviors, knowledge sharing, innovation, and meaningful work contributions. Accordingly, employees perceive high performance not merely as technological proficiency but as the ability to apply digital competence confidently within an environment characterized by trust, openness, and mutual support (Brahmana & Kontesa, 2024; Lee, 2022).

4.3. Theme 3: The Absence of Either Psychological Safety or Digital Orientation Creates Performance Gaps and Barriers

The third theme reveals that the interaction between psychological safety and digital orientation also has a negative dimension when one of these conditions is absent. Participants described that employees with strong digital capabilities are not necessarily able to make optimal contributions if they fear expressing ideas, experimenting with new approaches, or admitting mistakes. Conversely, employees who are willing to learn and adopt new technologies may struggle to develop their digital capabilities when organizations fail to provide sufficient support, learning opportunities, or technological resources. These findings indicate that digital orientation and psychological safety perform distinct yet complementary functions: digital orientation provides the capability and willingness to act, whereas psychological safety creates the social conditions that enable those capabilities to be effectively translated into workplace behaviors (Newman et al., 2017; Del Valle et al., 2024).

This experience is reflected in the statement of INF08:

"In my team, there are people who are highly skilled with technology but are afraid of saying the wrong thing or having their ideas rejected, so they choose to remain silent. On the other hand, there are also people who are eager to learn but lack adequate facilities and management support, so they remain stuck. As a result, performance is not optimal because one of the key factors is missing."

This quotation provides an important insight that digital capability without psychological safety often results in unrealized potential, whereas the willingness to learn without adequate organizational support hinders the development of digital orientation. From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, participants perceived employee performance not merely as an individual attribute, but as a capability that can only be realized when supported by appropriate organizational conditions. Consequently, barriers to digital performance may arise not because employees lack competence, but because they are unable to actualize that competence within a supportive social and structural environment. This interpretation aligns with studies suggesting that the influence of psychological safety on performance operates through behavioral mechanisms, learning processes, and employee experiences rather than through a simple direct relationship (Lee, 2022).

The findings further suggest that digital transformation cannot be achieved solely through investments in technology or improvements in digital competencies. Organizations must simultaneously cultivate psychological and social conditions that enable employees to utilize their competencies effectively. In this regard, psychological safety and digital orientation should be understood as two complementary conditions that jointly facilitate the realization of employee performance. Digital orientation equips employees with the capability to adapt, innovate, and contribute, whereas psychological safety provides the interpersonal environment in which those capabilities can be expressed, tested, refined, and continuously developed. Therefore, successful digital transformation at the employee level depends not only on the sophistication of digital technologies but also on the organization's ability to foster a culture in which employees feel safe to learn, experiment, and continuously improve. This finding extends the digital transformation literature by emphasizing that technological readiness and psychological readiness are inseparable dimensions in developing sustainable employee performance in the digital workplace (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

5. Discussion of Findings: Psychological Safety and Performance in the Digital Workplace

The findings indicate that employees' experiences of psychological safety constitute an important element in how they understand and interpret their performance in digital workplaces. Based on the three themes identified—(1) openness in sharing ideas and engaging in digital learning, (2) freedom to express opinions in virtual collaboration, and (3) willingness to acknowledge mistakes as a process of collective learning—it is evident that employees do not interpret a safe work environment merely as an emotional condition that makes them feel comfortable. Rather, they perceive it as an interpersonal space that enables

them to ask questions, express ideas, acknowledge limitations, and learn from mistakes. These findings address the first research question by demonstrating that psychological safety, as experienced by employees, functions as a condition that allows their work capabilities to be expressed and developed within a digital environment characterized by continuous change and uncertainty. This interpretation is consistent with the original conception of psychological safety as a shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, as well as with empirical studies linking psychological safety to learning behavior and work outcomes through various mediating processes (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017).

Participants' experiences of feeling safe to ask technical questions, express dissenting opinions, and admit mistakes suggest that psychological safety functions as a safe space for learning. In digital workplaces, such learning processes become increasingly relevant because employees must continuously adapt to evolving software, collaboration platforms, information systems, and work procedures. When employees do not fear being perceived as incompetent for asking questions or requesting assistance, they are more likely to obtain the information necessary to understand and effectively utilize new technologies. These findings reinforce Edmondson's (1999) argument that psychological safety is closely associated with learning behavior, while Kim et al. (2020) demonstrate that its influence on team effectiveness may operate through learning behavior and efficacy. Thus, in the present study, performance is understood not as a direct consequence of feeling safe, but as something that develops through learning processes facilitated by psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Kim et al., 2020).

The finding that participants were willing to ask questions about technologies they had not yet mastered also illustrates how psychological safety reduces the interpersonal risks commonly associated with workplace learning. Questions that might appear simple or basic can become difficult to ask when employees fear being judged as incompetent, outdated, or unable to keep pace with technological developments. Conversely, when the work environment responds supportively, asking questions is interpreted as an act of responsibility toward work quality rather than as evidence of professional weakness. From this perspective, the willingness to ask questions becomes a constructive work behavior because it enables employees to acquire the knowledge needed to perform their tasks more effectively. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of psychologically safe interpersonal conditions for encouraging employees to raise questions, disclose difficulties, and share opinions during learning and work interactions (Newman et al., 2017; O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020).

The theme concerning freedom to express opinions in virtual collaboration provides another important dimension to the meaning of psychological safety in digital workplaces. Participants required not only the confidence to ask questions, but also the assurance that differing opinions could be expressed without generating negative interpersonal consequences. This issue becomes particularly complex in virtual interactions because communication through digital platforms often reduces nonverbal cues and increases the likelihood of misinterpretation. Research on psychological safety in virtual teams suggests that a lack of psychological safety may discourage team members from voicing their views due to concerns about embarrassment, rejection, or other social consequences. Accordingly, participants' experiences of being able to express alternative ideas freely indicate that psychological safety facilitates more open, participatory, and constructive virtual collaboration (Alves et al., 2022).

