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# Digital era people management practices: general management insights

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## ABSTRACT

This research article examines the critical challenges and opportunities of people management in the digital era, offering valuable insights from general management and sustainable management perspectives. As organizations increasingly operate in digitally transformed environments, sustainable people management becomes essential to fulfilling the organization's evolutionary purpose, reflecting its deeper reason for existence. Therefore, understanding how such strategies are constructed and implemented is very important. The authors aim to construct a typology of people management practices by adopting a case study strategy and drawing on general management insights from face-to-face interviews with top management from two information and communications technology (ICT) companies in Estonia. All material and data are entered into a case database ($n$ = 20). The authors use a model of empirically grounded type construction and have constructed a typology of people management practices. The results make a significant contribution to people management by addressing the critical challenges and opportunities in managing human capital in the digital era.

## 1. Introduction

The digital era compels organizations to rethink their purpose and strategic objectives. By aligning technological advancements with stakeholder expectations and integrating sustainability into core operations, organizations can create sustainable value. This transformation enhances operational efficiency and fosters a culture of responsibility and ethical conduct, which is essential for long-term success in a post-growth world (Kasemsap 2017; Kumar 2021; Saari et al. 2024; Inan and Yilmaz 2025). Complex, autocatalytic, self-organizing, nonlinear, and adaptive systems are the principal challenges of the digital era (Laloux 2016; Raworth 2017; Henderson 2020).

Yet the practical and scholarly question remains: How is strategizing enacted in such contexts, and what role do people management practices play in enabling sustainable value creation and an organization's evolutionary purpose? Existing studies have not provided an empirically grounded typology that differentiates people management practice configurations by both their integration into strategizing and their sustainability orientation. Consequently, alignment, culture, and sustainability are often invoked, but the field offers limited clarity on how these concepts translate into comparable patterns of people management practices across organizations. Therefore, the authors ask questions such as: How are strategies constructed and implemented? What is a people management practice? Are people management practices an integral part of strategies? What kinds of people management practices are sustainable in fulfilling the evolutionary purpose? This supports the article's aim, which is to develop a typology of people management practices. Theoretical and methodological rigor in typology construction is achieved by grounding the process in established theories and methodologies, systematically selecting and operationalizing attributes, and integrating qualitative and quantitative methods.

Sustainable people management practices that fulfil the evolutionary purpose aim to balance long-term organizational performance with the well-being, development, and dignity of employees, while also contributing positively to environmental and social goals. However, despite the broad agreement that people management is important for strategic renewal and sustainability, we still lack an empirically grounded way to differentiate people management practice configurations by (a) their integration into strategy and (b) their sustainability as an ongoing equilibrium, rather than as isolated initiatives. Accordingly, concepts such as 'alignment', 'culture', and 'sustainability' are widely used, yet remain insufficiently linked to comparable patterns

of concrete people management practices across organizations. All members of sustainable and successful organizations should possess a combination of competences and competencies that enable them to navigate the challenges of the digital era and contribute to the long-term success of the organization (Wahl and Zernand-Vilson 2025). The research results contribute significantly by addressing why and how people management practices are integrated into strategies and which types of practices are sustainable to fulfil the evolutionary purpose of organizations. This study contributes to people management by developing a typology of people management practices that explains how integration into strategy varies and which practice configurations appear more sustainable in fulfilling the evolutionary purpose.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews theories and evidence related to models that explain how to manage and lead people. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, data collection, analysis, and the construction of the typology. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, while Section 5 concludes the paper and offers directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical framework of people management practices

The theoretical framework of people management practices is based on strategic human resource management (SHRM) theories and models that explain how to manage and lead people within an organization to achieve both organizational goals and employee well-being. This proactive approach treats employees as a strategic asset to drive sustainability.

