

2-10-2026

Reasons for Digital Transformation Project Failures Based on U.S. Project Managers' Lived Experiences

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Susan D. Landes

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2026

Abstract

Reasons for Digital Transformation Project Failures Based on U.S. Project Managers'

Lived Experiences

by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2024

MA, University of Phoenix, 2004

BS, Northwood University, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

February 2026

Abstract

Digital transformation projects have a failure rate of 66% to 84%, costing U.S. companies billions of dollars each year. Organizational leaders need to understand the implications of these costly failures, leading to substantial financial losses. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for digital transformation project failures from the perspective of the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. The conceptual framework consisted of Lewin's 3-stage change management model, Correani et al.'s digital transformation implementation model, Herzberg's 2-factor theory of motivation-hygiene, and von Bertalanffy's systems theory. The participants were 13 U.S. active, certified professional project managers with at least 5 years of experience, who had completed two or more U.S. digital transformation projects and had led at least one failed digital transformation project. The data were collected using semistructured interviews. Eight themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) lack of preparation, (b) ineffective change management, (c) unrealistic business expectations, (d) poor organizational collaboration, (e) lack of transparency early on, (f) underestimating timeframe and requirements, (g) poor communication between stakeholders, and (h) lack of user experience. Project managers can use these identified strategies to improve their management of digital transformation projects and align goals with technology initiatives. Implications for positive social change include the potential for organizational leaders to reduce project failure rates, reinvesting the billions of dollars saved to improve their product quality, and investing in the local communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the extraordinary women in my family, my mother, daughters, granddaughters, sister, niece, and friends. Your resilience, support, sacrifice, and encouragement have shaped this journey. May this work remind us that the women in our lives are capable of anything.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful to my dissertation chair, Dr. Robert Levasseur, for his guidance, encouragement, and steadfast commitment to my success. His insight challenged me to think critically and strengthened the quality of my work. The amazing and relatable stories that always brought laughter to our phone calls kept me moving forward. I am a better student and person because of his mentorship. I also thank my committee member, Dr. Thomas Butkiewicz, for his thoughtful feedback and expertise, which enriched this study.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the project managers who participated in this research. Their willingness to share their experiences made this work possible and provided invaluable perspectives on the challenges of digital transformation projects.

Most of all, I am indebted to my family. To my mother, for showing me the power of resilience and determination. To my daughters, for their sacrifices, guidance, and unwavering support. To my granddaughters, for inspiring me to show that the women in our family can achieve anything. To my sister and niece, for their constant encouragement. To my amazing friends who continually told me I could finish this education journey. This accomplishment belongs to all of us.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The United States alone will spend over \$1 trillion in 2025 on global digital transformation (Veith, 2023). Estimated global digital transformation spending will reach \$3.4 trillion in the year 2026 (Veith, 2023). However, 66% to 84% of digital transformation projects fail (Koczerga, 2024; Oludapo et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). The proposed study will fill the gap in the existing literature by discovering what U.S. project managers perceive to be the reasons for digital transformation failure based on their lived experiences. The study could also contribute to positive social change by adding to the limited research on the reasons for the high failure rates of digital transformation projects, thus enabling managers to take actions designed to lower those rates.

The remaining sections in this chapter include the background of the study that summarizes the research literature, the problem statement, the purpose of the study that connects the problem to the focus of the study, and the research question. This is followed by a description of the conceptual framework, nature of the study that identifies reasoning for the selected design, definitions that are key concepts or may be unfamiliar to the reader, assumptions that are applicable to the study, scope and delimitations identifying the specific focus of the study, and limitations due to design. The last section in this chapter is the significance of the study, which identifies the potential positive social change impact.

Background of the Study

Research into digital transformation projects reveals low success rates costing U.S. businesses millions of dollars (Veith, 2023). Over 37 years, *critical success factors* have been ranked among the top 10 searched keywords by researchers (Abbasi & Jaafari, 2018). White and Leifer (1986) found that project teams considered process the most important critical success factor. Nelson (2008) expanded this to include people as critical success factors in IT projects, highlighting significant financial losses from major IT failures. Project managers identified critical success factors as setting project goals, defining project scope, and establishing a project mission (Pinto & Prescott, 1988; Pinto & Slevin, 1987). Systems theory can help identify deeper relationships between risk and critical success factors, providing a holistic project view (Fortune & White, 2006).

Team members from different organizational areas and external resources have varied perceptions of project outcomes based on their experiences (Ika & Pinto, 2022). The negative connotation of the term failure often leads project managers and stakeholders to avoid its use (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021). Conflicts of interest, potentially due to a team member's position within the company or vendor, can negatively affect project success (Almajed & Mayhew, 2013). Building a project team that aligns with the project's tasks and goals, based on members' perceptions, experiences, and skills, may improve success (Abreu & Nunes, 2020).

Large-scale complex projects face barriers such as project design, political and legal issues, financial constraints, and technical factors (Rezvani & Khosravi, 2019). Mistrust between project managers and contractors in the construction industry can lead

to irregular information and higher risks (Ceric, 2014; Saaidin et al., 2017). Executives often perceive project management differently than other stakeholders, needing consideration of added risk factors (Liu et al., 2010). These factors, as viewed by executives, include misalignment between organizational culture and needed business process changes, shifts in senior leadership roles, the development of systems without integration into business operations, and political biases (p. 342). Environmental factors also influence project risk and success based on the perspectives of project managers and user liaisons (Liu & Deng, 2015).

In certain industries, such as mining, external non-technical risks—like environmental activism and governmental regulations—can lead to project unpredictability and complications (Fraser et al., 2023). When these risks materialize, projects may experience delays and budget overruns. Therefore, project managers must address these non-technical risks during the planning phase, which may require extended planning periods and broader stakeholder engagement.

Munns and Bjeirmi (1996) proposed the separation of project and project manager success factors to enhance overall project outcomes. While such separation allows for distinct assessments, project managers' psychological engagement is critical; disengagement correlates with project failure (Chaudhry et al., 2019). de Moura et al. (2019) indicated that the personality traits of project managers, influenced by experience and education, significantly affect project success or failure.

Leadership skills are paramount for effective project management. Zimmerer and Yasin (1998) asserted that positive leadership accounts for approximately 76% of project

success, while poor leadership contributes to 67% of project failures. Essential skills for project managers include interviewing, directing, and managing (Jiang et al., 1998).

Emphasizing education in emotional intelligence and risk management is necessary, as many graduates lack these competencies (Hughes et al., 2017; Šandrak Nukić et al., 2022).

Emotional intelligence enhances leadership and team collaboration (Sposito et al., 2023). Dadzie and Sebitla (2023) found that while various skills contribute to project success, many essential competencies are industry-specific rather than unique to project management. McGrath and Kostalova (2020) highlighted a demand for project managers capable of driving organizational change, needing a shift in methodology and a collaborative culture, which El Khatib et al. (2022) further expanded to include operational excellence. The Project Management Institute (PMI) commissioned Turner and Müller (2005) to investigate the impact of project manager leadership styles on project success. Their findings emphasized the importance of project manager competence and the appropriateness of various leadership styles throughout the project lifecycle, particularly in multicultural contexts.

Ika et al. (2022) suggested that research into project management failures has not advanced in 20 years. While Liana et al. (2023) explored the phenomenon of interest in a study of digital transformation project failures in Africa, the reasons for digital transformation project failures are not known. In addition, there is no consensus on the definition of project failure, nor on the relationship between causes of failure and project types (Pinto & Mantel, 1990).

Problem Statement

Digital transformation project failure rates are negatively affecting U.S. companies. The trillions of dollars being spent on digital transformation are at risk when the failure rates are 66% to 84% (Koczerga, 2024; Oludapo et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). When a company loses money due to project failure, the financial loss must be covered elsewhere in the organization. The social problem of a company wasting money due to project failure extends to employees, as this could lead to an employee layoff, which would affect people, their families, and communities. While Liana et al. (2023) explored the phenomenon of interest in a study of digital transformation project failures in Africa, the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers are not known. The research problem is that while researchers have investigated this issue, the topic has not been explored by considering the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. As a result, project managers lack insight into why more than half of these projects fail, limiting their ability to implement effective solutions to reduce obstacles and improve their success rates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for digital transformation project failures from the perspective of the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. The result of this study could provide valuable insights into project managers' lived experiences related to digital transformation failures, providing practitioners with the knowledge necessary to develop ideas for reducing

digital transformation failure rates and academics with new areas to explore within the literature.

Research Question

The research question was, what are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers?

Conceptual Framework

One model that grounded this study is Lewin's (1947) 3-stage change management model, which focuses specifically on the concept of the impact of individual and group dynamics on change implementation. The 3-step change management model consists of these stages: unfreezing a specific set of existing behaviors, changing those behaviors to something new, and refreezing the new behavior(s). Lewin's change model framework provided a context for examining the change management implications of the study findings based on U.S. project managers' lived experiences of the reasons for digital transformation project failures. Additional components of the conceptual framework were Correani et al.'s (2020) digital transformation implementation model, Herzberg's 2-factor theory of motivation-hygiene (Herzberg et al., 1993), and systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). These additional models are important because digital transformation projects reach across the organization with stakeholders from various departments. I discuss each of the four components of the conceptual framework in more detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

To address the phenomenon of digital transformation project failure, I used a descriptive phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell and Báez (2021), a phenomenological study involves collecting data from Báez explored the lived experiences of U.S. project managers related to the phenomenon of digital transformation project failure.

Veith (2023) stated that the United States will spend over \$1 trillion on digital transformation projects. I explored the phenomenon of digital transformation projects through the lens of U.S. project managers' lived experiences. To do this, I conducted audio recorded, semistructured interviews with each of the study participants and analyzed the collected data using thematic analysis (Kiger & Varpio, 2020) to determine the study findings.

Definitions

C-suite: A group of individuals employed by an organization that has a title starting with the word, chief (Kelly, 2014). Examples include but are not limited to chief executive officer, chief operating officer, chief financial officer, chief technology officer, chief information officer, chief human resources officer, and chief cyber security officer.

Digital transformation: A fundamental change process enabled by the innovative use of digital technologies accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities, aiming to radically improve an entity and redefine its value proposition for its stakeholders (Gong & Ribiere, 2021, p. 12).

Project manager: A method of directing and coordinating labor and other tangible resources throughout the life of a project by using up-to-date management techniques to achieve the desired targets in terms of scope, cost, time, quality, and the satisfaction of all participants (Davidov et al., 2023, p. 138).

Project Management Institute: A global authority in project management, committed to advancing the project management profession. This organization tests and certifies project management professionals (PMPs; [pmi.org/about](https://www.pmi.org/about)).

Assumptions

Researchers need to be clear about the assumptions of the study, which are aspects of the study that cannot be established as fact (Peoples, 2021). One assumption in this study was that the participants who attended the scheduled interview were the same individuals who agreed to participate in the study. A second assumption was that the participants would answer interview questions honestly and speak to the truth of events based on their lived experiences with the study phenomenon.

Scope and Delimitations

In this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study, I explored U.S. project managers' lived experiences with digital transformation project failure to understand the reasons for those failures. I delimited the study by choosing project managers within the United States who have a minimum of 5 years of project management experience, are certified professional project managers, and have managed at least one failed digital transformation project.

Another delimitation was that I selected digital transformation project failure; however, project failure rates are high across industries (Rivera & Kashiwagi, 2016). An additional delimitation was studying the lived experiences of project managers across industries and throughout the United States. There are various other stakeholders assigned to projects, but project management has the ownership of success or failure (Barbara & Dorota, 2020; Rodriguez-Segura et al., 2016; Sebestyen, 2017).

Limitations

Peoples (2021) suggested limitations within phenomenological studies include time limitations, bias, and small sample size (p. 36). One limitation of this study was the restriction of the geographical location to the United States. Expanding further would have increased the time required to complete the study; due to the limitation of time, the location could not be expanded outside the United States. The small sample size of 15, assuming data saturation, was limited due to financial commitment. To mitigate this limitation and enhance the quality of the findings, I continued to collect and analyze additional data by interviewing participants until data saturation occurred.

My professional background includes being a certified professional project manager for 15 years. To mitigate potential bias, I documented reflexive comments in a journal about my experiences related to those of participants. These actions helped mitigate any effect of my personal biases when my experience aligned with the participants.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it could contribute to positive social change by adding to the limited research on the reasons for the high failure rates of digital transformation projects; thus, enabling managers to take actions designed to lower those rates. Although researchers have investigated this issue, the topic has not been explored in this way. Liana et al. (2023) explored the phenomenon of interest in a study of digital transformation project failures in Africa. However, the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers are not known.