Within this context, performance is interpreted not only as the ability to complete individual tasks, but also as the capacity to contribute to collective processes through the exchange of ideas and knowledge. When employees feel confident expressing different perspectives, organizations gain opportunities to identify problems, consider alternatives, and improve work-related decisions. Psychological safety therefore creates the conditions through which individual knowledge can be transformed into collective contribution. This interpretation is supported by systematic reviews showing that interventions designed to enhance psychological safety are associated with speaking-up behaviors and employee voice, as well as by research identifying psychological safety as a critical condition for team learning and effectiveness (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020; Edmondson, 1999).

The third finding concerning the willingness to acknowledge mistakes reveals a deeper dimension of psychological safety. Participants who experienced technical errors did not attempt to conceal them; instead, they reported the problems to supervisors and sought assistance in resolving them. This experience suggests that, within a psychologically safe environment, mistakes are interpreted as sources of information and learning rather than merely as individual failures that must be hidden. In digital workplaces, such interpretations are particularly important because technical errors that remain unreported can escalate into more serious operational problems. These findings reinforce the argument that psychological safety enables

individuals and teams to confront mistakes openly and use them as opportunities to improve work processes and organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999; O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020).

Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted cautiously within the broader discourse concerning the relationship between psychological safety and performance. The present study does not demonstrate that psychological safety directly causes higher performance. Rather, it shows that employees interpret psychological safety as a condition that enables them to learn, speak up, seek help, and correct mistakes—processes that they subsequently perceive as components of good performance. This interpretation is supported by Kim et al. (2020), who found that psychological safety did not directly influence team effectiveness in their model, but contributed indirectly through learning behavior and efficacy, as well as by Lee (2022), who demonstrated that the relationship between psychological safety and performance may operate through job crafting and thriving at work. These quantitative findings strengthen the qualitative interpretation of the present study by suggesting that the meaning of performance is constructed through processes and experiences situated between feelings of safety and work outcomes (Kim et al., 2020; Lee, 2022).

This perspective becomes even more significant when psychological safety is examined within the context of digital workplaces. Technology itself does not automatically create either safety or unsafety; employees' experiences are strongly influenced by how technology is integrated into social relationships, leadership practices, and organizational management processes. In virtual teams, for example, information technologies can support awareness and coordination that facilitate psychological safety, while simultaneously creating challenges related to limited social cues and increased concerns about evaluation. Consequently, psychological safety in digital workplaces should be understood as a socio-technical phenomenon emerging from the interaction between technological systems and the social context of the organization (Alves et al., 2022; Vial, 2019).

The findings also provide an important nuance to discussions concerning digital surveillance and panoptic work environments. Digital monitoring systems may create perceptions that employees' activities are continuously visible and evaluated, which theoretically could increase caution in expressing opinions or admitting mistakes. The literature on digital employee monitoring highlights the power and surveillance dimensions embedded in digital technologies, while recent studies of remote workers suggest that the effects of monitoring on psychological safety are not uniform and depend heavily on how monitoring mechanisms are implemented. Thus, the present findings indicate that technology itself is not the sole determinant of psychological safety; more influential factors include employees' perceptions of organizational support, acceptance, fairness, and the social consequences associated with workplace interactions in digital environments (Manokha, 2020).

From the perspective of performance meaning-making, the findings suggest a shift from understanding performance as the achievement of final work outcomes toward viewing performance as the capacity to learn, adapt, speak up, and continuously improve. Employees who felt psychologically safe did not merely attempt to complete assigned tasks; they also sought to understand the technologies they used, requested assistance when encountering difficulties, proposed ideas for improving work processes, and reported mistakes so that corrective actions could be taken promptly. In this sense, psychological safety becomes a condition that enables employees to actualize these capabilities in their everyday work practices. This interpretation extends existing literature that has primarily linked psychological safety to learning, innovation, and performance by demonstrating how employees themselves interpret feelings of safety as part of the lived experience of "performing well" in digital workplaces (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the principal contribution of these findings is not simply to show that psychological safety is related to performance, but to reveal the meaning-making mechanisms underlying that relationship in employees' lived experiences. Psychological safety creates conditions in which employees can ask questions without fear of appearing incapable, speak without fear of rejection, and acknowledge mistakes without fear of humiliation. These experiences subsequently generate patterns of learning behavior and constructive contribution that lead employees to interpret performance as something adaptive, developmental, and continuously evolving. In other words, within digital workplaces, employees do not define performance solely by what they successfully produce, but also by their ability to continue learning, adapting, contributing, and improving work practices within a psychologically safe environment. These findings provide an important foundation for understanding the next theme of the study, namely how psychological safety interacts with digital orientation in shaping employees' perceptions of performance more comprehensively (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Vial, 2019).

6. Discussion of Findings: Digital Orientation and the Meaning of Employee Performance

The findings of this study address the second research question regarding how employees' digital orientation shapes the way they understand and evaluate performance in digital workplaces. Based on the lived experiences of the eight participants, three overarching themes emerged: (1) adaptability to technological change and work efficiency, (2) the use of digital technology to facilitate collaboration and work outcomes, and (3) digital competence as a source of professional value and identity. These themes indicate that, from the participants' perspectives, digital orientation extends beyond the technical ability to operate digital tools. Rather, it encompasses readiness to adapt, openness to continuous technological learning, the ability to integrate digital technologies into everyday work processes, and the willingness to leverage technology to create meaningful contributions. Consequently, digital orientation functions as an interpretive lens through which employees define and evaluate what constitutes effective performance in digitally enabled workplaces. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies that conceptualize digital orientation as a strategic capability supporting digital transformation, while recognizing that its relationship with performance is often indirect and contingent upon contextual and organizational mechanisms (Khin & Ho, 2019; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024; Brahmana & Kontesa, 2024).