A prominent and widely used theory originates from Lepak and Snell (1999): the theory of human capital allocation and development. Allocation refers to how individuals and organizations choose to invest in human capital, while development describes the process of acquiring and enhancing these skills. The theory suggests that such investments yield returns, influencing individual career paths and overall economic growth, and are motivated by a rational pursuit of increased economic benefit. In a post-growth world, growth is never an objective in itself; instead, purpose can be manifested on a larger scale (Laloux 2016). The theoretical foundation for human capital theory is drawn primarily from transaction cost economics and the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm, which are used to discuss various employment modes (Barney 2001). Each theory is presented as evidence that value and uniqueness are fundamental dimensions differentiating most human capital. Value is defined as the ratio of strategic benefits to customers derived from skills relative to the costs incurred. The degree of uniqueness affects transaction costs; as human capital becomes more idiosyncratic to a particular firm, externalization may become infeasible or incur excessive costs (Lepak and Snell 1999). Today, it is recognized that knowledgeable and skilled people are the true assets of most organizations; therefore, the knowledge-based theory (KM) of the firm should also be considered. Knowledge is viewed as the most strategically significant resource of the organization, embedded and carried through multiple entities, including organizational culture and identity, policies, routines, documents, systems, and people (Grant 1996; Nonaka et al. 2000). Furthermore, dynamic capabilities (DC) theory is a newer approach in strategic management that focuses on an organization's capability to adapt and change in response to a rapidly evolving business environment (Teece et al. 1997; Winter 2003). While the RBV emphasizes selecting appropriate resources, DC emphasizes development and renewal. It is also understood that values are based on what is most important to people; values are perceptions that guide attitudes and behaviour, representing both important goals and the appropriate ways to achieve them (Wahl 2012). Stakeholder theory asks managers to articulate the shared sense of value they create, and addresses values and beliefs about the appropriate relationships among the individual, the organization, and the state (Tricker 2015). Artificial intelligence (AI) in people management raises many ethical and legal issues that should be addressed before combining the best of both worlds (Tsiskaridze et al. 2023).

People management practices are activities that directly impact employees and are implemented in line with the intentions set out in organizational strategies (Boon et al. 2019). Sustainable people management practices focus on creating a balance that ensures long-term engagement, well-being, and prosperity for employees while contributing meaningfully to organizational and societal sustainability objectives (Kramar 2022; Lulewicz-Sas et al. 2022). Previous studies have indicated that without the alignment with organizational culture, people management practices cannot reach their full potential (Chan et al. 2004; Harrison and Bazzy 2017; Rhee et al. 2018; Vasumathi et al. 2025). Core values are the principal elements of organizational culture and, together with beliefs and expectations, either hinder or support the achievement of the formulated strategy; the alignment between organizational core values and basic values can enhance resilience and sustainable success (Wahl and Durst 2022). Organizations that clearly define their purpose or mission and activate core values to support it are well positioned for long-term success in a complex and dynamic world (Beehive 2020). It is important to focus more on being authentic than on appearances. In bringing strategy into being, practitioners advance the living construction of their strategy through a four-stage strategy formation process – identification, framing, interpretation, and attainment – as a narrative-driven performative praxis (Prokushenkov 2025). People management practices include the components presented in Fig. 1.

The components of people management practices collectively aim to build a high-performance culture by enhancing employees' ability, motivation, and opportunity to contribute effectively to organizational success (Alqudah et al. 2022). Performance management involves setting objectives, monitoring progress, providing feedback, and evaluating performance aligned with organizational goals. Selective personnel hiring uses rigorous recruitment processes to hire individuals with the right competencies and fit for the organizational culture. Job security provides stable employment to foster loyalty and optimize turnover (Sun et al. 2007). Managers need strong communication skills to convey the purpose or