Significance to Practice

The United States alone will spend over \$1 trillion in 2025 (Veith, 2023). However, 66% to 84% of digital transformation projects fail (Almajed & Mayhew, 2013; Correani et al., 2020; Gauld, 2007; Koczerga, 2024; Oludapo et al., 2024; Robert, 1997; Wade & Shan, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). There is a significant economic loss to organizations when digital transformation projects fail. This study's results may help those organizations embark on new or revitalized digital transformation projects by understanding what causes failure. Project managers leading digital transformation projects may also benefit from the results of this study by applying them to reduce the risk of failure.

Significance to Theory

An obvious way to increase project success in digital transformation is to understand the reasons for failure. This study's results may contribute to the research into project management failures, which Ika et al. (2022) suggested has not advanced in 20

years. Understanding why digital transformation projects fail through the lived experiences of project managers may also contribute to project management methodologies by offering insight into the reasons for failure. Project managers can incorporate this knowledge into project risk assessments, allowing them to mitigate the risk of digital transformation project failures.

Significance to Social Change

This study's results could contribute to positive social change by adding to the limited research on the reasons for the high failure rates of digital transformation projects. Organizations that understand the reasons for failure could enable managers to take actions designed to lower those rates. Increasing the chance for success in digital transformation projects could reduce costs related to project failure and make the company's products more competitive, thus benefiting the company and its employees due to higher profitability and its customers due to higher-quality products.

Summary and Transition

Digital transformation projects have a high failure rate that has significant cost implications for organizations. In an effort to avoid costly project failures, organizations should understand the root cause of those failures. For 37 years, the key phrase, *critical success factors*, has been in the top 10 researched keywords, yet there continues to be a high rate of failure (Abbasi & Jaafari, 2018). Identifying common themes of project failure in digital transformation based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers may provide new insight into the reasons for such failures.

The conceptual framework for this study included Lewin's (1947) 3-stage change management model. Applying this model consists of freezing existing processes, making improvements, and then unfreezing. I explored this model in detail in Chapter 2. To address the phenomenon of digital transformation project failure, I used a descriptive phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) research design in this study.

Chapter 2 consists of a thorough review of the literature on the topics of project management failures and digital transformation. Various project management topics are reviewed along with alignment to digital transformation projects. The chapter is divided into three sections: (a) literature search strategy, (b) conceptual framework, and (c) literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Global digital transformation spending is estimated to reach \$3.4 trillion in the year 2026 (Veith, 2023). The forecast is that the United States alone will spend over \$1 trillion in 2025. However, 66% to 84% of digital transformation projects fail (Koczerga, 2024; Oludapo et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). The research problem for this study is the lack of knowledge about reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. While Liana et al. (2023) explored the phenomenon of interest in a study of digital transformation project failures in Africa, the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers are not well-known. Because previous research leaves a knowledge gap about why U.S. digital transformation projects have a high failure rate, project managers lack insight into why more than half of these projects fail, limiting their ability to implement effective solutions to reduce obstacles and improve their success rates. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for digital transformation project failures from the perspective of the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. In this chapter, I provide an explanation of the literature search strategy used to complete an exhaustive review of the literature, a description of the conceptual framework for the study, and an exhaustive literature review followed by a summary and conclusion section.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched for peer-reviewed articles from the years 1900 to 2024 using online library resources. The databases explored included JSTOR, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect,

and Walden Library (EBSCO). Additionally, I used Google Scholar to locate open-access articles. To limit the search for articles relevant to this study, keywords used included the following: *digital transformation, digital strategy, digital transformation success, digital transformation failures, causes of digital transformation failures, digital impact, iron triangle, project management, failure, project managers, project management failure history, success, project management success, IT success, IT failure, project risk, risk management in projects, formal project management, informal project management, effective project management, American project management, stakeholders, competence, project management perception, project management tools, emotional intelligence, behavior in projects, motivation, leadership, leadership traits, motivate project teams, motivate project managers, stakeholder project perception, leadership project management, project forecasting, project planning, project team perception, personality traits, agile, agile methodology, agile project management, executive project perception, C-suite definition, C-suite 1.0, C-suite 2.0, C-suite 3.0, user perceptions, project performance measurement, key performance indicators, factors, Kurt Lewin, Herzberg two-factor theory, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, systems theory, systems thinking, motivation theory, change management, psychological bias, bias, gender bias, group change, project overrun, work breakdown structure, WBS, perception, individual change, Lewin change model, Lewin 3-step model, Project Management Institute, planning fallacy, project management outcomes, and project status reports*. I applied variations of these terms in various searches to ensure a comprehensive search leading to diverse results.

Conceptual Framework

Lewin's (1947) 3-stage change management model focuses on the concept of the impact of individual and group dynamics on change. The 3-step change management model consists of unfreezing a specific set of existing behaviors, changing those behaviors to something new, and refreezing the new behavior(s). Lewin was not naïve enough to believe all operational tasks could be frozen and unfrozen at the same time. Organizational systems exist before and after the change. Lewin also believed that behavior is a function of the person and the environment (Crosby, 2021).

In addition to Lewin's (1947) 3-step change model framework, three other models were included in the conceptual framework of this study. Correani et al. (2020) offered a digital transformation implementation model, motivators for individuals from Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation-hygiene (Herzberg et al., 1993), and organization complexity from systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). First, the Correani et al. model offers data elements that play a vital role in the digital strategy implementation. The implementation strategy for this research is equivalent to the project management of digital transformation.

The Correani et al. (2020) model begins with the scope as the foundation of the project. It includes objectives of the project, deliverables, measurements, stakeholders, agreements, and the like. Processes and procedures encompass the entirety of a project because modifications or new processes may appear based on other building blocks. Internal and external data are another critical supporting factor that may inform an organization on how an external client may be using products and services. In the case of

the data platform, this is a technical system that could be internal to the organization or used by an external resource to obtain data. The data platform includes artificial intelligence and information and knowledge, as it is the digital component of transformation. The people concept is above the data blocks because managing a digital transformation project will impact on all areas of the organization's business operations. Managing a digital transformation project could create new roles in the organization or require new skills for which employees will need special training. Beneath the data block are partners, which represent the support provided by others, such as software or service vendors.

Motivating a project manager is critical to the overall success of the project (Pankratz & Basten, 2018). Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation-hygiene (Herzberg et al., 1993) introduces two concepts: the first is motivators, which are intrinsic and may lead to job satisfaction; the second is hygiene, which are extrinsic and may lead to "interpersonal dissatisfaction" (p. xii) if not adequate. Intrinsic motivators include the individual having some control over their job, personal growth through achievement, interesting work, and the freedom to be creative within their professional roles (p. 82). According to Herzberg et al. (1993), key workplace hygiene factors include management practices, relationships, compensation, and organizational conditions (p. 113). An individual may be motivated to perform their role because they find it interesting work (intrinsic factor) but dissatisfied with their salary or other extrinsic factors (Herzberg et al., 1993).

Ludwig von Bertalanffy defined systems theory in the late 1920s (von Bertalanffy, 1972, p. 410). In his original work, which he developed when studying biology, von Bertalanffy stated, “The chief task of biology must be to discover the laws of biological systems at all levels of organization” (p. 410). Later, he elaborated on his original work, stating, “The properties and modes of action of higher levels are not explicable by the summation of the properties and modes of action of their components taken in isolation” (p. 412). While von Bertalanffy stated the idea that a system is more than the sum of its parts, the concept dates back to Aristotle (Botla, 2009). An organization is a system; it has various departments, processes, procedures, employees, customers, and so forth that make up the single entity. The process of a project manager implementing a digital transformation project may cross all areas of the organization.

Literature Review

Oludapo et al. (2024) conducted a bibliometric analysis to address the continuing issue of high digital transformation failure rates. The authors examined 120 scholarly articles published over a 28-year period using inductive thematic analysis to uncover themes related to digital transformation failures. This approach allowed them to identify recurring challenges organizations face when attempting to implement transformative digital initiatives.

Through their analysis, Oludapo et al. (2024) identified four common themes that recur throughout the literature on digital transformation challenges: technology, innovation, management, and information systems (p. 9). However, the authors also

highlighted a critical gap in the body of research: while many studies focus on organizational, cultural, and leadership-related factors, there is a noticeable lack of in-depth exploration into the core technological issues underlying digital transformation failures (p. 14). Specifically, the technological infrastructure, systems, and processes that form the foundation of digital transformation efforts may be overlooked. This omission leaves a significant gap in understanding and addressing the root causes of failure.

Alzghaibi (2023) investigated failure factors within large-scale electronic health record (EHR) implementation by conducting semistructured interviews with project team members. Alzghaibi sought to uncover specific factors that blocked the successful adoption of the system. Based on the data collected, the author identified three primary themes contributing to the failure: lack of connectivity, inadequate technical support, and frequent staff turnover (p. 19). These findings identify the importance of stable and integrated technological infrastructure, as well as consistent management of people, in ensuring the success of complex digital projects. It is important to note that this study excluded project managers from the participant pool, which may have limited insights into higher-level decision-making and planning processes. This exclusion of individuals who play a key role raises questions and suggests that further research is necessary.

Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) conducted a systematic literature review to investigate and classify the barriers to digital transformation in higher education institutions (HEIs). Their aim was to provide a clear understanding of the obstacles HEIs face when implementing digital transformation initiatives. The authors initially identified 768 articles related to their research questions. However, after applying specific inclusion

criteria, such as focusing on barriers, challenges, and obstacles to digital transformation implementation, offering theoretical concepts, and centering analyses on these barriers, the pool of articles was reduced to 23. Because of the limited number, the authors conducted an additional review of the selected articles' references, which enabled them to identify 14 additional studies. Ultimately, their systematic approach resulted in a total of 44 articles that met their research criteria. This outcome highlights a gap in literature specific to the researcher's topic, with only 6% of the initially identified articles addressing barriers and challenges for digital transformation projects in HEIs.

From their analysis, Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) identified 20 distinct barriers to digital transformation in HEIs. Among the most commonly reported were a lack of digital literacy, resistance to change and risk aversion, inadequate IT infrastructure, and budgetary constraints (p. 20). These barriers reflect a complex set of challenges that institutions face, ranging from technical and financial limitations to human and cultural factors. The second research question in the article was focused on how the barriers could be categorized. The authors were able to categorize the barriers into six groups: (a) environmental, (b) strategic, organizational, technological, people-related, and cultural (pp. 16–20). This classification provides a structured framework for understanding the various factors that can hinder digital transformation efforts in HEIs. For example, environment-related barriers may include external factors such as government policies or societal expectations (p. 16), while people-related barriers encompass individual-level challenges like resistance to change and skill gaps (p. 19).

The findings by Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) highlight the challenges faced by HEIs in adopting and adapting to digital transformation. The lack of adequate IT infrastructure and budgetary constraints are problematic, as they directly affect the ability of organizations to invest in and maintain the necessary technologies for digital transformation (p. 16). Also, resistance to change and a lack of digital literacy among faculty and staff highlight the human element of these challenges, emphasizing the importance of adopting a culture of openness and continuous learning (p. 19). The authors' categorization of barriers provides a valuable roadmap for HEIs seeking to address these obstacles thoroughly. By identifying specific areas of weakness, organizations can design their strategies to overcome these barriers, such as targeted training programs, improved infrastructure, or strategic planning and resource allocation. Gkrimpizi et al. also highlight the need for further research because the small proportion of articles that met the authors' criteria indicates a lack of focused academic attention on the barriers to digital transformation. While it is important to understand digital transformation failures, it is equally important to explore literature around project management.

Project management requires expertise, methodologies, tools, and strategies to execute a sequence of tasks that provide value to the organization and reach required objectives. In 2019, archeologists located two logs with carved notches that interlocked in Zambia, Africa (Barham et al., 2023). The logs were 427,000 years old and believed to be part of a structure (Barham et al., 2023). Building a structure would require expertise, method, tools, and a strategy. Considering this example, it is possible to theorize that

project management existed 427,000 years ago. While the reason for this literature review is not to trace the history of project management, it is important to understand its historical significance. In addition, in this section, I critically analyze, compare, contrast, synthesize, and summarize the scholarly literature related to the topic of this research: the high rate of failure in digital transformation projects in the United States.

History of Project Management

In the early 20th century, Karol Adamiecki, an engineer from Poland, developed the Harmonogram, a tool to visualize the scheduling and coordination of tasks in complex projects (Marsh, 2017; Morris, 2013). Unfortunately, the literature is not clear on why the Harmonogram took longer to adopt outside Poland and Russia (Marsh, 2017); however, Henry Gantt also designed a visual tool, the Gantt Chart, used for project scheduling and management around the same time (Kabeyi, 2019; McFarland, 2002; Morris, 2013).