The first theme demonstrates that employees with a strong digital orientation perceive adaptability to technological change as an integral dimension of effective performance. For the participants, performance is no longer defined solely by the ability to complete tasks using familiar procedures, but also by the capacity to learn and apply emerging technologies as work demands evolve. The experience of Participant 5, who expressed enthusiasm whenever new software updates became available, illustrates that technological adaptability has become part of the internal standard employees use to evaluate the quality of their own performance. In this sense, digital capability is perceived not merely as an additional skill but as an essential capacity that enables employees to sustain effectiveness amid continuous organizational change. This interpretation aligns with the dynamic capabilities perspective, which emphasizes the ability of both organizations and individuals to respond proactively to technological change as a fundamental element of continuous adaptation and renewal (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

However, the findings also indicate that digital adaptability cannot be reduced to the technical ability to operate software or digital applications. Participants described adaptability as a willingness to continuously learn, experiment with new technological features, and integrate digital tools into their daily work routines. Consequently, digital orientation encompasses broader behavioral and cognitive dimensions than technical digital literacy alone. Digitally oriented employees are not simply capable of using technology; they also perceive technological change as an opportunity for learning and improvement. This interpretation supports digital transformation literature emphasizing that successful digitalization depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on the capacity of individuals and organizations to develop and continuously integrate new capabilities into work practices (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

From the perspective of performance meaning-making, technological adaptability is subsequently interpreted by participants through experiences of improved work efficiency. Employees reported that greater mastery of digital technologies enabled them to complete tasks more rapidly while making more substantial contributions to their organizations. Thus, efficiency was understood not merely as saving time but as the ability to allocate resources and attention toward activities perceived as generating greater value. This finding is consistent with digital transformation research suggesting that technological capabilities contribute to organizational performance through digital transformation processes and the development of digital orientation. Nevertheless, this study extends previous literature by demonstrating how employees themselves interpret this relationship: technology becomes an indicator of "working effectively" when it enables them to accomplish their responsibilities more efficiently and meaningfully (Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The second theme reveals that digital orientation also shapes employees' understanding of performance through the effective use of technology for collaboration. Participants described performance not merely as an individual accomplishment but as the ability to contribute to collective effectiveness through digital communication platforms, document-sharing systems, project management applications, and other collaborative technologies. Employees considered themselves high-performing when technology not only facilitated their own tasks but also enhanced coordination and enabled team members to work more effectively together. This finding reflects a shift from an exclusively individualistic understanding of performance toward a more relational and collaborative conception within digital work ecosystems (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019).

The ability to collaborate through technology further illustrates the social dimension of digital

orientation. Digitally oriented employees do not simply use technology to enhance their own productivity; they also recognize its potential to strengthen connectivity, accelerate information exchange, and coordinate work across temporal and geographical boundaries. Such capabilities become increasingly critical within hybrid and digital workplaces, where successful performance frequently depends upon managing interdependence among geographically dispersed team members. Accordingly, digital orientation may be understood as both a productive and relational capability that connects individual competencies with collective organizational objectives. This interpretation supports the socio-technical perspective of digital transformation, which conceptualizes digitalization as simultaneously reshaping technology, organizational structures, work processes, and interpersonal relationships (Vial, 2019; Nambisan et al., 2017).

The third theme demonstrates that digital competence has become an important component of employees' professional self-evaluation. Participant 2's description of analytical software and dashboard skills as a professional "weapon" illustrates that digital competence functions not only as an operational tool but also as a source of professional identity and self-confidence. Participants perceived themselves as more valuable when they were able to keep pace with technological developments and master digital tools relevant to their industries. In this context, digital orientation contributes to professional identity formation because employees use digital capability as a benchmark for assessing whether they remain relevant, competent, and capable of making meaningful contributions within evolving organizational environments (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

These findings indicate that the meaning of performance in digital workplaces encompasses broader subjective dimensions than formal organizational performance indicators alone. Participants considered high performance to involve not only achieving predetermined targets but also maintaining professional relevance, continuously learning new technologies, effectively utilizing digital tools, and supporting collective achievement. Consequently, digital orientation becomes one of the cognitive frameworks employees employ to evaluate the quality of their contributions. This finding provides an important extension to the literature on digital competence by demonstrating that such competence functions not only as an antecedent of performance but also as a determinant of how employees themselves define and assess performance (Khin & Ho, 2019; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the present study does not support the conclusion that digital orientation automatically or directly leads to superior performance. Rather, the qualitative findings indicate that digital orientation becomes meaningful only when translated into adaptive behaviors, effective technology utilization, collaborative practices, and continuous learning. This distinction is particularly important because previous quantitative studies have reported inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between digital orientation and performance. For example, Brahmana and Kontesa (2024) found that digital orientation did not significantly improve several measures of firm performance, whereas other studies have demonstrated that its influence operates indirectly through mechanisms such as digital transformation, information technology capabilities, and digital innovation. These inconsistencies reinforce the interpretation advanced in this study that digital orientation should not be viewed as a direct determinant of performance but rather as a capability whose value depends upon its realization through organizational processes and enabling conditions (Brahmana & Kontesa, 2024; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024; Bali & Joshi, 2023).

From this perspective, the present study contributes by shifting the analytical focus from asking whether digital orientation improves performance to examining how employees construct the meaning of performance through their experiences of using and adapting to digital technologies. The findings demonstrate that employees increasingly define performance in terms of their capacity to learn and adapt to technological change, utilize digital technologies to strengthen collaboration, and sustain professional competence and relevance. Thus, digital orientation serves primarily as an interpretive framework for understanding performance rather than merely as a predictor of performance outcomes. This perspective extends current understandings of digital transformation by positioning employees' subjective experiences as central to explaining how technological change is translated into everyday performance standards (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings suggest that digital orientation shapes the meaning of employee performance through three interconnected processes: technological adaptation, collaborative contribution, and professional competence actualization. Technological adaptation enables employees to define performance as the capacity to remain effective amid ongoing change; digital collaboration reframes performance as meaningful contribution toward collective outcomes; and digital competence encourages employees to perceive performance as the ability to maintain professional relevance and organizational value. Together, these processes suggest that employee performance in digital workplaces is increasingly understood as an

adaptive, collaborative, and continuously evolving capability rather than merely the achievement of predetermined performance targets. Such an interpretation becomes particularly significant as organizations continue to navigate digital transformation requiring continuous capability renewal (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Nambisan et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Finally, these findings provide the conceptual foundation for the subsequent discussion concerning the interaction between psychological safety and digital orientation. Whereas psychological safety creates interpersonal conditions that encourage employees to ask questions, experiment, acknowledge mistakes, and express ideas without fear, digital orientation provides the readiness and capability to learn, adapt, and utilize emerging technologies. Within this context, neither construct independently explains how employees interpret performance. High levels of digital capability may remain underutilized when employees lack psychological safety to experiment or voice their ideas, while psychological safety alone may not translate into meaningful digital contributions if employees lack readiness to embrace technological change. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the meaning of performance in digital workplaces emerges through the convergence of the capability to act digitally (digital orientation) and the psychological security to actualize that capability (psychological safety). This integrated understanding forms the conceptual basis of the Safe Digital Actualization framework proposed in this study (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024).