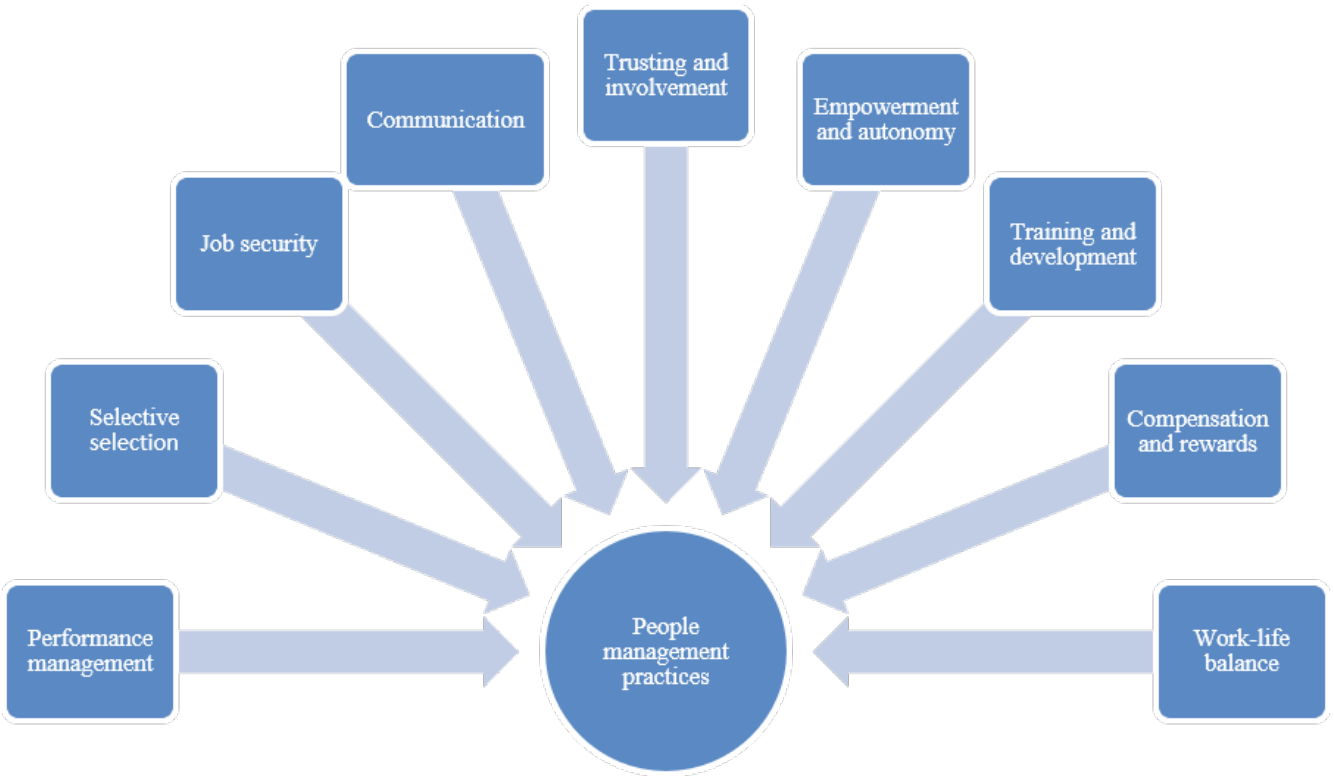


**Fig. 1.** Components of people management practices.

mission clearly to board members and other stakeholders; open communication ensures transparency throughout the organization. Trust and involvement encourage participation in decision-making, problem-solving, and collaboration to leverage employee expertise and commitment. Empowerment and autonomy allow employees discretion and ownership in their work to boost motivation and innovation (Kim 2023). Training and development provide continuous skill improvement, learning opportunities, and support to help employees perform at their best. Compensation and rewards implement competitive and performance-based pay, bonuses, and incentives that motivate employees. Work-life balance supports flexible work arrangements and initiatives to improve well-being and engagement.

To summarize, the literature reveals notable differences in how the components of people management practices interact within the organization and the external environment. However, sustainability requires a balanced and integrated strategizing process supported by a strong organizational culture. After reviewing the relevant literature, the authors proceed with the research methodology, data collection, analysis, and construction of the typology.

## 3. Materials and methods

### 3.1. Research methodology, data collection and analysis

The research uses a qualitative method, and it is categorized as an explanatory, cross-sectional research project. This empirical study is based on a case study strategy following Yin (2009), drawing on general management insights from non-standardized, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with top management from two information and communications technology (ICT) companies in Estonia. Guiding themes and questions were pretested, and the interviews took place in 2023–2025. All empirical material and related documentation were systematically stored in a case database to ensure transparency, traceability, and consistency throughout the research process. In accordance with the multiple-case design, all selected cases ($n$ = 20) were documented and described in detail.

The study included participants from two organizations in Estonia, representing two business contexts: telecommunications ($n$ = 10, 50%) and software development ($n$ = 10, 50%). The sample was predominantly senior, with fifteen top-level participants (75%) and five mid-level participants (25%). Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 11 female participants (55%) and nine male participants (45%). The largest role groups were heads of division ($n$ = 5, 25%) and heads of function ($n$ = 4, 20%), followed by heads of business ($n$ = 3, 15%), chairmen of the board ($n$ = 2, 10%), heads of department ($n$ = 2, 10%), and product managers ($n$ = 2, 10%). One area manager (5%) and one partner & head of function (5%) were also included. The distribution of participants across hierarchical levels differed between the two case organizations and reflected organizational size and managerial layering. The telecommunications company (approximately 1300 employees) operates with a more differentiated hierarchy, enabling the inclusion of several mid-level managers. In contrast, the software development company (approximately 360 employees) has a comparatively flatter structure, resulting in fewer mid-level roles and a larger proportion of top-level informants. Importantly, across both organizations, participants – regardless of formal level – were directly in-

volved in the design and implementation of people management practices, making them appropriate key informants for addressing the study objectives.