In the mid-20th century, specifically around 1951, the United States Air Force included departments, Research and Design, and Material Command. The 'Weapons Systems Project Office' had oversight of each department, serving as a crucial link between the two (Johnson, 1997; Morris, 2013). This was the first known project office, which may be comparable to a Project Management Office in today's standards (Morris, 2013). In 1953, Martin and McDonnell Aircraft companies established the first formal position of project manager (Johnson, 1997; Stretton, 2023). In 1954, Brigadier Bernard Schriever received an appointment to the Western Development Division (WDD) within the United States Air Force (Morris, 2013; Neufeld, 2004). In 1955, Shriever implemented processes to streamline and improve development on his assigned rocket

projects. It was the first project where a project manager had authorization for the technical and budgetary tasks (Morris, 2013). In the same year, the Navy and Army had been working together on a different rocket program; the two were competing for command. The Special Projects Office (SPO) was created in 1955 and led by Admiral William Raborn to unite the efforts between the Navy and Army (Bresnen, 2015; Johnson, 1997; Morris, 2013). The SPO was comparable to a Project Management Office.

In the late 20th century, more military departments and civilian organizations were incorporating project management into their organizational structure. As the topic of project management grew, so did the need for tracking and reporting. Between 1958 and 1962, the SPO created the Planning and Evaluation Review Technique (PERT) (Abbasi & Jaafari, 2018; Johnson, 1997, 2013; Kabeyi, 2019). This technique allows project managers to track progress and validate the project schedule. Dupont engineers developed the Critical Path Method (CPM). CPM identifies the task with the longest timeline in the project plan, which facilitates accurate scheduling (Johnson, 2013; Morris, 2013). The expansion of project management persisted, yet the United States encountered difficulties within the defense sector. These difficulties created a new idea which focused on the people element of project management.

The U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense developed the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) in 1971 with the intention of standardizing training for managing projects (Acker, 1986; Gadeken, 2015). The DSMC is the largest school within the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), and it has offered program management

courses for over 50 years. Advancements in project management continued during the 1980s. Eliyahu M. Goldratt introduced the theory of constraint (TOC) in his book published in 1984, *The Goal*. The theory identified by Goldratt and Cox (1984) assisted project managers in identifying a constraint that limited project advancement (Kabeyi, 2019). For example, the production of a widget requires completion of a set of tasks. If delivery from an international vendor for a component delays the next task, then it is a constraint. While Goldratt and Cox (1984) referred to the manufacturing industry, the theory is used across industries. As time progresses, additional project management methodologies emerge and mature.

The PMI, founded in 1969, released the first white paper that led to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) in 1987 (Kabeyi, 2019; Morris, 2013; Webster, 1994). The PMBOK is currently in the seventh edition as of this writing. The Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) created a project methodology in 1989 named PRINCE (Kabeyi, 2019). This methodology was built upon a previous method, the Project Resource Organization Management Planning Technique (PROMPTII), which the United Kingdom government used the method for information system projects (Kabeyi, 2019). The second iteration of PRINCE, developed in 1996 (named PRINCE2), expanded its usage outside of information systems (Albert et al., 2017; Kabeyi, 2019). Goldratt expanded his contribution into project management and introduced critical chain project management (CCPM) in his book published in 1996, *The Critical Chain* (Rand, 2000).

As the 21st century approached, standard methodologies were gaining maturity, and new methods such as agile project management were introduced (Hohl et al., 2018; Kabeyi, 2019). If PMI meets the standard requirements of releasing a revised version, the non-profit will release 25 editions of the PPBOK during the 21st century. Project management continues to shift at a rapid pace. As a result, new and updated methods, tracking tools, measurement methods, and the like impact the discipline. History and technology provided the opportunity for project management to advance, yet the success rate continues to be low.

Failure and Success in Project Management

Researchers have widely investigated the low success rates within digital transformation projects. Over a 37-year span, critical success factors were in the top 10 searched keywords by researchers (Abbasi & Jaafari, 2018). The data for this keyword suggests that authors did not primarily focus on understanding why the projects failed. The top three keyword search categories included construction management, construction industry, and risk management.

Padalkar and Gopinath (2016) found that 60% of the literature focused on key drivers of project outcomes and effectiveness (p. 1315). Literature reviewed across 15 years from 2000 to 2015 identified that future research themes in project management should include schedule controls, knowledge, communication, and risk management. Low success rates would imply that these topics may be critical factors needed to increase project management success.

The high rate of project failure is not unique to digital transformation projects. As stated previously, there is extensive research on project management within the construction industry. The construction industry spends an estimated \$4 to \$12 billion per year to resolve disputes and claims in the supply chain. Despite this, there has been little improvement over the last 3 to 6 decades (Rivera & Kashiwagi, 2016). In short, project management has a costly impact across industries.

The annual estimated spend on digital transformation is \$1.3 trillion (Ramesh & Delen, 2021). The rate of project failure between 66% and 84% informs academics and practitioners that a gap continues to exist in the literature and project management standards (Almajed & Mayhew, 2013; Correani et al., 2020; Gauld, 2007; Robert, 1997; Wade & Shan, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). According to three case studies performed by Ramesh and Delen (2021), the timing of digital transformation projects is the key to a successful launch. Introducing new technologies can either expand the capabilities of individuals engaged in business processes or diminish the necessity for human involvement. It can also bring business to a halt because the timing was wrong. For example, if an organization experiences the largest growth in the fourth quarter year after year, implementing new technology during that time would increase the likelihood of failure not only for the organization but also for its customers and vendors.

The Iron Triangle continues to be a standard measurement 55 years after its introduction. Dr. Martin Barnes developed the Iron Triangle, also called the Triple Constraint, in 1969 (Albert et al., 2017; Pollack et al., 2018). The triangle represents three constraints, time, cost, and quality, which may affect a project. Dr. Barnes (2007) stated,

“I invented a triangle to illustrate the point with time, cost, and quality at the corner. On the overhead projector, I moved a coin around the triangle to show how the three tensions competed . . .” (p. 1). The triangle represents that if a project manager moves the timeline of the project, then another point in the triangle must also shift. If the project manager delays a project, then it would impact on costs. The scope of the Iron Triangle has limitations in the sense that moving the timeline may not shift the cost (Atkinson, 1999). However, expanding the Iron Triangle to include customer satisfaction and relationship quality in project success may provide a holistic measure of success (Williams et al., 2015). Applying the Iron Triangle to the measurement of project performance suggests that poor planning, ineffective scheduling, and disorganized financials would have a direct impact on success or failure. In other words, inappropriate planning of a project or inappropriate management of the financials is likely to result in failure of the overall project (Hai Nguyen, 2020).

The organization or project structure could impact the success or failure of a project. Organizations offering a matrix organizational design allow a project manager to have more control (Might & Fischer, 1985). Like Might and Fischer (1985), Belassi and Icmeli Tukel (1996) found that a matrix approach better supports projects. Matrixed organizations, when balanced, have the capability of supporting more complex projects (de Laat, 1994).

Project impact can come from any area in the organization. It may not depend on project team members, vendors, customers, and so forth. Executive team members are not exempt from impacting projects within the organization. Al-Abrow et al. (2019)

suggested that narcissistic behavior from the chief executive officer has a negative impact on project success. Flyvbjerg (2021) argued that this is a strategic misrepresentation, as narcissistic behavior is a power bias. Project success also has a dependency on stakeholder involvement (Barbara & Dorota, 2020; Rodriguez-Segura et al., 2016; Sebestyen, 2017). Stakeholders are not necessarily equivalent to organization employees. Stakeholders could include customers when implementing a customer relationship management solution. The project may include a voluntary customer pilot program where the project team obtains feedback about the user experience. If this situation were to occur, then the stakeholder would become a project team member.

According to Frese and Sauter (2014), there are three critical success factors in project management: (a) accurate planning, (b) defined responsibility and accountability, and (c) schedule control (p. 126). Researchers completed a study and found that low-performing teams with high-cost projects had a higher success rate than participants in high-performing low-cost projects. This is the opposite of the expected outcome given the high-performing team. The authors suggested that low performers exhibited more openness and engagement in their communication (Brown et al., 1990). The literature clearly shows a gap in the definition of success and failure. While there are consistencies across studies, the same is true for inconsistencies. There is a potential connection between project success and failure and any person, process, or thing in an organization.

Perception of Success and Failure

The perception of project success or failure is in the eye of the beholder. How a person perceives the success or failure of a project is based on their experiences or the

way in which they process information throughout the project. Belassi and Icmeli Tukul (1996) argued that a gap in the literature existed for measuring project success or failure. The authors suggested that the reason for this gap was the complexity of defining success or failure.

Researchers completed a study to identify project teams' perceptions of the most important critical success factors. The project team identified 'process' as the most important critical success factor (White & Leifer, 1986). Nelson (2008) expanded on these results to include people as critical success factors in IT projects. The author continued to identify 10 major information technology failures, each resulting in over \$100 million in losses. Project managers' perception of critical success factors includes setting project goals, project scope definition, and project mission (Pinto & Prescott, 1988; Pinto & Slevin, 1987). Project failure research does not agree on the definition of failure, and it lacks identifying a possible relationship between the cause of failure and the type of project (Pinto & Mantel, 1990). However, Pinto and Mantel (1990) identified two components that can predict failure: project scheduling and troubleshooting.

Project teams include members from different areas of the organization as well as external resources. The team members have different perceptions of project success or failures based on their experiences (Ika & Pinto, 2022). Team members will have different perceptions of the project outcomes. Project managers and stakeholders may avoid using the term failure because of the negative connotation implied (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021). A chief information officer has suggested that conflict of interest would have a negative impact on project success (Almajed & Mayhew, 2013). A conflict

of interest in project management could be due to a team member's position within the company or vendor. A contributor to project success may start at the beginning, during the project team creation. Based on perceptions, experiences, skills, and so forth, building a project team that aligns with the tasks and objectives of the project may improve success (Abreu & Nunes, 2020). Hussein (2019) recommended categorizing success factors by interviewing project team members and using those success factors to predict success or failure before starting the project.

A review of existing literature specifically focused on project failure rates in digital transformation resulted in an 87.5% failure rate for digital transformation projects (Wade & Shan, 2020). According to Uchihira and Eimura (2021), six factors believed to lead to failure of digital transformation projects are information, experience gap, incompatible evaluation criteria, conflict of interest, perception gap of the future, and lack of mutual trust (pp. 16-3–16-4).

Amoah et al. (2020) surveyed 1,893 participants of the South African Government social housing project to identify project failures. As a result of their quantitative study, they identified poor planning, poor project control, insufficient stakeholder consultations, poor communication, and a lack of understanding of participant requirements, such as home size, as reasons for project failure. In the United States, e-Government projects fail approximately 85% of the time. When this happens publicly, and tax dollars fund the project, the failure is highlighted (Aladwani, 2016). The literature on the root cause of government failed projects aligns with academic studies for non-government projects (Aladwani, 2016).

Aranyossy et al. (2018) compared U.S. project failures to projects performed in Hungary. Between the two countries, the critical failure factors include stakeholder management, top management support, and project planning. There are 5,373 miles between the United States and Hungary; yet the distance, culture, history, language, and so forth do not change the commonalities in project management failure. A survey of over 3,000 information and communication technology project managers in Spain resulted in critical success and failure factors that align with the existing literature (Montequin et al., 2014). Eyiah-Botwe et al. (2019) researched how stakeholder management can improve construction projects within the developing country of Ghana. Like the United States and Hungary, improvement of stakeholder management could improve public-private project outcomes in Ghana (Eyiah-Botwe et al., 2019). The academic literature of the United States, Hungary, Spain, and Ghana aligns when it comes to project failure and success.

Lean Six Sigma (LSS) projects have a standard structure based on Six Sigma methodology. There are multiple phases to LSS, which include define, measure, analyze, improve, and control. Like other project types, there are different phases in which failure can occur. In a study completed in 2022, Antony et al. (2022) identified that the measure and analysis phases were the greatest areas of concern. Thamhain (2004) suggested managers can control the environment for team members through the implementation of tools like the LSS project management process. This would encourage the development of team members while providing a pre-defined structure and methodology for projects.

Kiselev et al. (2020) analyzed 15 large, failed IT-related projects using the case study methodology to identify success factors outside of project management. The study

resulted in findings that project governance failed due to contextual challenges not addressed prior to turning the project over to project management. Two years later, Zaman et al. (2022) conducted a study to identify the link between project governance, leadership style, and success. The specific leadership style in this study was exploitative, suggesting the project managers focused on individual outcomes, allowing them to appear superior over other project team members. The authors identified a negative connection between poor performance and exploitative leadership, while project governance had a positive impact on success. These results suggest that the project manager and project governance may have an equal effect on project success or failure.

Large-scale complex projects have barriers to success, including project design and implementation, political and legal, financial, and technical factors (Rezvani & Khosravi, 2019). There have been a variety of frameworks to assist with project success. Systems theory would identify deeper relationships between risk and critical success factors (Fortune & White, 2006), giving project teams a holistic view of the project.