7. Discussion of Findings: the Interaction of Psychological Safety and Digital Orientation in Shaping Employee Performance Meaning

The findings of this study address the third research question concerning how psychological safety and digital orientation interact in shaping employees' perceptions and interpretations of performance in the digital workplace. Unlike quantitative studies that conceptualize these constructs as variables whose relationships are examined through direct effects or statistical interaction models, this phenomenological study demonstrates that their interaction is more appropriately understood as a mutually reinforcing experiential process embedded in employees' everyday work lives. Analysis of the experiences of the eight participants identified three recurring patterns: (1) psychological safety as the condition that enables the development of digital orientation; (2) digital orientation as the capability that enables employees to actualize their potential within a psychologically safe environment; and (3) imbalance between these two conditions as a source of constraints on capability actualization and performance meaning. These findings suggest that employee performance in digital workplaces is not merely determined by technological capability or psychological conditions independently, but rather by employees' ability to actualize their digital capacities within interpersonal environments that encourage learning, experimentation, idea sharing, and constructive risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019).

The first pattern indicates that psychological safety functions as the enabling condition for the development of digital orientation. The experience shared by Informant 6 demonstrates that the willingness to learn new technologies depends not only on an individual's initial capability but also on the perception that the workplace provides a safe environment for making mistakes, asking questions, and seeking assistance. Under such conditions, mistakes are interpreted not as threats to professional identity but as integral elements of the learning process. Consequently, psychological safety creates the psychological conditions necessary for employees to engage in the interpersonal and cognitive risks required to cope with technological uncertainty. This interpretation aligns with previous research suggesting that psychological safety promotes learning behaviors by allowing individuals to acknowledge knowledge limitations, request clarification, and experiment without fear of negative interpersonal consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017; Frazier et al., 2017).

Within the context of digital transformation, this process becomes increasingly significant because technological change continuously requires employees to update their knowledge and competencies. When employees perceive that the workplace does not provide a safe environment for admitting ignorance or acknowledging mistakes, they may adopt defensive strategies, such as avoiding unfamiliar technologies, concealing difficulties, or relying solely on familiar system features. Conversely, supportive environments encourage exploration and continuous learning, enabling employees to gradually expand their digital capabilities. Accordingly, this study suggests that psychological safety should not simply be interpreted as a factor that "increases" digital orientation; rather, it establishes the conditions through which digital orientation evolves via learning experiences and experimentation. This interpretation extends the digital transformation literature, which has traditionally emphasized technological resources and organizational capabilities, by highlighting the fundamental role of psychological conditions underlying employees' adaptation to technological change (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

The second pattern illustrates a complementary and reciprocal relationship. Whereas psychological safety provides the space for learning and experimentation, digital orientation provides the capability that enables employees to utilize that space productively. Informant 4 described how employees possessing strong technological competence and positive attitudes toward digital technology feel more confident proposing new ideas, experimenting with innovative approaches, and utilizing technology to improve work processes when they believe their workplace values such contributions. In this context, digital orientation represents not merely technical competence but also a source of professional self-efficacy and confidence in one's ability to contribute effectively within digitally enabled work environments. When this capability intersects with psychological safety, employees become more likely to actualize their digital competencies through constructive workplace behaviors (Frazier et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020).

These findings reveal a fundamentally complementary relationship between the two constructs. Psychological safety addresses the question, "Is it safe for me to experiment, ask questions, or express new ideas?" In contrast, digital orientation addresses the question, "Do I possess the readiness and willingness to utilize technology in doing so?" These two dimensions converge during the actualization of employee performance. Employees with strong digital orientation who work in psychologically unsafe environments may possess the necessary capabilities but lack the psychological space to express them fully. Conversely, employees working within psychologically safe environments but possessing limited digital orientation may have opportunities to learn while lacking sufficient readiness or capability to exploit digital technologies effectively. This interpretation is consistent with the socio-technical perspective of digital transformation, which emphasizes the integration of technological capabilities, human competencies, and organizational change processes (Nambisan et al., 2017; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The third pattern demonstrates that an imbalance between psychological safety and digital orientation may constrain performance actualization. Informant 8 described two contrasting situations. In the first, employees possessed strong digital competence but hesitated to express ideas or take risks because they feared rejection or negative evaluation. In the second, employees demonstrated a willingness to learn and improve but lacked adequate organizational support to develop their digital capabilities. Both situations indicate that the presence of only one condition is insufficient to achieve optimal capability actualization. These findings are consistent with psychological safety research demonstrating that safe interpersonal environments encourage learning behaviors and employee contribution, while digital transformation literature emphasizes that digital capabilities require organizational environments that enable their application and continued development (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

From the perspective of performance meaning, this imbalance provides an important insight: employee performance depends not only on how capable employees are in utilizing digital technologies, but also on the extent to which the workplace enables those capabilities to be expressed and realized. Employees with advanced digital competencies may still fail to demonstrate their full potential if they perceive that every mistake threatens their competence or professional reputation. Likewise, supportive work environments alone cannot guarantee optimal performance if employees lack the readiness to learn and adapt to technological demands. Therefore, performance meaning emerges from the intersection between digital capability and the psychological conditions that enable its actualization. This interpretation provides a more contextual explanation for why investments in technology and digital training do not always generate consistent improvements in employee performance (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2024).

The present findings also extend existing understandings of psychological safety within digital work environments. Previous research has consistently associated psychological safety with learning behaviors, knowledge sharing, innovation, and team effectiveness, while studies of virtual teams have shown that fostering psychological safety becomes increasingly challenging when interactions are mediated through digital technologies. This study contributes by demonstrating that, within digital workplaces, psychological safety serves not only as a mechanism for creating interpersonal comfort but also as a critical condition enabling employees to navigate technological uncertainty more adaptively. When employees feel safe admitting that they do not fully understand new technologies, requesting assistance, or proposing alternative work methods, digital transformation becomes a process of collective learning rather than merely technological implementation (Edmondson, 1999; Lechner & Mortlock, 2022; Newman et al., 2017).