### 3.2. Constructing a typology

To construct the typology of people management practices, authors mainly relied on Kluge's (2000) four stage model of empirically grounded type construction. The construction of typologies is central to qualitative social research, so it is necessary to clarify the concept of types (e.g. ideal types, real types, prototypes, extreme types, types of structure) and the process of typology construction. Quality can be adequately captured by combining qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2019) with empirically grounded type construction (Lang and Schweizer 2020).

Stage 1: The ideal type helps organize the chaos of practice and is defined as a combination of attributes. In qualitative studies, the properties and their dimensions are elaborated and 'dimensionalized' during the analysis process using the collected data and theoretical knowledge (Kelle and Kluge 2010). Attention is given to the level of interpretation and abstraction of the data, which is expressed in abductive category formation (Lang and Schweizer 2020). Categories were added to the case database during the abductive category formation of interview transcriptions, and subcategories were dimensionalized.

Stage 2: Categories serve as the starting point for identifying empirical regularities in the occurrence of content-bearing elements in the data (Lang and Schweizer 2020). Cases were grouped according to the defined properties and their dimensions, and the identified groups were then analysed for empirical regularities. PAST 5.2 (Hammer et al. 2001) was used for computer analysis. Quantified data were entered as a matrix and recorded using numerical codes. Codes were entered for all data values; existing coding schemes enabled comparisons. Data were checked for errors, cleaned, and preprocessed. As a result of hierarchical (Ward's method) and non-hierarchical cluster analysis (K-means) and non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS), the authors were able to group cases into internally homogeneous and externally heterogenous groups. The first cluster k1 contains four cases ($n$ = 4, 20%), the second cluster k2 contains four cases ($n$ = 4, 20%), the third cluster k3 contains four cases ($n$ = 4, 20%), and the fourth cluster k4 contains eight cases ($n$ = 8, 40%). The identified groups were analysed for empirical regularities. The groups were compared to determine whether there is sufficiently high external heterogeneity at the 'level of the typology' and to assess whether the resulting typology contains sufficient heterogeneity and variation in the data.

Stage 3: The meaningful relationships that form the basis of the empirically founded groups must be analysed to move from description to understanding and explanation. The combinations of content-bearing elements were analysed to determine how they are related in a meaning-generating way within the data, to deduce the supra-individual commonalities of subjective argumentative structures, and to make the semantic connections of these combinations visible (Lang and Schweizer 2020). Extensive contrasting analyses within and between the groups ultimately lead to a reduction of the attribute space and to a typology. The examined social phenomena should not only be described but also 'understood' and 'explained'; therefore, the meaningful relationships that form the basis of the empirically founded groups and combinations of attributes were analysed.

Stage 4: The constructed ideal types were described by their combinations of attributes and by the meaningful relationships among them. The differences and similarities between the ideal types, based on their characteristic content-bearing elements and the meaning-generating elements that connect them, were not simply described but were exaggerated to make their characteristics more visible (Lang and Schweizer 2020).

These four stages represent sub-goals of the type-construction process and can be achieved using different analysis methods and techniques, depending on the research questions and the type and quality of the data.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section presents the empirically grounded four-type typology of people management practices and discusses its implications for strategic integration and sustainability. The authors constructed a preliminary typology of people management practices, which includes four ideal types: Sustainable & Integrated, Unsustainable & Unintegrated, Unsustainable & Integrated, Sustainable & Unintegrated (Fig. 2).