Ika et al. (2022) stated that project management researchers have been trying to identify the reason for cost overruns for the last 20 years (p. 3310). Tiwana and McLean (2003) suggested that cost overruns cost companies around \$22 billion annually (p. 345). Planning fallacy comes from an optimistic outlook on project estimates, often leading to underestimating the time needed for completion and resulting in overruns. Love et al. (2022) suggested that some overruns occurred because of optimism bias in project managers, influencing their decision-making. These biases lead project managers to underestimate the time, effort, and resources necessary for task and project completion

(Flyvbjerg, 2013). Optimism bias can go beyond the planning stage and have a deeper impact (Kutsch et al., 2011). Planning is dependent on the type of project; project costs will be more accurate if project managers ensure that project team members participate in and validate the documentation of the planning stage (Zwikael & Gilchrist, 2023).

Project managers' perceptions of communication risk are due to a mistrust between project managers and contractors within the construction industry (Ceric, 2014). This mistrust creates irregular information, negatively impacting the project. Project managers are responsible for the project once a contract is signed. Due to this, project managers do not have exposure to verbal commitments between parties made prior to the contract signing. As a result, the project manager would not include the verbal commitments from the contract language while building the scope of the project, thereby limiting the chance of success. A verbal commitment may be as innocent as a delivery date, but there could be a financial penalty clause in the contract for 'delayed' projects. If a project manager is unaware of the delivery commitment, the project and financial risk are higher. Saaidin et al. (2017) found that the project manager's perception of project risk to project success between the client and the contract could be financial. Project managers who fail to address the risk within projects create a larger impact on the organization by limiting profit margins.

Portuguese project managers identified that project planning and control injected into the national culture would improve success (Rodrigues et al., 2014). However, Koops et al. (2016) studied the public project manager perception of project success, building upon a study focused on Dutch project managers. Koops et al. concluded that,

regardless of the national culture studied, project managers' perspectives on the most important criteria in project management align with the Iron Triangle, budget, time, and quality; in addition, participants included safety. These results suggest that, rather than building project planning and control into the culture in Portugal, standardizing measurement practice may advance project success.

There is extensive literature on whether success factors for information systems (IS) projects align with other project types (Basten et al., 2011). According to project managers' perception, efficient processes and satisfied customers are important project success measurements. Pankratz and Basten (2018) conducted a study to identify whether IS project success factors impact project success criteria and concluded that project-related motivation is pivotal to success, according to project managers' perceptions. However, including scope, time, cost, and quality negatively impacts motivation (Schmid & Adams, 2008). Based on project managers' perception, clear and consistent communication and early project team involvement are the key to motivation.

Project Risk Associated With Success and Failure

Executives within organizations may view project management from a different perspective than other stakeholders. When comparing executive perception to project managers' perception, considering additional risk factors is necessary (Liu et al., 2010). These additional risk factors based on executive perception include misalignment between organizational culture and business process changes required as part of the project, shift in roles at senior leadership levels, building systems without considering business operations, and political bias (p. 342). According to Kelly (2014), the C-suite

has changed since the 1990s, requiring the addition of “functional specialists.” Kelly refers to this as “C-suite 2.0” (p. 114). The individuals in specialized chief roles are experts in their field. For example, to resolve an assembly line problem, an executive functional specialist, the chief operations officer responsible for the assembly line, and an employee specialist who understands the impact of the issue operationally would work together to resolve the problem. Kelly also highlighted that C-suite leadership buy-in and support are the most important factors for successful initiatives. Environmental factors can impact the risk and success of a project according to perceptions of project managers and user liaisons (Liu & Deng, 2015).

Project risk requires identification and mitigation at the front end of the project. According to perceptions of project managers and users, if a project manager does not address risks such as scope change, conflict, misaligned skills, staffing, inaccurate requirements, poor user engagement, and unidentified roles and responsibilities, then projects have an increased chance of failure (Keil et al., 2002). Addressing project risks does not guarantee a successful project. Kumar Gupta et al. (2019) identified a theme of risk mitigation strategies for project failures in the literature (p. 283). When organizations incorporate risk management into their operations, projects have better outcomes (Kuczyńska & Nepelski, 2021).

There are acceptable measures when it comes to risk management. In 1992, George H. W. Bush appointed Daniel Goldin to the position of Administrator of NASA. Goldin was the longest-serving Administrator at NASA; he served between 1992 and 2001. During his tenure, he introduced a concept, faster-better-cheaper. The idea was to

produce smaller projects that were less costly but provided better results (Roy, 1998). Theoretically, the risk is acceptable because it is smaller, because resources and budget become dispersed across multiple small projects. Thus, should one fail, the organization does not suffer a total loss (Paté-Cornell & Dillon, 2001).

Risk can come from external factors in some industries; this means the risk becomes unpredictable to a project manager. The concept of non-technical risks in project management specific to the mining industry may include environmental activists, federal or state governments, communities, and so forth (Fraser et al., 2023). When non-technical risks become active, projects become stalled, go over budget, and cause delays. During the planning phase, project managers must address the external non-technical risks. This may require longer planning time, additional outreach beyond the organization, and public meetings.

Publicized Project Management Failures

Throughout time, there have been epic public failures across industries. The planned opening for Denver International Airport was sometime in October of 1993. The project, which was to consist of 120 gates and 6 runways, expandable to 12 for future growth, had a budget of \$1.7 billion. In February of 1995, the airport opened, the cost was \$5 billion, with the number of gates reduced from 120 to 88 and only five runways (Szyliowicz & Goetz, 1995). The root cause of the failed project was decision-making; however, project planning failed in a variety of areas, such as budget, scope, and quality. The lack of proper planning resulted in an abandoned baggage claim system costing \$175.6 million (Lukaitis & Cybulski, 2005). The definition of bandit decisions is “a class

of decision-making problems that involve choosing one action from a set. In terms of project management, the firm selects from several alternative IT projects, each with its own distribution of risks and rewards” (Chulkov & Desai, 2005, p. 135). Bandit decision-making may have helped the Denver International Airport project if the risks and rewards were identified holistically in lieu of individual project evaluations.

Project failures come in various sizes and costs, but when governmental agencies fail, it becomes a public discussion. For example, in 1990, the California Division of Motor Vehicles invested \$14.8 million in an attempt to consolidate computer systems. Although the project received negative public attention, it continued for 2 more years resulting in an additional \$34.6 million in spending.

Shore (2008) studied systematic bias in project failures; one case study cited was the Mars Orbiter and Mars Polar Lander. The \$125 million Orbiter project failure was due to a miscommunication between two teams. Lockheed used pounds as a measurement during the design process; however, NASA scientists assumed the measurement was in metric units. Shore (2008) defined “the project culture...required that engineers prove that something was wrong rather than ‘prove that everything was right’” (p. 10). The Mars Polar Lander also failed within months, resulting in a loss of \$165 million (Shore, 2008).

Target Corporation also had a significant failure in 2013 when it launched its first international expansion project. According to Megits and Schuster (2015), the problems fell into seven categories: supply chain management, impact of Canadian laws, data integrity, pricing strategy, culture and consumer behavior, marketing strategy, and local

Canadian competitor (pp. 3–5). Target Canada lost over \$1.4 billion by June 10, 2014, when the official announcement to shut down international locations was released on YouTube (p. 9). Expanding into a new market requires research, planning, coordination, decision-making, and all the other basic project management functions of a megaproject.

Decision-making at all levels within an organization can be challenging.

Individuals at any level could make a decision that results in catastrophic consequences.

Whyte (1991) recommended that groups and people employ a decision framework that includes the following:

1. Training.
2. Don't Immediately React with your First Impulse.
3. Employ Multiple Frames.
4. Encourage Multiple Framing by Rewarding It.
5. Conduct Some Early-Stage Deliberations in the Absence of the Group Leader.
6. Attempt to Identify the Appropriate Decision Frame.
7. Selection. (pp. 28–30).

Project managers can incorporate a decision framework into the project for the project team to use when making decisions.

Project Manager's Skillset

Munns and Bjeirmi (1996) suggested separating the success and failure factors of the project and the project manager for improved success. They argued that projects and project management overlap and that one can be successful without the other. While this separation of project and project manager could measure project success or failure

separately, the project manager will be impacted. Psychological effects on project managers engaged in client projects could have a negative impact on the level of engagement (Chaudhry et al., 2019). When a project manager disengages from a project, success is unlikely. However, de Moura et al. (2019) found that personality traits of the project managers based on years of experience or higher education could lead to project success or failure.

Project managers must have leadership skills to effectively manage a team. Zimmerer and Yasin (1998) stated that “positive leadership contributes almost 76% to the success of a project” (p. 37); however, “...negative or poor leadership contributes 67% to the failure of projects” (p. 37). The IS managers prioritized interviewing, directing, and managing skills for project managers (Jiang et al., 1998). Leadership skills have more than 50% impact on the outcome of a project; they should be at the forefront of educating project managers. Additional education may include training the project manager in emotional intelligence and project risk. Šandrak Nukić et al. (2022) identified these two items as lacking in a group of students who would be graduating soon from a civil engineering program. While soft skills may be lacking in the group of graduates, successful project management requires them (Hughes et al., 2017).

Emotional intelligence can enhance other key skillsets such as leadership and partnering with other teams (Sposito et al., 2023). Dadzie and Sebitla (2023) investigated the influences on selecting project managers within the construction industry. While the research suggests various skillsets for project success, Dadzie and Sebitla (2023) identified factors that influence selection; however, the first 10 skills only included four

pertaining to project managers' skills, the rest were unique to an industry. The four skills included academic qualifications, work experience, project duration, and working effectively with a team. McGrath and Kostalova (2020) stated, "Organizations are looking for a new skillset and competency: somebody who can drive organizational change and lead transformation within the organization" (p. 540). This recommendation requires the organization to shift methodology and mindset, as well as build a culture of collaboration within the organization. This recommendation of collaboration also supports El Khatib et al. (2022); however, these authors expanded the definition of collaboration to include operational excellence as a system. According to the authors, operational excellence frames management as a structured, process-driven system to recognize performance (p. 297). These are organizational transformation skills that have a positive impact on managing projects and could impact success or failure.

Davidov et al. (2023) researched the relationship between published project management knowledge standards, such as PMBOK and PRINCE 2, and the required knowledge for practitioners; the results indicated a need for additional project management knowledge outside of the industry standards. Karanja and Malone (2020) investigated alignment between project management curriculum learning outcomes and Bloom's Taxonomy framework. From their research, they found that 26% of course syllabi lacked learning outcomes (Karanja & Malone, 2020).

After many years of project management standard recommendations and training, there is still a gap in predicting project failure. The introduction of artificial intelligence may provide an opportunity to fill the gap. Researchers conducted an experimental study

to test whether machine learning could predict future failures. The results identified that machine learning, Support Vector Machine, could predict failed project management knowledge area gaps (Desalegn Taye & Alemu Feleke, 2022).

The PMI commissioned Turner and Müller (2005) to determine if project manager leadership style is a success factor in the overall project. The authors stated:

Although the project success literature has, by and large, ignored the project manager (and his or her competence, personality, or leadership style) as a project success factor, much has been written on those subjects. For instance, authors have suggested:

1. The project manager's competence is related to his or her success as a project manager.
2. Different project leadership styles are appropriate at each stage of the project life cycle.
3. Specific leadership styles are appropriate for multi-cultural projects.
4. Project managers have a leadership role in creating an effective working environment for the project team.
5. Project managers prefer task-oriented to people-oriented leadership styles.
6. The project manager's leadership style influences his or her perception of success in different situations. (Turner & Müller, 2005, p. 57)

When evaluating project manager skillsets, a researcher would inquire if those skills could impact the outcome of a project. As previously stated, there are gaps in the education and training of project managers. Geoghegan and Dulewicz (2008) completed a

study that identified a relationship between management qualities such as managing resources, empowering, and developing, and the success of delivering projects. Bredillet et al. (2015) defined a competent project manager: “A ‘good’ PM is a ‘wise’ PM and conversely acts ‘rightly’ or does ‘good’ action in context. That is what a ‘good’ PM is expected to ‘do’ with regard to the purpose s(he) pursues and role s(he) fulfils in this very situation” (p. 264). It is unclear how an organization could hold a project manager accountable for such vague expectations.

When considering skill set and project success, it is essential to consider the organizational hiring process. Specifically, is there gender bias when hiring project managers? Pinto et al. (2015) interviewed over 281 participants and identified that there was no gender bias in “masculine-typed” jobs (p. 332).

Summary and Conclusions

Digital transformation has a long history of high failure rates. While there are substantial studies around digital transformation project failures, they are limited in specifically identifying reasons for failures from project managers’ lived experiences. This shortcoming suggests the need to shift the focus to the project manager and learn from their lived experiences. Project management also has a long history, but it is not traced to one specific event from a historical perspective. The key concepts of the conceptual framework of the study are Correani et al.’s (2020) model for implementation strategy, Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation-hygiene (Herzberg et al., 1993), and systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). The existing literature contains research that examines the perceptions of project managers. However, most of the literature does not

primarily focus on the project manager; instead, the studies focus on project teams, stakeholders, project governance, and the like. When the researchers' focus was on project managers, the data they collected had a bias toward existing critical success factors that forced the project manager to fit their perception into a predetermined perspective.