Simultaneously, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of digital orientation. Rather than conceptualizing digital orientation solely as an individual characteristic, the findings suggest that it should be understood as an adaptive capability that evolves through continuous interaction between employees and

their organizational environment. Employees may possess both the motivation to learn and the technical ability to use digital technologies, yet the development of digital orientation largely depends on whether organizations provide opportunities, support, and tolerance for continuous learning. Consequently, digital orientation is more appropriately interpreted as an adaptive capability strengthened through supportive workplace experiences rather than as a static technical competence. This interpretation aligns with the dynamic capabilities perspective, which emphasizes organizations' and individuals' ability to sense change, seize opportunities, and continuously transform within dynamic environments (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Based on the overall findings, this study proposes a conceptual interpretation in which psychological safety and digital orientation constitute complementary and mutually reinforcing conditions rather than a simple linear relationship. Psychological safety provides the safe space to act, whereas digital orientation provides the readiness to act digitally. When these two conditions coexist, employees are better positioned to learn, experiment, collaborate, and actualize their digital competencies. Conversely, the absence of either condition creates a gap between employees' existing capabilities and their ability to express those capabilities effectively in practice. This synthesis extends current understandings of employee performance in digital workplaces by positioning performance not merely as the outcome of competence or psychological conditions alone, but as the process of capability actualization occurring within specific social and technological contexts (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Building upon this synthesis, the study introduces the preliminary conceptual interpretation of Safe Digital Actualization, defined as the process through which employees optimally actualize their digital capabilities because they operate within work environments that provide psychological safety for learning, experimentation, idea sharing, and acknowledging mistakes. This concept is not intended to represent a newly validated theoretical construct but rather an initial conceptual proposition emerging from the phenomenological synthesis of the present findings. Within this framework, psychological safety functions as the enabling condition, digital orientation functions as the enabling capability, and performance meaning emerges as the subjective outcome of capability actualization. This conceptualization is consistent with the literature emphasizing that psychological safety facilitates learning and interpersonal risk-taking, whereas successful digital transformation requires continuous adaptation of both human and organizational capabilities (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Overall, the principal contribution of this study lies not in claiming that psychological safety and digital orientation statistically improve employee performance, but rather in explaining how these two lived experiences jointly shape employees' interpretations and actualization of performance within digital workplaces. The findings indicate that employees interpret performance as the capacity to adapt to technological change, leverage digital technologies for collaboration, engage in continuous learning, and maintain professional relevance. However, these capabilities can only be fully realized when employees feel psychologically safe to utilize them. Accordingly, employee performance in the digital era should be understood as emerging from the interaction between the capability to act digitally (digital orientation) and the psychological safety to actualize that capability. This perspective carries important practical implications by suggesting that organizations should invest not only in digital technologies and competency development but also in cultivating psychologically safe work environments that enable employees to apply, develop, and continuously actualize their digital capabilities (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

8. Cross-Theme Interpretation and Theoretical Construction

The cross-theme analysis indicates that employees' experiences of psychological safety, digital orientation, and the meaning of performance do not emerge as isolated phenomena; rather, they constitute an interconnected process within the context of digital work. The findings regarding openness to expressing ideas and asking technical questions, freedom to voice differing opinions, willingness to acknowledge mistakes, adaptability to technological change, the use of technology to support collaboration, and perceptions of digital competence reveal a consistent pattern. Employees interpret performance not merely as the achievement of work outputs but as the ability to continuously adapt, learn, collaborate, and contribute within technology-mediated work environments. From the perspective of digital transformation, technological change not only reshapes work tools and processes but also transforms how individuals and organizations create value and understand the capabilities required to perform effectively (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The synthesis of the findings further demonstrates that psychological safety and digital orientation occupy distinct yet complementary positions in shaping employees' interpretations of performance. Psychological safety provides the psychological conditions that enable employees to ask questions, express

ideas, acknowledge mistakes, and experiment without excessive concern about interpersonal consequences. In contrast, digital orientation represents employees' readiness and inclination to adapt to technological change, learn digital tools, integrate technology into collaborative work, and develop competencies relevant to evolving job demands. Accordingly, this study suggests that performance in digital work environments cannot be adequately understood solely through the presence of digital capabilities or psychological conditions independently, but rather through the extent to which digital capabilities can be actualized within a supportive social environment that enables employees to act confidently and constructively (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

From the perspective of the participants' lived experiences, psychological safety can be understood as an enabling condition that creates opportunities for employees to develop and actualize their digital capabilities. Employees who experience psychological safety do not necessarily possess advanced digital competencies at the outset. Instead, feeling psychologically safe enables them to acknowledge limitations, seek assistance, experiment with unfamiliar technological features, and learn from mistakes. Through these experiences, employees gradually expand their capacity to respond to digital demands. Thus, the findings do not suggest that psychological safety directly causes higher digital orientation; rather, psychological safety creates the conditions under which learning and technological exploration can strengthen employees' digital orientation. This interpretation is consistent with studies positioning psychological safety as a fundamental condition for learning behaviors, information sharing, and interpersonal risk-taking in organizations (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

Conversely, digital orientation can be interpreted as an enabling capability that allows employees to utilize this psychologically safe environment to generate meaningful contributions within digital work settings. Employees with a strong digital orientation use technology not only to complete tasks more efficiently but also to develop innovative ways of collaborating, solving problems, accessing information, and improving work effectiveness. The findings suggest that these capabilities subsequently influence how employees evaluate themselves as competent and valuable organizational members. In this sense, digital orientation serves as an interpretive lens through which employees define performance in terms of adaptability, efficiency, digital collaboration, continuous learning, and professional relevance. This interpretation aligns with the digital transformation literature, which emphasizes that successful transformation requires developing capabilities that enable individuals and organizations to continuously respond to technological change (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Kindermann et al., 2024).