Authors place types of people management practices within a two-dimensional space. The x-axis represents sustainability, ranging from unsustainable to sustainable, and the y-axis represents integration, ranging from unintegrated to integrated. Types 1 and 4 are considered sustainable because

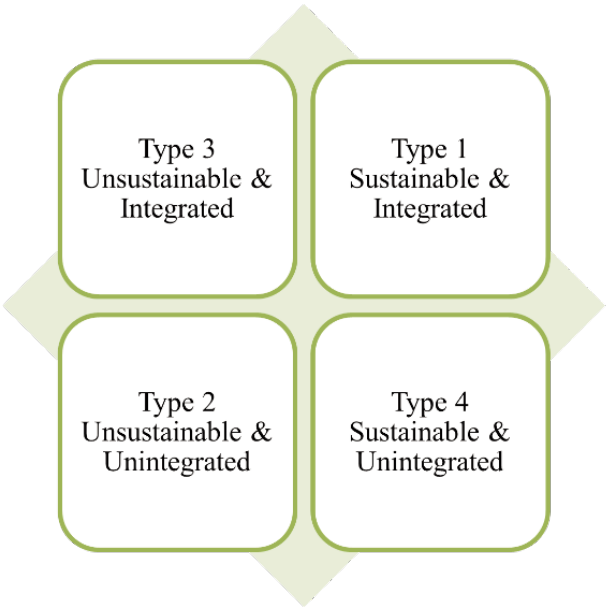


**Fig. 2.** Preliminary typology of people management practices (sustainability and integration).

they support ongoing equilibrium in people management, fostering long-term engagement, well-being, and prosperity while aligning with organizational sustainability goals. Types 1 and 3 are considered integrated because people management is embedded in strategy and demonstrates system-level complementarity among strategy, organizational culture, and people management practices, capturing vertical fit, horizontal fit, and cultural alignment.

#### Type 1: Sustainable & Integrated

This type represents a systemic human resource architecture in which people management practices form a mutually reinforcing bundle aligned with strategic intent and cultural expectations. Integration occurs through coordinated routines, decision structures, and feedback loops that translate people-related information into concrete adjustments, with implementation supported by cross-functional coordination. Sustainability is enacted primarily as a long-term, employee-centred equilibrium – well-being, flexibility, learning, engagement, and balanced performance – supported by fair reward principles and long-term investments. Empirically, the pattern is strong in alignment and control mechanisms, while participation (employee co-creation) and strong line-manager enablement are not the main drivers, and sustainability is less often framed as an explicit societal or environmental purpose.

#### Type 2: Unsustainable & Unintegrated

This type reflects a fragmented people management logic: practices are not designed as a coherent system and are weakly linked to strategic goals and cultural alignment. Integration is limited because responsibility is often shifted to the line without sufficient enablement, and employee voice does not function as a corrective mechanism. Sustainability is weak because the foundations of sustainable people management – psychological safety and inclusion, well-being supports, and longer-term retention logic – remain underdeveloped, and broader sustainability aims are not connected to people decisions. Empirically, this configuration is best understood as reactive and disjointed rather than a deliberately balanced system.

#### Type 3: Unsustainable & Integrated

This type is integrated primarily through enactment and participation: people issues are present in strategizing, cultural expectations are reflected in how practices are interpreted, and employees and managers actively shape ways of working. Integration is achieved through shared meaning, manager enactment, and voice-based feedback loops, rather than formal governance routines. However, sustainability is undermined because key social infrastructure is missing or unstable – most notably psychological safety and inclusion – and retention is not secured through long-term systemic levers; reward fairness may also be weak. Empirically, this configuration combines high integration in practice with fragile sustainability conditions, creating tension between involvement and long-term equilibrium.

#### Type 4: Sustainable & Unintegrated

This type demonstrates strong sustainability outcomes but limited systemic embedding: practices support well-being, engagement, retention, and long-term investment (e.g. community or education), yet integration into strategy and consistent implementation across units remains uneven. Integration is partial; some alignment and monitoring may be present, but cross-unit consistency, employee co-creation, and strong line-manager enablement are not the main integration mechanisms, making the system more patchwork than fully institutionalized. Sustainability is maintained through selected commitments and practices rather than a tightly integrated HR architecture, and it is only weakly anchored in broader societal or environmental purpose. Empirically, the defining feature is sustainability without full integration – that is, sustainable outcomes are achieved despite uneven system-level coherence.