Chapter 3 includes an examination of the research approach, including its design and justification. Other components of Chapter 3 include, but are not limited to, additional aspects of the methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures, data collection process, and data analysis steps. Chapter 4 follows with an analysis of data results.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for digital transformation project failures from the perspective of the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. This chapter contains a research design and rationale, the research question, an explanation of the researcher's role, and the study methodology, including participant selection logic, instrumentation, study procedures, and the data analysis plan. Also included is a discussion of strategies to increase the trustworthiness of the study in terms of its credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and the ethical nature of the procedures used, and a summary of the main points of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question was, what are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers? According to Shastri et al. (2021), a project manager is a professional responsible for planning, executing, and closing projects within an organization; they ensure projects are completed on time, within budget, and meet the specified objectives. Effective project managers possess a combination of leadership, communication, organizational, and technical skills to successfully oversee projects from initiation to completion (Riberio et al., 2021). Understanding the lived experiences of project managers will provide insight into digital transformation failure.

This was a qualitative descriptive phenomenological study. A qualitative method allows flexibility during the interviewing process, which may lead to additional

exploration or a deeper level of understanding, which is the reason for using a qualitative approach. I did not choose quantitative because the reason for the study is exploratory, not explanatory, which would involve testing one or more hypotheses about the relationship between independent and dependent quantitative variables.

According to Creswell (2007), there are five primary qualitative approaches to research: narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. However, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offered a sixth approach, basic. Each approach has qualities that align with different types of research. To address the research question in this qualitative study, I used a descriptive phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994) to study the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. According to Creswell and Báez (2021), a phenomenological study involves collecting data from individuals who experience the same phenomenon.

While descriptive phenomenology was the method selected for this study, I considered other methods. The narrative research method requires the researcher to collect data based on the participant's individual experience through storytelling (Creswell & Báez, 2021). Grounded theory enables the researcher to develop a theory from the research data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The intent of this research was not to create a theory or collect data through stories. The research question within this study was focused on identifying the lived experiences of U.S. project managers, which points to a phenomenological research method.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to be the instrument (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Collins and Stockton (2022) suggested that, as the qualitative researcher is the instrument, they must separate themselves from their role as the researcher. When interviewing or observing in qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to ensure their behaviors align with those of a researcher. For example, when interviewing a participant, the researcher must control their emotions. Separating self, as Collins and Stockton (2022) suggested, means the researcher would not influence participant responses by bringing their experiences, emotions, and bias to the interview.

My role as participant means I led semistructured interviews with participants selected for the study. During the interview, I collected audio-recorded responses electronically while taking notes and asking additional probing interview questions as necessary to ensure detailed data collection. I had no personal or professional relationship with participants, and I did not hold any power over them. Raheim et al. (2016) studied the researcher-researched relationship for 2 years. One of the researcher-researched relationships they identified is the hierarchical position or status in group interviews. In the study, this meant the researcher was interviewing participants at the same professional level such as a physician to another physician. The authors suggested this scenario may lead participants to feel the researcher is testing their professional abilities. Based on this information, my professional status could have caused a challenge if not addressed prior to the interview, which I did in each case.

In 2011, I became a certified PMP. I have spent the last 19 years of my career performing or owning the responsibility of project management in my roles. Personal experience can create a bias in the role of a researcher. Using a semistructured interview protocol reduced or prevented personal experience from impacting the structured interview. During the interview, I had a preset list of questions to use. I asked probing questions specific to a participant's response if I needed to clarify or obtain more information. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) suggested that probing questions have two functions: encourage elaboration and clarification while keeping the discussion focused (p. 221).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The study population consisted of project managers who had led failed digital transformation projects within the United States. I recruited and interviewed a sufficient number of U.S. project managers to ensure data saturation, which occurs when no new themes emerge from additional interviews (Mwita, 2022). The four inclusion criteria for participants were that they (a) are active certified PMIs, (b) have a minimum of 5 years of project management experience, (c) have a minimum of two completed U.S. digital transformation projects, and (d) have led at least one failed U.S. digital transformation project.

Instrumentation

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested qualitative researchers use some type of interview for data collection. The authors defined three types of interviews: structured,

semistructured, and unstructured. The structured interview consists of closed-ended questions where the interviewer may interview orally but may also use a written survey. The semistructured interview includes open-ended questions allowing for flexibility in the participant's responses. The unstructured interview includes open-ended questions that may feel like a conversation instead of an interview. I used a semistructured interview to gather project managers' lived experiences with failed digital transformation projects within the United States. I made field notes by documenting in a journal to supplement the verbatim scripts. The interview questions are located in Appendix A.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The procedure to recruit participants included multiple steps. The LinkedIn website allows credentialed users to search for members using keywords. I searched for *project management professional* and added a filter to the location field, restricting the results to the United States. There were more than 1,000 certified project managers returned in the search results. I filtered the results to exclude any title that was not *project manager*.

The next planned step was to obtain data from the PMI website, pmi.org. Based on the inclusion criteria, identifying participants from LinkedIn by job title was not sufficient. The participant must also have an active PMP certification. I ran a Certification Registry query to search for individuals with PMP certification and the United States as the location. The results were almost 400,000 records. Not all entries had a first and last name because individuals can opt out of the information displayed in the registry. I removed the records without a name from the dataset.

I compared the LinkedIn output file to the PMI certification registry to ensure each potential participant's PMP certification was active. I completed this comparison using a VLOOKUP formula in Microsoft Excel. The final list included active certified PMP individuals with the title of project manager and located in the United States. I messaged each person on the list through LinkedIn, inquiring about their interest in taking part in my study. Appendix B references the message template that was sent to potential participants via LinkedIn messaging.

If I had not been able to obtain data saturation after 15 interviews, I would have continued to message potential participants via LinkedIn messaging. The initial estimate was over 1,000 potential participants. Hence, I was confident I would find the necessary participants to reach data saturation. This turned out not to be the case, as described in Chapter 4.

When participants responded via email sharing their interest in participation, I sent them the consent form via email for electronic signature. The consent form stated the study purpose, procedure steps, voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits of being in the study, payment details, privacy information, contracts and questions, and how to acknowledge consent. If the potential participant agreed to the consent form, they sent an email back to me acknowledging their consent. Upon receipt of each participant's consent form, I progressed to the data collection step.

I scheduled a 1-hour audio call based on a convenient time for the participant. The interviews took place via a recorded Zoom audio call. When each interview was over, I reviewed the transcript. I removed hesitations or filler words such as uh, ah, and so forth.

I then emailed the edited transcript to the participant for their approval of the content, requesting that they provide feedback within 3 days.

Participants exited the study after providing feedback on the modified transcripts. The exit process included sending the participant a gift card and thanking them for their participation. At this point, I focused exclusively on data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

Kiger and Varpio (2020) suggested using thematic analysis when researching the lived experiences of study participants. An audio recording feature within Zoom software automates the interview transcription process. Each participant's transcript was saved to Microsoft OneDrive once their interview was complete. I asked each participant to review the data collected to ensure its accuracy prior to entering it into a Microsoft Excel document to organize the interview data and facilitate data analysis.

The goal of interviewing the participants was to generate the type of in-depth data required for obtaining valid answers to the research question by means of the interview questions. To that end, after providing each participant with a summary of their interview data for validation purposes, I followed Kiger and Varpio's (2020) systematic six-step thematic analysis process to analyze the validated study data:

1. *Familiarization with data*: Repeated reading of interview transcripts.
2. *Initial coding*: Identifying meaningful codes aligned with research questions.
3. *Generation of themes*: Grouping related codes into broader thematic categories.
4. *Theme validation*: Cross-referencing themes with original data for reliability.

5. *Defining and naming themes*: Providing clear descriptions for each theme.
6. *Interpreting results*: Using participant quotes to support thematic narratives.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Sundler et al. (2019) suggested credibility is earned through honesty during the procedural and methodological processes. The validation strategy I used was reflexivity and data saturation. Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) defined reflexivity as “a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes” (p. 242). Data saturation is achieved when new themes are not emerging from the data. After the interviews were transcribed, they were sent to the participants for review and validation. This enhanced transparency.

Transferability

Sundler et al. (2019) stated, “the relevance, usefulness, and meaningfulness of research findings to other contexts are important components of the study's transferability” (p. 737). I used thick descriptions for transferability. Younas et al. (2023) suggested that thick description enables the researcher to enhance transferability. A thick description provides more than a detailed description; it invokes an imagery in the reader to the point of being able to replicate the environment (Younas et al., 2023).

Dependability

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined audit trail as “a document that allows a researcher to retrace the process by which the researcher arrived at their final findings”

(p. 323). An audit trail template created by Carcary (2020) is available to researchers when proving reliability. An audit trail is like a clear path that shows how researchers went about their study in qualitative research. The importance of an audit trail is that it allows others to see exactly how the researcher gathered and analyzed data.

I used the template as listed in Appendix C, created by Carcary (2020), as a guide to create the audit trail for my study. This transparency helped ensure the findings were reliable and believable. If there were any mistakes or inconsistencies in the data, the audit trail helped catch them, allowing for the resolution of conflicts. The audit trail also provided the means for other researchers to replicate the data analysis process to see if they get the same results, confirming the study's conclusions are dependable.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, reflexivity means the researcher is aware of their biases, values, and experiences that may influence their interpretation of the study findings (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). They write reflexive comments where their own experiences relate to the main topic of study and how the connection might affect their conclusions. I documented reflective comments in a journal to enhance confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

The role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University is to ensure research performed by Walden University students and faculty follows ethical standards set forth by the university and adheres to U.S. federal regulations. Ethical oversight is necessary to protect the dignity, rights, and well-being of the participants throughout the research project (Walden University, n.d.-a). As a researcher, it was my

responsibility to provide the necessary information to prove that I treated participants and data ethically. A student cannot recruit or collect data prior to IRB approval (IRB Approval ID: 03-25-25-0225745). Once I received approval, I began recruiting participants and collecting data.

Each participant completed a consent form that explained the nature of the study and their expectations as participants in the study. However, if a participant had decided to withdraw from the study and I had not reached data saturation, I would have recruited a replacement participant. If I had reached data saturation, then I would have documented the withdrawal in my audit trail and not replaced the participant.

Ethical concerns are not limited to the human component of research. They extend to data generated from the participants within a study, as well as organizational identity. Per the Walden University Manual (Walden University, n.d.-b) for the low-risk work-related interview document, I have stored the study data in a secure, password-protected, location. This includes transcripts, recordings, and field notes. Data access is limited to me, supervising faculty, and staff at Walden University. As required, I will store the data for 5 years and then destroy it.

Protecting the identity of organizations is part of the ethical procedure. As project managers explain their lived experiences, they may mention the company where their failures occurred during the interview. If this happens then the organization's name would be in the audio recording and transcript. My role as the researcher was to mask the organization's name and redact any identifying details. An example of identifying details, the participant worked at the leading manufacturer of electric vehicles. Due to the project

failure described by the lived experience of the project manager, this might cast a negative light on the company, which the American population could easily recognize. Other characteristics may include products, location, services offered, and the like that would identify an organization.

Summary

This chapter is a detailed discussion about research design, my role as a researcher, participant recruitment, instruments, data collection, data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. A phenomenological research method was chosen to identify the lived experiences of project managers. I led semistructured interviews with participants to collect data about their lived experiences. As part of the methodology, I identified four inclusion criteria for participants. Using the semistructured interview method, I was able to ask open-ended questions, allowing flexibility in the participants' responses. I collected data from participants and obtained their approval of the transcripts recorded during the interviews. The data analysis plan included using Kiger and Varpio's (2020) thematic analysis. To establish credibility, I used reflexivity and data saturation. I used thick description for transferability. Carcary (2020) created an audit trail that I used for dependability. To ensure confirmability, I documented reflective comments in a journal. I obtained IRB approval and ensured participants were treated ethically throughout the process. In Chapter 4, I detail the results identified in the study.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the research results. The first section, research settings, outlines the interview procedures and environment. The second, demographics, presents details about the participants' professional demographics. Third, data collection, details how I collected the study data. The fourth, data analysis, identifies the themes discovered during data analysis. The fifth, evidence of trustworthiness, includes subtopics of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The sixth includes study results, addresses the research question and details of the themes noted in section four, data analysis. The final section summarizes Chapter 4 and introduces Chapter 5.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for digital transformation project failures from the perspective of the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. Insights gained may help practitioners reduce failure rates, save organizations time and efficiency, and offer academics new directions for research. The research question in this study was: What are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers?