The cross-theme findings further reveal a reciprocal relationship between psychological conditions and digital capabilities. When employees feel psychologically safe to learn and experiment, they are more likely to develop stronger digital orientation. As digital orientation develops, employees acquire greater capacity to participate, collaborate, and contribute effectively within digital work environments. These experiences, in turn, reinforce perceptions of competence and professional confidence. Therefore, the relationship between psychological safety and digital orientation is better understood as a mutually reinforcing process rather than a simple linear association. This finding extends existing digital transformation literature by demonstrating that successful technological adaptation depends not only on technology availability or technical competence but also on psychological conditions that allow those competencies to emerge and be effectively utilized (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Nevertheless, the synthesis also demonstrates that these two elements are not always equally present. Employees possessing strong digital capabilities and orientation may nevertheless withhold ideas, avoid experimentation, or limit their contributions when working in psychologically unsafe environments due to concerns about rejection or negative interpersonal consequences. Conversely, employees working within psychologically safe environments but lacking sufficient digital readiness or capability may have opportunities to grow but remain unable to transform those opportunities into meaningful contributions. These findings suggest that neither psychological safety nor digital orientation alone sufficiently explains how employees construct the meaning of performance. What appears to be critical is the integration of psychological safety with digital capabilities that can be effectively actualized (Frazier et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2021; Cepeda-Cardona & Lozada Barahona, 2025).

Based on this synthesis, the present study proposes a preliminary conceptual proposition referred to as Safe Digital Actualization. This concept describes the process through which employees optimally actualize their digital capabilities because they work within environments that provide psychological safety to learn, ask questions, express ideas, engage in constructive risk-taking, and acknowledge mistakes. Within this framework, psychological safety functions as a safe space to act, whereas digital orientation represents the readiness and capability to act digitally. The meaning of performance subsequently emerges through this

process of actualization, whereby employees transform digital competence and psychological safety into adaptive, collaborative, innovative, and learning-oriented work behaviors. This conceptualization is derived from the phenomenological synthesis of the present findings rather than representing an empirically validated construct; therefore, it should be regarded as an initial theoretical proposition that warrants further empirical examination (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019).

Within the Safe Digital Actualization framework, performance is no longer conceptualized solely as the achievement of work outcomes but rather as employees' capacity to actualize their capabilities in response to the demands of digital work environments. Participants consistently interpreted performance through several interrelated dimensions, including adaptability to technological change, effective use of technology to strengthen collaboration, willingness to engage in continuous learning, ability to leverage technology for effective task completion, and perceptions of digital competence as an integral component of professional value. These findings indicate a shift in the meaning of performance from a dominant emphasis on task completion toward a more adaptive and dynamic understanding in which continuous learning and adaptability become essential aspects of employee contribution. Such a shift is consistent with the nature of digital transformation, which reshapes organizational value creation and requires increasingly dynamic capabilities from both individuals and organizations (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Accordingly, this study proposes a cross-theme conceptual pathway that can be summarized as:

Psychological Safety → Safe Space to Learn and Act → Digital Orientation → Digital Capability Actualization → Adaptive Meaning of Performance

This pathway is not intended to represent a statistically validated causal model but rather an interpretive representation of how participants experienced and made sense of the relationship between psychological conditions, digital orientation, and work performance. Within this framework, psychological safety enables learning and exploration; these experiences strengthen digital orientation; digital orientation subsequently enables employees to actualize their capabilities through adaptation, collaboration, and continuous learning; and together these processes shape a broader and more adaptive interpretation of performance. This framework contributes conceptually by shifting attention from the question of whether digital orientation improves performance toward the phenomenologically oriented question of how employees use digital orientation to understand and actualize their performance within psychologically safe work environments (Kindermann et al., 2024; Brahmana & Kontesa, 2024; Cepeda-Cardona & Lozada Barahona, 2025).

This theoretical construction also offers a new perspective on the existing literature, which has generally examined psychological safety, digital capabilities, and performance through relatively separate research streams. Psychological safety research has primarily emphasized learning, knowledge sharing, innovation, and interpersonal behaviors, whereas digital transformation studies have focused largely on technological capabilities, digital innovation, and organizational change. The present study bridges these perspectives through employees' subjective experiences, demonstrating that psychological conditions and digital capabilities can be understood as complementary dimensions within the broader process of performance actualization. This contribution is particularly relevant because the digital orientation literature also indicates that the relationship between digital orientation and performance is not always direct, highlighting the need to understand the mechanisms and contextual conditions through which digital orientation is translated into organizational value and employee performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Brahmana & Kontesa, 2024; Kindermann et al., 2024).

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that organizations should pursue digital transformation strategies that extend beyond technological investments and technical training alone. Organizations should cultivate work climates that encourage employees to ask questions, acknowledge limitations, express divergent opinions, and engage in constructive experimentation without fear of disproportionate interpersonal consequences. Simultaneously, organizations should provide continuous learning opportunities, technological support, digital training, and access to digital resources to ensure employees possess the capabilities necessary to utilize psychologically safe environments productively. In other words, human-centered digital transformation requires the simultaneous development of psychological enablement and digital capability development, because strengthening one without the other may create a gap between employees' potential capabilities and their ability to actualize them effectively (Edmondson, 1999; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the cross-theme interpretation suggests that performance in digital workplaces is a dynamic, contextual, and relational experience. Employees evaluate performance not solely by what they accomplish but also by how effectively they learn, adapt, collaborate, and maintain professional relevance amid ongoing

technological change. These capabilities are more likely to be actualized when employees experience psychological safety while simultaneously possessing sufficient digital orientation. Accordingly, this study proposes Safe Digital Actualization as an initial conceptual proposition explaining that the meaning of performance in digital workplaces emerges through the convergence of a psychologically safe environment for action and the capability to act digitally. This conceptualization provides a foundation for future research to empirically examine whether this mechanism can explain variations in employees' interpretations and actualization of performance across diverse digital organizational and hybrid work contexts (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conclusions