Taken together, the typology highlights two theoretically important tensions and thereby advances research on people management in the digital era. First, integration into strategizing does not automatically imply sustainability: Type 3 shows that even when people management is enacted through participation in strategizing, sustainable foundations may remain fragile (Prokushenkov 2025). Second, sustainability does not require full integration: Type 4 indicates that organizations may sustain people outcomes through selected commitments even when system-level embedding remains uneven, refining SHRM arguments that emphasize equilibrium and long-term employee prosperity (Kramar 2022; Lulewicz-Sas et al. 2022). By treating culture–practice alignment as a key differentiator, the typology also strengthens culture-based explanations of people management effectiveness by linking values and expectations to how practices are enacted (Chan et al. 2004; Wahl 2012; Harrison and Bazzy 2017; Rhee et al. 2018). Overall, the typology provides a structured vocabulary for comparing people management configurations and clarifies where ‘fit’ and ‘sustainability’ diverge in practice.

The typology can be used as a diagnostic tool for people management leaders and other top management to identify their current people management configuration and prioritize development efforts. For Type 2 (Unsustainable & Unintegrated), the immediate priority is to create minimum system coherence by clarifying strategic people priorities, strengthening line manager enablement, and establishing basic well-being and psychological safety practices. For Type 3 (Unsustainable & Integrated), the key task is to stabilize sustainability foundations by improving inclusion and psychological safety, strengthening fair reward principles, and building longer-term retention levers without losing the existing participatory integration. For Type 4 (Sustainable & Unintegrated), the focus should be on reducing fragmentation by improving cross-unit consistency and establishing employee voice mechanisms that support shared practices. For Type 1 (Sustainable & Integrated), the main opportunity is refinement: maintaining strong alignment and sustainability while

strengthening participation and managerial enactment, so the system remains adaptive over time.

## 5. Conclusion

This study presents an empirically grounded four-type typology that distinguishes people management practices by their integration into strategizing and their sustainability orientation. The typology enables systematic comparison of people management configurations and provides a basis for testing how different configurations relate to sustainability-relevant outcomes in the context of digital-era complexity. Future research could refine and test an advanced version of the typology through multidimensional international studies and by examining the explanatory hypotheses associated with Types 1–4. Additionally, a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) could identify alternative configurations of people management practices sufficient for achieving sustainability outcomes.

### Data availability statement

Data are available upon request due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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## Inimeste juhtimise praktikad digiajastul: üldjuhtimise arusaamu

**Mike Franz Wahl ja Maria Kütt**

Artikkel käsitleb inimeste juhtimise keskseid väljakutseid ja võimalusi digiajastul, lähtudes üldjuhtimise ja kestliku juhtimise vaatenurgast. Digitaalne transformatsioon sunnib organisatsioone ümber mõtestama oma eesmärke, strateegiaid ja juhtimispraktikaid, kusjuures inimeste juhtimine mängib võtmerolli organisatsiooni evolutsioonilise eesmärgi (*purpose*) täitmisel. Autorite eesmärk on luua empiiriliselt põhjendatud tüpoloogia inimeste juhtimise praktikate kohta ning selgitada, kuidas need on strateegiatesse integreeritud ja kui kestlikud need on.

Uuring põhineb kvalitatiivsel juhtumiuuringul, mille käigus viidi läbi 20 poolstruktureeritud intervjuud Eesti IKT-sektori kahe ettevõtte tipp- ja keskastme juhtidega. Eesmärgi saavutamiseks rakendati Kluge neljaastmelist empiiriliselt põhjendatud tüpoloogia loomise mudelit, kombineerides kvalitatiivset sisuanalüüsi ja klasteranalüüsi. Töötati välja inimeste juhtimise praktikate nelja ideaaltüübiga tüpoloogia. Tüpoloogia eristab praktikaid kahe mõõtme alusel: kestlikkus ja strateegiline integratsioon. Esimene tüüp – kestlik ja integreeritud – esindab süsteemset ja tasakaalustatud lähenemist, kus inimeste juhtimine toetab pikaajalist heaolu, õppimist ja organisatsioonilist tulemuslikkust ning on tugevalt seotud strateegiaga. Teised tüübid peegeldavad kestlikkuse ja integratsiooni erinevat taset või puudumist, tuues esile pingeid töötajate kaasatuse, psühholoogilise turvalisuse ja pikaajalise tasakaalu saavutamisel.

Uuringu tulemused annavad olulise panuse arusaama, kuidas inimeste juhtimise praktikad aitavad organisatsioonidel digiajastul luua kestlikku väärtust, ning rõhutavad vajadust siduda need praktikad teadlikult strateegia, organisatsioonikultuuri ja väärtustega.