Research Setting

At the time of the interview, the participants did not identify any organizational conditions that would influence their experience and therefore influence the interpretation of the study results.

Demographics

Participant interviews took place from June to July of 2025. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants' professional demographics. All 13 participants interviewed were PMP certified and had 5 or more years of project management experience. Eleven of the participants managed more than two digital transformation projects. Nine participants had more than two failed digital transformation projects. The participants' professional demographics represent relevance to the study by establishing the depth of each participant's background, formal training in project management methodology, and familiarity with digital transformation projects, thus ensuring participants had lived experiences with failed digital transformation projects.

Table 1

Participant Professional Demographics

Participant	PM experience (years)	PMP certified	DTPs managed	Failed DTPs managed
1	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
2	5+ years	Yes	1 project	1 project
3	5+ years	Yes	1 project	1 project
4	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	1 project
5	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	1 project
6	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
7	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
8	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
9	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
10	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
11	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
12	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects
13	5+ years	Yes	2+ projects	2+ projects

Note. PM stands for Project Management. DTP stands for Digital Transformation Project.

Data Collection

The data collection method for this study was a semistructured audio-recorded interview scheduled for 1 hour with each of the 13 participants. As the data collection instrument, I was located in my home during interviews with each participant. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed using Zoom.

I followed the data collection plan documented in Chapter 3; however, unusual circumstances required additional recruitment steps. The additional step included hiring a vendor, Qualitative.io, to assist in reaching additional potential participants. As stated in the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection section of Chapter 3, I used LinkedIn and pmi.org to message potential participants on LinkedIn. This recruitment process resulted in four participants signing up. One of those four participants shared the information with their network, which resulted in two additional participants. Qualitative.io obtained the other seven participants for the study.

Potential participants navigated to a URL unique to my project. The potential participants answered screening questions, which included how many years of project management experience they had, whether they had an active PMP certification, how many digital transformation projects they had managed, and how many digital transformation projects they had managed that did not meet project objectives. This screening enabled data capturing, and the Qualitative.io vendor would not advance a potential participant if they did not meet the criteria. However, there were two exceptions: participants two and three responded that they had only one digital transformation project that they managed. Based on the criteria, these two participants

would not be eligible for the study; however, both identified that they had over 5 years of experience. Therefore, I chose to interview the participants to determine if they met the criteria. During the interview, both participants identified that they have supported more than one digital transformation project, thereby meeting this criterion for the study.

As detailed in Chapter 3, it was my intention to obtain an electronic signature for consent from each participant using email. I obtained consent electronically from each participant using Qualitative.io. The consent language was unchanged. Verbal consent to be interviewed is in each participant's audio recording and transcript.

When participants answered the screening questions, they were able to select available time slots for their interview. When a new participant selected a time slot, I confirmed using the Qualitative.io user interface. The confirmation generated an email, a Zoom meeting, and sent an invitation to both the participant and me. The interview interactions took place via Zoom.

The initial Qualitative.io recruitment process did not provide results. Potential participants were clicking into the information but not signing up. Based on the experience of the Qualitative.io team they suggested an increase in the thank you gift. Their recommendation was \$140 for a 1-hour interview. Changing the thank-you gift from \$20 to \$140 led to seven participants signing up. Once I received the approval from each participant's member checking process, I used the Qualitative.io user interface to send the thank-you gift email, which included a link to a Mastercard gift card.

The online variation from the process outlined in Chapter 3 for data collection occurred during the recruitment process. Although the way the steps were performed

shifted, the revised process remained essentially the same. Thus, the data collected were not affected. The IRB-approved consent remained unchanged along with the interview protocol. None of the people who agreed to participate withdrew from the study.

The participants scheduled their interview based on the availability of the interviewer using the Qualitative.io user interface. At the scheduled interview time, I started the Zoom meeting, and the scheduled participant joined. I was alone in a room with a headset to ensure the interview was private. After the introduction, I reminded the participants of the consent agreement, explained the process of audio recording, transcription modification, member checking, approval requirements, and the participation thank you gift. Before starting the Zoom audio recording, I verified that the participant did not have any questions. Once the recording started, I asked if the participant agreed to the interview, and all participants agreed. The interviews took 15 minutes to 1 hour to complete. The time difference between the interviews was due to variations in the level of detail of the participants' answers.

Upon completion of the interview, I reviewed the transcripts and modified them to reduce improper transcription, translation, and remove words such as uhm, like, you know, and etc. Member checking allows the participant to validate that the transcripts reflect their lived experiences. I emailed each participant their modified transcript, requesting they complete member checking. The participants sent a reply email with a revised transcript or their statement of approval; the data analysis reflects the approved transcripts. Upon approval of the transcript, I sent a thank-you gift of \$140 in the form of a gift card to the participant.

Data Analysis

I used Kiger and Varpio's (2020) systematic six-step thematic analysis process to analyze the member-validated study data. The first step involved familiarization with data by repeatedly reading the approved interview transcript. I used Microsoft Excel to capture the common lived experiences shared by the participants, which were captured as defined in Step 2 of the thematic analysis process and used in Step 3 to identify the initial, meaningful categories (i.e., potential themes) based on the participants' responses. For example, if many of the participants interviewed stated ineffective leadership was a reason for digital transformation failure, then ineffective leadership became a potential theme. In Step 4, I cross-referenced the potential themes with the original data for reliability by rereading the approved transcripts. In Step 5, I determined what percentage of the potential themes were independently mentioned by the study participants to rank order and thus separate the most frequently mentioned potential themes (i.e., the study themes) from the remaining, less frequently mentioned potential themes, and conducted data saturation analysis to determine when no new themes had emerged. In Step 6, I used participant quotes to support the thematic narratives for the study themes that emerged from the data analysis process.

Saturation

Mwita (2022) stated that data saturation, which occurs when no new information (in this case, themes) emerges, adds to the validity and credibility of the data. Following the analysis of the first 10 participants' interview data, I analyzed the data for the first 10

participant interviews, which resulted in nine potential themes (see Table 2). However, after the fourth interview, no new categories (potential themes) emerged.

Nevertheless, to be sure of data saturation, I conducted three additional interviews to determine if any new potential themes would emerge. Eight of the nine potential themes identified in the data saturation baseline analysis (see Table 3) re-emerged. However, no new themes emerged, which meant data saturation had occurred with confidence after the 13th interview.

Table 2*Data Saturation Analysis Part 1: Baseline*

Potential themes:	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	Total	Rank
Lack of preparation		1		1	1		1	1	1		6	1
Poor organizational collaboration		1				1		1	1	1	5	2
Ineffective change management		1			1		1	1		1	5	2
Lack of transparency early on	1		1	1		1					4	4
Unrealistic business expectations	1						1	1			3	5
Underestimating timeframe and requirements				1		1				1	3	5
Poor communication between stakeholders	1	1									2	7
Lack of user experience				1					1		2	7
Budget constraints				1						1	2	7

Table 3*Data Saturation Analysis Part 2: All Participants vs. Baseline*

Potential themes:	Participant													Total	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13		
Lack of preparation		1		1	1		1	1	1				1	7	1
Ineffective change management		1			1		1	1		1	1	1		7	1
Unrealistic business expectations	1						1	1			1	1	1	6	3
Poor organizational collaboration		1				1		1	1	1				5	4
Lack of transparency early on	1		1	1		1							1	5	4
Underestimating timeframe and requirements				1		1				1				3	6
Poor communication between stakeholders	1	1										1		3	6
Lack of user experience				1					1			1		3	6
Poor communication between stakeholders	1	1												2	7
Lack of user experience				1					1					2	7
Budget constraints				1						1				2	7

Identification of Themes

For Step 6 of the analysis process, I evaluated all 13 interviews and the categories (potential themes) that emerged. Based on their relevance to the RQs and their frequencies (Table 3), I chose those categories identified by over 20% of the participants as the themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this section, I describe the implementation of the standards for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for the study. No problems arose in the collection and analysis of the study data. Hence, no adjustments were made to the strategies specified in Chapter 3.

Credibility

Each participant received a transcript of their interview to review and approve. This member checking process was to ensure the participants' answers were reflective of what the participant intended to state. Another step also helped with reflexivity: modifying the transcript by removing filler words such as, uhm, like, you know, and etc. If the transcription process misunderstood a word, I also modified the transcript to correct it. The importance of member checking was that it ensured that my changes were not subjective and that I did not change the meaning of the participant's answer when making modifications. The second method used for credibility included data saturation, discussed previously.

Transferability

I used thick descriptions to enhance transferability (Younas et al., 2023). Vivid descriptions and direct quotes from the interview scripts supported thick descriptions. The goal was to offer insights into the research findings using rich data content. This approach allows transferability for readers.

Dependability

I used the template created by Carcary (2020) to create the audit trail. The audit trail allows another researcher to follow the process steps of a study and understand the results. This detailed level of transparency also allows other academics to replicate the steps for their study, confirming that the study's conclusions are dependable.

Confirmability

Reflexivity means the researcher is aware of their biases, values, and experiences that may influence their interpretation of the study findings (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). I journaled reflexive comments where my experiences related to the main topics of study and the potential impact on conclusions. These comments were journaled to enhance confirmability.

Study Results

The research question for this study was: What are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers? Eight themes emerged from the semistructured interviews of 13 participants (see Table 3):

1. Lack of preparation

2. Ineffective change management
3. Unrealistic business expectations
4. Poor organizational collaboration
5. Lack of transparency early on
6. Underestimating the timeframe and requirements
7. Poor communication between stakeholders
8. Lack of user experience

In the remaining section, I describe each theme. I also provide supporting evidence from the participants' approved transcripts from their interviews.

Theme 1: Lack of Preparation

Seven of the 13 study participants suggested that lack of preparation is a reason for digital transformation project failure. Lack of preparation creates critical gaps in the foundational work that happens before planning in digital transformation projects; these gaps increase the risk for project failure. Participant 2 identified insufficient gathering of defined requirements and failure to finalize the scope as critical because it can cause challenges if completed later in the project. When asked about the difference between successful and failed digital transformation projects, Participant 2 stated, "Preparation" was a key to success. Participant 5 explained that projects often begin without clearly defined governance structures for managing changes; this governance should happen before the project starts. Participant 7 suggested inadequate resource planning during the preparation phase for enterprise projects. They also stated, "...it's one thing to be blindsided, but it's another to not do the due diligence at the front end to understand what

roadblocks might be up ahead.” Participant 8 described skipping due diligence not only impacts risk planning but also reduces the ability to have foresight into potential issues. Additionally, Participant 9 described the importance of full team buy-in. Participants 4 and 13 stated that the criticality of users who perform the work must be brought into the project.

Theme 2: Ineffective Change Management

Seven of the 13 study participants suggested ineffective change management is a reason for digital transformation project failure. This theme highlights how inadequate, or poorly timed change management contributes to project failure. Participant 2 explained that projects often suffer when last-minute changes disrupt workflows. Participant 7 suggested there is a failure to guide business users through what is changing, how it will impact them, and why it matters. They stated that “the business-as-usual people aren’t taken through the change management to understand what is changing, how it’s changing, how it impacts their processes and roles, as well as making sure that there’s appropriate documentation.” Participant 8 explained that failed projects result when project managers overlook the management of the human side of change by not understanding alignment and readiness. Participants 10, 11, and 12 stated that there is a lack of early planning, proper documentation, and failure to involve frontline operators, which results in confusion, resistance, and failure.

Theme 3: Unrealistic Business Expectations

Six out of 13 participants identified unrealistic business expectations as a reason for digital transformation project failure. This theme reflects the disconnect between

business expectations and project reality. When answering the question: What are the reasons for digital transformation project failure, Participant 1 stated that “unrealistic business expectations paired with technology limits.” Participant 1 also explained projects strained by competing priorities for budget and time, which can impact failure. Participants 7 and 13 shared that executives set unrealistic expectations by trying to move quickly, which leads to project failure. Participant 8 suggested that the executive level has unclear or disjointed ownership of tasks that lead to digital transformation project failure. Participant 11 suggested that subject matter experts may hesitate to challenge executive decisions, further compounding the issue. Participant 12 identified that leadership may not be in alignment and may fail to provide clear sponsorship, while teams struggle to meet overambitious goals set without input from those overseeing the work.

Theme 4: Poor Organizational Collaboration

Five out of 13 participants identified poor organizational collaboration as a reason for digital transformation project failure. This theme centers on the breakdown of coordination and alignment across departments and leadership levels. Participant 10 stated, “It is just organizational buy-in if you don’t have the buy-in from all the leaders...one leader has one goal, and the other leader has another goal, and it’s impossible to get them to mesh.” Participant 2 suggested that projects often launch with enthusiasm, but collaboration weakens as cross-functional team involvement increases and development slows, leading to reduced communication and forward movement. Participant 6 suggested that sales teams may prioritize contracts over coordination, engaging delivery teams too late, and failing to gather accurate requirements. Participant

8 implied an effort to do too much at once, or to impose changes without team engagement, which breaks down collaboration. Participants 9 and 10 stated that when leaders lack alignment or support for the project scope, internal friction undermines progress and contributes to failure.