This study explored employees' lived experiences and interpretations of psychological safety and digital orientation in shaping their understanding of performance within digital workplaces. Based on a phenomenological analysis of the experiences of eight employees working in technology-intensive digital work environments, the findings indicate that performance is no longer understood merely as achieving work targets or completing assigned tasks. Instead, participants interpreted performance as the ability to adapt to technological change, engage in continuous learning, collaborate through digital platforms, and actualize their competencies in response to dynamic work demands. These findings suggest that digital transformation reshapes not only work processes and technological tools but also the ways employees understand their contributions and professional value within organizations (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

First, employees' experiences demonstrated that psychological safety constitutes a fundamental condition that enables individuals to learn, ask questions, express ideas, acknowledge mistakes, and engage in exploration within digital work environments. Participants interpreted psychological safety not merely as the absence of interpersonal conflict or threat, but as the confidence that they could admit a lack of knowledge, seek assistance, and experiment with new approaches without fear of disproportionate negative consequences. In digital workplaces characterized by continuous technological change and uncertainty, this condition provides employees with the opportunity to engage in ongoing learning and adaptation. Accordingly, this study suggests that psychological safety functions as a safe space to learn and act—a psychological environment that enables employees to actualize their potential and participate more openly in digitally mediated work settings (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017).

Second, digital orientation emerged as a capability that enables employees to interpret and actualize performance in increasingly digitalized workplaces. Employees with stronger digital orientation tended to define performance in terms of their ability to adapt to technological change, utilize digital tools effectively, foster virtual collaboration, and continuously develop competencies aligned with evolving job demands. These findings indicate that digital orientation extends beyond technical proficiency in using technology to encompass a proactive attitude toward change and a willingness to engage in continuous learning. Therefore, digital orientation can be understood as an enabling capability that allows employees to transform technological opportunities into meaningful contributions and professional value within digital work environments (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Kindermann et al., 2024).

Third, the principal finding of this study is that psychological safety and digital orientation are not experienced as independent constructs but rather as complementary conditions that jointly shape employees' interpretation and actualization of performance. Psychological safety provides employees with the interpersonal space to learn and experiment, whereas digital orientation equips them with the readiness and capability to make productive use of that space. Employees who feel psychologically safe are more willing to experiment and develop their digital capabilities, while employees possessing stronger digital capabilities are better able to actualize those competencies when working in supportive environments. These findings reveal a process of reciprocal reinforcement linking psychological conditions, digital capability, and employees' meaning-making of performance, without implying a statistically validated causal relationship (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Fourth, the study found that an imbalance between psychological safety and digital orientation may constrain employees' ability to actualize their potential. Employees possessing strong digital competencies but working in psychologically unsafe environments may choose to withhold ideas, avoid experimentation, or remain reluctant to disclose work-related difficulties. Conversely, psychologically safe environments alone do not necessarily result in optimal performance when employees lack sufficient digital readiness and capability to respond effectively to technological demands. These findings suggest that the meaning of performance in digital workplaces cannot be adequately explained solely by the presence of digital capability

or psychological conditions independently. Rather, it depends on an organization's ability to create conditions in which both elements can be simultaneously actualized (Frazier et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2021; Cepeda-Cardona & Lozada Barahona, 2025).

Fifth, as its primary conceptual contribution, this study proposes Safe Digital Actualization as an initial theoretical proposition derived from the synthesis of participants' lived experiences. The concept describes the process through which employees are able to actualize their digital capabilities because they work within environments that provide psychological safety to learn, ask questions, express ideas, experiment, and acknowledge mistakes. Within this conceptualization, psychological safety functions as a safe space to learn and act, whereas digital orientation serves as the readiness and capability to act digitally. The convergence of these two elements enables employees to construct a more adaptive understanding of performance, reflected in continuous learning, adaptability to technological change, digital collaboration, and the ability to make meaningful contributions. This concept should be regarded as a preliminary theoretical proposition emerging from phenomenological findings rather than an empirically validated construct (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019).

Overall, this study concludes that the meaning of performance in digital workplaces is dynamic, contextual, and relational. Employees evaluate performance not only by what they accomplish but also by how effectively they learn, adapt, collaborate, and maintain professional relevance amid continuous technological change. Accordingly, the primary contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that performance in digital work environments is not merely about what employees achieve, but also about how employees are enabled to learn, adapt, and act digitally. Through the perspective of Safe Digital Actualization, this study extends the understanding of employee performance in the digital era by positioning psychological safety and digital orientation as two complementary elements that jointly facilitate the actualization of employees' capabilities and shape their interpretation of performance (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Kindermann et al., 2024).

2. Recommendations

Based on the findings regarding the dynamic relationship among psychological safety, digital orientation, and employees' meaning-making of performance in digital workplaces, this study recommends that organizations should not view digital transformation merely as an agenda for technology acquisition or technical skills development. Rather, digital transformation should be understood as a socio-technical change process involving continuous interactions among technology, individuals, and organizational contexts. From this perspective, the success of digital transformation largely depends on an organization's ability to create an environment in which employees feel psychologically safe to learn and experiment while simultaneously possessing the capacity to utilize digital technologies effectively. Accordingly, the recommendations proposed in this study focus on two complementary priorities: developing psychological safety as a safe space for learning and action and strengthening digital orientation as employees' readiness and capability to act digitally (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

2.1. Recommendations for Organizational Practice

First, organizations should establish psychological safety as a fundamental element of digital workplace culture. Participants' experiences indicate that psychological safety emerges when employees can ask questions, express differing opinions, acknowledge mistakes, and seek assistance without fearing negative interpersonal consequences. Therefore, leaders should cultivate leadership practices that encourage open dialogue, actively invite employee input, respond to mistakes as valuable learning opportunities, and demonstrate that uncertainty or failure during the learning process is not automatically interpreted as individual incompetence. Such practices are essential because psychological safety is closely associated with employees' willingness to learn, share knowledge, and actively participate in organizational change initiatives (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017).

Second, organizations should systematically integrate learning from failure into digital work processes. The findings indicate that employees are more willing to experiment with digital technologies when mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning rather than grounds for assigning blame. Organizations may implement mechanisms such as after-action reviews, blameless post-mortem analyses, or learning-oriented reflection sessions to identify underlying causes of problems, document organizational knowledge, and prevent similar issues from recurring. Such approaches align with the understanding that psychological safety enables individuals and teams to openly discuss problems and engage in collective learning processes (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017).