Theme 5: Lack of Transparency Early On

Five of the 13 participants identified the lack of transparency early on as a failure reason for digital transformation projects. This theme emphasizes the importance of open communication and early involvement of stakeholders, particularly end users, in digital transformation projects. Participants one, three, four, and 13 shared that when users are included from the beginning, they better understand goals, impacts, and expectations for the project, reducing the risk of late-stage requirement changes that cause delays or failure. Participant 1 stated that “transparency early, on especially, is going to help build trust with the team.” Participant 6 suggested that a lack of transparency, especially around project timelines, deliverables, or the broader strategic vision, can create confusion and erode trust. Participant 6 also suggested that ensuring early and honest communication across all levels sets the foundation for alignment and long-term project success.

Theme 6: Underestimating Timeframe and Requirements

Three of the 13 participants identified underestimating the timeframe and requirements as a failure reason for digital transformation projects. This theme highlights how digital transformation projects often fail due to unrealistic estimates and an incomplete understanding of project needs. Participant 4 explained their experience with a project with an expected completion of 7 to 8 months that went on hold after 12 months

because they had estimated the project without gathering proper requirements. Participant 6 indicated, “Failure from the sales end is where a lot of the issues with requirement solicitation start.” Participant 6 suggested that the engagement of delivery teams later in the sales contract cycle or after the contract signature also results in unrealistic timelines for delivery. Participant 10 shared experiences where the deadline for the project was set before the planning session took place. Once the planning session took place, team members realized the project was larger than anticipated, and the deadline was not viable.

Theme 7: Poor Communication Between Stakeholders

Three of the 13 participants identified poor communication between stakeholders as a failure reason for digital transformation projects. Participant 1 stated that stakeholders may not be sharing the same message about a digital transformation project, which reflects miscommunication among the teams. Participant 2 extended this explanation by suggesting that miscommunication breaks down the positive energy that existed at the beginning of a project. Participant 11 suggested that stakeholders, such as subject matter experts, need to spend time communicating with one another to identify proper requirements for the project. Participant 11 indicated, “I can’t tell you the number of times we’ve gotten to go live and there have been several significant misses just because we didn’t talk to the people who are going to actually use the product as much as we should have.”

Theme 8: Lack of User Experience

Three of the 13 participants identified a lack of user experience as a failure reason for digital transformation projects. Participant 4 stated that the importance of understanding how users interpret the digital transformation and their role in the project can determine success or failure. Participant 9 emphasized the importance of user engagement:

Having the folks that are actually using the system involved in early testing, having their buy-in, and it comes down to communication. How you communicate to them. Of course they're not developing it, but making sure that at every state, whether it's the requirements, whether it's development, or whether it's testing, you have some sort of business buy in from the folks that are actually using it. They're able to see the system to see it develop, they can give their input. That also helps a lot being successful, because when they come to the final product 2 years later, whatever it is, they're not surprised by it.

Participant 12 indicated, "If the original issue isn't resolved, or if the outcome benefits a different problem than what was identified, that's a failure, regardless of how technically impressive the solution may be."

Summary

The research question in this study was: What are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers? This chapter identified and described the eight themes that emerged as answers to the research question. Each theme was described along with supporting evidence from

participant interviews. Chapter 5 includes interpretation of findings, limitations to this study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for digital transformation project failures from the perspective of the lived experiences of U.S. project managers. The research question in this study was: What are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers? The study was conducted to address the research gap by discovering what U.S. project managers perceive to be the reasons for digital transformation failure based on their lived experiences. The study could also contribute to positive social change by adding to the limited research on the reasons for the high failure rates of digital transformation projects; thus, enabling managers to take actions designed to lower those rates.

The key findings of this study comprise eight themes that emerged from the participant interview data analysis. Based on the data analysis and having achieved data saturation, the reasons for digital transformation failure based on U.S. project managers lived experiences are (a) lack of preparation, (b) ineffective change management, (c) unrealistic business expectations, (d) poor organizational collaboration, (e) lack of transparency early on, (f) underestimating timeframe and requirements, (g) poor communication between stakeholders, and (h) lack of user experience.

Interpretation of Findings

This section consists of a comparison of the eight themes to the peer-reviewed literature identified in Chapter 2 to determine if they confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline. Also included in this section is a comparison of the themes

to the conceptual framework for the study, which included (a) Lewin's (1947) 3-stage change management model, (b) Correani et al.'s (2020) digital transformation implementation model, (c) Herzberg et al. (1993) 2-factor theory of motivation-hygiene, and (d) systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Theme 1: Lack of Preparation

Based on the data analysis, one of the top reasons for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is the lack of preparation. Lack of preparation creates critical gaps in the foundational work that happens before planning in digital transformation projects. Seven of the 13 study participants reported this theme as a failure reason.

Preparation includes team readiness, stakeholder alignment, securing tools and resources, governance, and clarifying roles before project kickoff. Aranyossy et al. (2018) identified critical failure factors to include stakeholder management. Keil et al. (2002) discussed unidentified roles and responsibilities, increasing the chance of failure. Kiselev et al. (2020) identified project governance at risk if not properly addressed prior to planning. Zaman et al. (2022) confirmed the positive impact on project success when it includes governance. This major theme confirms the past research while also extending it to include the importance of team buy-in to the project.

Theme 2: Ineffective Change Management

Another top reason for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is ineffective change management. This theme highlights how inadequate, or poorly timed change management contributes to project

failure. Seven of the 13 study participants identified this theme as a reason for digital transformation project failure.

The literature review in Chapter 2 references resistance to change, scope change, and organizational change; however, the data analysis results indicate ineffective change management, as last-minute changes disrupt workflows and understanding the impact change has on humans. Ineffective change management of this type extends knowledge.

Theme 3: Unrealistic Business Expectations

Theme 3 for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is unrealistic business expectations. This theme reflects the disconnect between business expectations and project reality. Six out of 13 participants identified this theme as a reason for digital transformation project failure.

The data analysis results indicate unrealistic business expectations include competing priorities, executives setting unrealistic delivery expectations, unclear or disjointed ownership, a lack of leader sponsorship, and alignment. The literature review in Chapter 2 does not address these topics; therefore, unrealistic business expectations appear to extend the existing literature.

Theme 4: Poor Organizational Collaboration

Theme 4 for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is poor organizational collaboration. This theme centers on the breakdown of coordination and alignment across departments and leadership levels. Five out of 13 participants identified this theme as a failure reason.

Uchihira and Eimura (2021) identified six factors leading to digital transformation project failure, which include information, experience gap, incompatible evaluation criteria, conflict of interest, perception gap of the future, and lack of mutual trust (pp. 163–164). Two of these factors, lack of mutual trust and conflict of interest, reflect participant data, thus confirming the theme in the literature review.

Theme 5: Lack of Transparency Early On

Theme five for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is a lack of transparency early on. This theme emphasizes the importance of open communication and early involvement of stakeholders, particularly end users, in digital transformation projects. Five of the 13 participants identified this theme as a failure reason.

Barbara and Dorota (2020), Rodriguez-Segura et al. (2016), and Sebestyen (2017) suggested stakeholder involvement to improve project success. Abreu and Nunes (2020) suggested that forming a project team whose skills, experiences, and perspectives align with the project's objectives and tasks can enhance the likelihood of success. Thus, this finding confirms the findings of existing literature.

Theme 6: Underestimating Timeframe and Requirements

Theme 6 for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is underestimating timeframe and requirements. This theme highlights how digital transformation projects often fail due to unrealistic estimates and an incomplete understanding of project needs. Three of the 13 participants identified this theme as a reason for project failure.

Flyvbjerg (2013) identified that optimism bias can lead project managers to underestimate the time, effort, and resources necessary for task and project completion. However, the participants referred to other stakeholders setting the timelines or missing requirements, so this finding does not confirm Flyvbjerg (2013). According to Keil et al. (2002), one of the risks for project failure is inaccurate requirements. Hai Nguyen (2020) suggested that inappropriate planning of a project or management of the financials is likely to result in failure of the overall project. Hence, this theme confirms the findings of Keil et al. (2002) and Hai Nguyen (2020).

Theme 7: Poor Communication Between Stakeholders

Theme 7 for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is poor communication between stakeholders. This theme references stakeholders who shared inconsistent messages, lost early momentum, and failed to define clear project requirements. Subject matter experts did not collaborate effectively, and teams overlooked input from end users, leading to critical issues at go-live. Three of the 13 participants identified this theme as a failure reason.

According to Amoah et al. (2020), when teams fail to collect project requirements early from the appropriate stakeholders, the project will likely fail. The author also identified miscommunication among the stakeholders, causing project failure. Thus, this theme confirms Amoah.

Theme 8: Lack of User Experience

The eighth and final theme for failed digital transformation projects, according to U.S. project managers' lived experiences, is a lack of user experience. Teams often

overlook how users interpret digital transformation and their role in it, leading to unclear or incomplete requirements. When solutions address the wrong problem or miss the original issue entirely, the project fails, regardless of its technical success. Three of the 13 participants identified this theme as a failure reason.

Chapter 2 literature review uses the terms stakeholder and user interchangeably. As stated previously with the seventh theme findings, Barbara and Dorota (2020), Rodriguez-Segura et al. (2016), and Sebestyen (2017) suggested that stakeholder involvement improved project success. The authors describe the stakeholder engagement early in the project to avoid failure at the end. The participants in this study refer to the lack of user experience at the end of the project. According to participant comments, this could be due to staff turnover or lack of engagement. Hence, this theme extends existing knowledge.

C-suite leaders have an opportunity to review these findings and implement safeguards to reduce the risk of failed digital transformation projects. Much of the literature identified in Chapter 2 reflects project managers and their responsibilities to ensure success; however, there is a limit to the power a project manager holds within an organization. The lack of preparation theme reflects the beginning of a digital transformation project, which is the critical point of building a solid foundation for the project. C-suite leaders have the ability to rapidly resolve the challenges identified at this stage, such as insufficient funding, lack of accountability, or conflicting priorities.

When a digital transformation project is facing potential failure due to ineffective change management, a chief operating officer could engage in the project to support the

human impact of the change and operational workflow changes required. This action would improve the chance of project success while supporting the project manager. The chief operating officer would understand the operational challenges that may have additional ramifications for the organization, unknown to the project manager. The increased visibility could ensure the C-suite has real-time and honest communication about the project.

The unrealistic business expectations theme reflects competing priorities, executives setting unrealistic delivery expectations, unclear or disjointed ownership, a lack of leader sponsorship, and alignment. This is a theme for which the C-suite has full accountability in ensuring success. Executives are being fiscally irresponsible if they set delivery expectations without understanding the full scope, resource requirements, and so forth of the digital transformation project.

The lack of user experience theme refers to missed requirements that may lead to the original problem not being solved. This is a theme that a chief technology officer could address for the organization. This executive has full access to the systems within the organization for the users. They also have experience in collecting requirements, building solutions, and understanding development methodologies.

I am not suggesting C-suite leaders should be involved in the day-to-day operations of running a digital transformation project. Rather, my suggestion is for them to increase their visibility, understanding, and support of the project. The organizational cost of failed digital transformation projects is too high to be ignored by C-suite leaders.

The themes identified in this study, if addressed prior to the start of a project, have the ability to decrease the failure rate.

Relationship of Themes to Conceptual Framework

The study's findings support the relevance of the conceptual framework selected for this research and extend its application within digital transformation project failures. Lewin's (1947) three-stage change management model provided a useful view for interpreting themes one, lack of preparation; theme two, ineffective change management; and theme six, unrealistic business expectations, as each of these themes reflects challenges in the unfreeze and change stages. Correani et al.'s (2020) digital transformation implementation model aligned with Theme 3, unrealistic business expectations, and Theme 4, poor organizational collaboration, by highlighting the importance of strategic alignment, leadership engagement, and organizational capability. Herzberg et al.'s (1993) two-factor theory of motivation-hygiene helped explain themes three, four, and five regarding how inadequate leadership support, lack of transparency, and unrealistic demands functioned as hygiene factors that negatively influenced team motivation. von Bertalanffy's (1972) systems theory was reflected in Themes 5, 7, and 8 as they relate to organizational complexity, particularly poor communication, lack of transparency, and missed user input, which disrupted system feedback and interdependencies. Overall, these frameworks provided a strong foundation for understanding the lived experiences of U.S. project managers and contributed to a deeper understanding of the findings.