Third, organizations should foster digital orientation as an ongoing developmental process rather than relying solely on one-time technical training programs. Employee development initiatives should extend

beyond teaching software operation to include understanding the strategic value of technology, readiness to embrace technological change, willingness to experiment with new digital tools, the ability to utilize technology for collaboration, and continuous learning as technologies evolve. Consequently, digital orientation should be embedded within everyday work practices as part of continuous professional development. This recommendation is consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective, which emphasizes continuous adaptation and competency renewal as essential drivers of successful digital transformation (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Kindermann et al., 2024).

Fourth, organizations should adopt an integrative strategy that simultaneously develops psychological safety and digital orientation. The findings demonstrate that the presence of one without the other may limit employees' ability to fully actualize their potential. Providing technology training without creating a psychologically safe environment for experimentation is insufficient, just as fostering a supportive culture alone is inadequate if employees lack the necessary digital capabilities. Therefore, digital transformation initiatives should be designed alongside competency development programs and organizational culture change efforts. This integrated approach represents the practical foundation of the Safe Digital Actualization concept, whereby employees possess both a psychologically safe environment and adequate digital capabilities to fully realize their contributions within digital workplaces (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Fifth, organizations should redesign performance evaluation systems to better reflect the characteristics of digital work. The findings suggest that employees evaluate performance not only through task completion and target achievement but also through their ability to adapt, learn continuously, collaborate virtually, utilize digital technologies effectively, and contribute to organizational problem solving. Accordingly, performance management systems in digital environments should incorporate indicators related to adaptability, continuous learning, digital collaboration, and effective technology utilization while maintaining appropriate attention to performance outcomes. Such an approach reflects the evolving nature of value creation in organizations undergoing digital transformation (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Sixth, organizations should pay greater attention to the social and well-being dimensions of digital work design. Although this study primarily focuses on psychological safety and digital orientation, employees' experiences also occur within broader social relationships and ongoing adaptation demands that influence their work experiences. Organizations should therefore provide communication and collaboration mechanisms that facilitate both formal and informal interactions while maintaining healthy boundaries between work responsibilities and personal life. Such strategies are important to ensure that digital transformation prioritizes not only operational efficiency but also the well-being of the people who experience and implement the transformation process (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019).

Overall, the recommendations for organizations may be summarized in a single guiding principle: effective digital transformation requires the integration of a psychologically safe environment for learning with employees' capability to act digitally. Organizations should avoid approaches that focus exclusively on technology investments or technical training and instead cultivate an ecosystem that integrates a culture of psychological safety, the continuous development of digital orientation, and adaptive performance management systems. The integration of these three elements is expected to create organizational conditions that enable employees to fully actualize their capabilities within digital work environments (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Kindermann et al., 2024).

2.2. Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

First, future studies are encouraged to empirically examine and further develop the Safe Digital Actualization concept. As a theoretical proposition derived from the phenomenological findings of this study, the concept requires further conceptual refinement and empirical validation. Future research may identify the key dimensions of Safe Digital Actualization, develop measurement indicators, and examine its construct validity as well as its relationships with employee performance, innovation, learning, and well-being. Such efforts would extend the existing literature on psychological safety and digital orientation, which have largely been investigated as separate constructs (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Kindermann et al., 2024).

Second, future research should adopt longitudinal research designs to better understand the evolving relationships among psychological safety, digital orientation, and employees' meaning of performance. While this phenomenological study provides an in-depth understanding of employees' lived experiences within a specific context, it cannot explain how these experiences develop over time. Longitudinal studies could investigate whether increases in psychological safety facilitate the development of digital orientation, whether improvements in digital competence strengthen employees' confidence, and how technological change reshapes employees' perceptions and interpretations of performance over extended periods (Warner

& Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Third, future studies are encouraged to employ mixed-methods research designs to examine the propositions emerging from this study. The qualitative findings indicate a complementary relationship between psychological safety and digital orientation. Quantitative studies could test whether these constructs exert direct and interactive effects on employee performance, whereas mixed-methods approaches could integrate statistical testing with an exploration of employees' subjective experiences. Such research would provide stronger empirical evidence regarding whether the patterns identified in this study are generalizable across broader organizational contexts and populations (Frazier et al., 2017; Cepeda-Cardona & Lozada Barahona, 2025).

Fourth, future research should further investigate the roles of leadership and organizational context in shaping psychological safety and digital orientation. Although the present study highlights the importance of social support and workplace acceptance, future studies could explore in greater depth how leadership behaviors, digital leadership styles, organizational structures, and organizational culture influence these experiences. Comparative studies involving organizations with different levels of digital maturity may also provide richer insights into the organizational conditions that facilitate the development of employees' digital orientation (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Vial, 2019).

Fifth, future studies should broaden the research context by comparing different industries, organizational types, and work arrangements. Employees working in technology firms, manufacturing companies, service organizations, educational institutions, and public-sector organizations may experience digital work differently due to variations in digital demands, autonomy, hierarchical structures, and organizational support. Comparative research may also examine organizations operating under hybrid, remote, and fully on-site work arrangements to better understand how work contexts influence the relationships among psychological safety, digital orientation, and employees' meaning of performance (Verhoef et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Sixth, future research should consider the implications of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, when examining employees' meaning of performance. These technological developments are likely to reshape competency requirements, collaboration patterns, perceptions of work, and employees' evaluations of their own contributions. Future studies could investigate whether AI adoption strengthens or alters the relationship between psychological safety and digital orientation, particularly as employees encounter uncertainty regarding changing job roles and competency expectations. Such research is essential to ensure that the Safe Digital Actualization framework remains relevant within increasingly complex digital work environments (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Overall, the future research agenda should extend beyond statistically testing relationships among variables to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals, technology, leadership, and organizational contexts interact to shape employees' experiences in digital workplaces. In particular, further development of the Safe Digital Actualization concept represents a promising research direction for explaining how organizations create conditions that simultaneously enable employees to feel psychologically safe to learn while possessing the capability to act digitally. By integrating psychological and digital perspectives, future research is expected to make more comprehensive contributions to the advancement of strategic human resource management theory and practice in the era of digital transformation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Kindermann et al., 2024).

DAFTAR PUSTAKA

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