Limitations of the Study

There are various limitations to this study. Location may limit the study, as it only includes project managers based in the United States. This focus reduces the opportunity to gain insight into global digital transformation project management failures. The participant requirements of being PMP certified reduced the available pool. Non-certified project managers may face additional failure reasons. Participants represented a wide variety of industries, which limits researchers or practitioners looking for industry-specific information on failed digital transformation projects. While I informed the participants of their privacy and reassured them that their identities would not be disclosed, they may have been apprehensive about sharing reasons for the digital transformation project failure through their lived experiences. It can be difficult to acknowledge failure along with individual contributions to that failure. Lastly, while I reached data saturation, the sample size of 13 participants may be small. A larger participant pool may bring additional experience, resulting in more themes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this study, there are multiple recommendations for future research. Future research should consider addressing the theme of lack of preparation identified in this study. While Keil et al. (2002), Kiselev et al. (2020), and Zaman et al. (2022) discussed roles and responsibilities, governance, and proper planning to avoid project failure, the authors did not identify gaining full team buy-in. Kelly (2014) suggested C-suite leadership buy-in is a crucial factor for successful initiatives. However, this scope is also limited and fails to include full team buy-in. Understanding how full

team buy-in impacts the project's success or failure would allow practitioners to identify the potential risk early in the project. Researchers could explore the impact of gaining full team buy-in early in the project.

Another recommendation for future research is to explore opportunities for effective change management in digital transformation project management. There is vast literature on change management along with methodologies, implementation best practices, and theoretical frameworks. Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) researched failure in the implementation of HEIs and identified people-barriers as an individual-level challenge due to their resistance to change (p. 19). While the findings from Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) align with the findings of this study, the slight but significant difference is the timing of when change management was introduced. When the digital transformation project team introduces change to the people in an organization without sufficient time to adjust, then resistance becomes a failure factor (Gkrimpizi et al., 2023). A future study that is specific to understanding change management in digital transformation project management would not only contribute to existing literature, but it could also assist practitioners in improving their project success. This topic has the potential for ongoing research.

Additionally, there is a lack of studies on unrealistic business expectations. This encompasses topics like competing priorities, executives setting unrealistic delivery expectations, executives setting unclear or disjointed ownership responsibilities, lack of leader sponsorship, and alignment. Understanding the role of executives in digital transformation projects requires additional research. Liu et al. (2010) highlighted executives' perception regarding project failure; the findings included misalignment of

organizational culture, business processes, development of systems without integration into business processes, and political biases. However, all participants in this study identified the role of an executive sponsor as important in their digital transformation project. They also suggested that unrealistic expectations from executives contribute to the failure of digital transformation projects. Participants did not have insight into why executives were setting unrealistic expectations. If the role of executives is to be successful for the organization, then it would benefit practitioners and academics to understand their process in setting expectations. Additional research into the executive's role in digital transformation projects could uncover the driving factors of executives setting unrealistic business expectations.

An additional recommendation for future research includes stakeholder management. The literature reflects stakeholder involvement as a dependency on project success (Barbara & Dorota, 2020; Rodriguez-Segura et al., 2016; Sebestyen, 2017). In this context, stakeholder management refers to the identification of and ongoing management of stakeholders during a digital transformation project. The literature on this topic aligns across the United States, Hungary, Spain, and Ghana (Aranyossy et al., 2018; Eyiah-Botwe et al., 2019; Montequin et al., 2014). Future research could focus on a methodology to identify stakeholders across the organization. The outcomes could help organizations reduce the risk of missed communication, inconsistent messaging, and missed requirements.

Furthermore, the lack of user experience is an area that needs further research. There is literature surrounding user engagement at the beginning of projects, ensuring the

end users are stakeholders (Barbara & Dorota, 2020; Rodriguez-Segura et al., 2016; and Sebestyen, 2017). The participants in this study noted that teams often seek user contributions late in the project, after completing the solution, which requires additional buy-in to achieve success. Future research should explore the end-user journey in digital transformation projects to gain insight into the impact of success or failure.

Implications

This study's findings have the potential to positively impact social change in digital transformation project management. Failure reasons in digital transformation projects have not advanced in 20 years (Ika et al., 2022). The amount of money invested in digital transformation projects continues to increase year after year (Veith, 2023). While technical innovation is often the focus of digital transformation projects, this study identifies human, organization, and process-driven factors that can impact failure rates. Identifying failure reasons grounded in lived experiences encourages organizations to reconsider their reliance on technology as a sole solution and instead focus on holistic transformation strategies. This shift can lead to improved technology adoption that genuinely supports project and organization goals.

At the individual level, project managers may use the results to improve their management of digital transformation projects. By improving their success rate, they may find more satisfaction in their work. Individual improvement of success rates could reduce the overall failure rates. Beyond improving project outcomes, project managers may gain greater confidence in navigating digital transformations by understanding failure reasons from other project managers' lived experiences.

Organizations may also improve by increasing their digital transformation success rates. Improved success rates could lead to less financial waste and improved return on investment. The organization's products may become more competitive, benefiting employees, increasing profitability, and improving product quality.

Organizations that include these findings in their strategic planning may achieve greater alignment between business goals and technology initiatives. This alignment between business and technology is imperative to project success. Incorporating the eight failure themes as part of organizational risk audits or readiness assessments could become the best practice. The long-term outcome may include an increase in user buy-in, and reduced frustration associated with project failure.

My research does not suggest C-suite leaders should be involved in the day-to-day operations of running a digital transformation project. Rather, my findings indicate a need to increase their visibility, understanding, and support of the project. The organizational cost of failed digital transformation projects is too high to be ignored by C-suite leaders. C-suite leaders have an opportunity prior to the start of a project to implement safeguards to reduce the risk of failed digital transformation projects based on my study findings. C-suite leaders also have the ability to rapidly resolve the challenges identified at an early stage, such as insufficient funding, lack of accountability, or conflicting priorities.

The organization could offer project management training like the DSMC (Acker, 1986; Gadeken, 2015). The training could be expanded to include the various roles within project management. A training program that educates C-suites on being an executive sponsor would assist in their success, as well as that of other project team members. This

would also assist new employees during onboarding by understanding the failure risks for digital transformation projects rather than having to learn on the fly and costing organization money. When organizations educate their employees, the proper expectations are set. Training skills specifically focused on required competencies for digital transformation projects will decrease failure rates (Dadzie & Sebitla, 2023).

The study results may also offer implications for societal change, as mentioned previously, it could improve project managers' satisfaction with their work while also gaining confidence. These benefits could improve their workplace wellbeing, which may have a positive impact on their family life and communities. In addition, one of the failure factors identified earlier included the project managers' reluctance to inform executives that their expectations are not realistic. By improving or building a methodology for digital transformation project management, it may empower project managers to have transparent discussions and improve communication with executives.

Organizations could design a methodology for building a digital transformation project team. When implementing a digital transformation project, it is important to build a team that aligns with the tasks and objectives (Abreu & Nunes, 2020). Building a methodology for project team selection allows the organization to identify those individuals who will assist in reducing the risks that lead to project failure. By performing this work up front, it reduces the risk of not having the right stakeholders on the project.

This study also contributes to project management methodologies by identifying failure reasons for digital transformation projects. The eight themes identified provide

potential risks for project managers to mitigate as part of their overall digital transformation project planning. According to Kuczyńska and Nepelski (2021), when organizations incorporate risk management into their operations, projects have better outcomes. In practice, project managers could add the eight themes to their risk planning as standard practice when implementing digital transformation; standardizing these risks allows risk mitigation to happen early in the project.

The contributions from this study could include bridging the gap between theory and practice. While methods like PMBOK give structured guidance, this study adds a real-world risk perspective that can help strengthen those existing approaches. Accrediting organizations and professional training programs like PMI could incorporate these themes into continuing education or certification exams to ensure that project managers are equipped to handle digital transformation complexity. This could raise the bar for how projects are managed and help create new tools or shortcuts designed specifically for digital transformation efforts.

Conclusions

Estimated global digital transformation spending is expected to reach \$3.4 trillion by 2026 (Veith, 2023), yet between 66% and 84% of these projects will fail (Koczerga, 2024; Oludapo et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). These high failure rates come at a high cost to organizations, financially, operationally, and strategically. This study explored the reasons behind these failures through the lived experiences of 13 certified project managers. Using thematic analysis and data saturation analysis, eight core themes emerged: (a) lack of preparation, (b) ineffective change management, (c) unrealistic

business expectations, (d) poor organizational collaboration, (e) lack of transparency early on, (f) underestimating timeframe and requirements, (g) poor communication between stakeholders, and (h) lack of user experience.

These findings provide practical insight into the challenges project managers face and can be used to strengthen digital transformation planning and execution. They offer organizations an opportunity to better prepare, align expectations, and put the right people and processes in place. Digital transformation is more than a technological investment; it is an organizational shift that requires clarity, collaboration, and thoughtful execution.

By bringing these themes into early risk planning, organizations can improve project outcomes and reduce costly missteps. Project managers may also find value in using the themes as a guide to reflect on and improve their own practice. As digital transformation investments continue to grow, the need to shift from reactive problem-solving to proactive planning has never been more critical. These results serve as a reminder that transformation efforts succeed not just because of tools and technology but because of people, preparation, and clear communication from the very beginning. Finally, C-suite leaders should prepare for digital transformation projects by addressing the themes in this study before starting a project. Building, implementing, and educating standardized processes designed to address each theme may increase the chance of project success while also offering a scalable, repeatable success model.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The primary data collection instrument for this study was semistructured, open-ended interview questions based on the research question:

RQ: What are the reasons for digital transformation project failures based on the lived experiences of U.S. project managers?

The following are the interview questions I asked each participant:

1. How many digital transformation projects have you completed in your career?
2. What types of digital transformation projects have you led?
3. Without identifying anyone, generally, who were the stakeholders on the digital transformation projects?
4. Without identifying anyone, generally, who were the executive sponsors of the digital transformation projects?
5. How long did the digital transformation projects take to implement?
6. In your experience, what are the reasons for digital transformation project failure?
7. Have you found those reasons to be consistent with other digital transformation failed projects?
8. In your experience, what are the differences between successful and failed digital transformation projects?

9. Prompts (only if necessary): Can you tell me more? Can you give me an example?

Appendix B: LinkedIn Message

Subject Line: Seeking Project Managers' Expertise in May and June (\$20 thank you gift)

There is a new study about reasons for digital transformation project failure that could help project managers and organizations improve their project success rate. For this study, you are invited to describe your experience with a failed digital transformation project.

About the study:

- One 60-minute phone interview that will be audio recorded.
- You will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card as a thank you.
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.

Volunteers must meet these criteria:

- Active certified project management professional.
- Five years of project management experience.
- Have a minimum of two completed U.S. digital transformation projects.
- Have led at least one failed U.S. digital transformation project.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Susan Landes, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during May and June.

Please email (redacted) to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward this message to others who might be interested.

Appendix C: Research Audit Trail Checklist

Physical Audit Trail

Research problem identification and proposal development:

- Is the research problem (e.g., the gap in the existing literature) clearly defined?
- Is a research question specified?
- Are the research aims and objectives stated?
- Is it a formal research proposal (as required) submitted to and approved by the relevant funding body?

Literature review:

- Is a literature review protocol (key steps and procedures) clearly documented and validated?
- Is the literature search scope defined?
- Are all publication sources documented (e.g., bibliographic databases, library search portals, journals)?
- Are literature search parameters documented (e.g., keyword search strings)?
- Are literature screening criteria documented (e.g., specific keywords, language, authors, date ranges)?
- Are literature quality appraisal standards defined (e.g., grounding of findings in the body of evidence)?
- Is the literature data extraction process outlined (e.g., use of coding, CAQDAS)?
- Is the literature data classification and analysis process outlined (e.g., use of thematic categories, conceptual frameworks, and concept maps)?

Research framework definition:

- Is a research methods strategy specified (e.g., use of interviews, focus groups, case studies, design science)?
- Is the rationale for the chosen research methods specified?
- Are notes on research trustworthiness maintained?
- Are changes to the research framework and methodological decisions over the course of the study, and the rationale for the same documented?

Sample selection:

- Are the criteria for research participant selection defined (e.g., domain expertise, seniority)?
- Is the sampling strategy (e.g., purposive, snowball) and rationale for its selection defined?

Evidence/raw data collection:

- Are all sources of secondary evidence specified (e.g., contextual descriptions, policy documents, research reports)?
- Are all sources of primary data specified (e.g., interview or focus group transcripts, pilot validation feedback)?
- Are researcher journals and reflections on the body of evidence recorded?

Evidence management and analysis:

- Are all thematic codes and categories documented?
- Are memos developed to enable emerging thematic categories to be traced to the body of evidence?
- Are reflexive memos attached to the thematic categories?
- Are relationships across the thematic structure explored (e.g., diagrammatically modelled)?
- Are examples of how the emerging analysis is grounded in the body of evidence maintained (e.g., in an appendix)?

Artefact development:

- Is the research audience and dissemination strategy specified?
- Is the research report/research paper documented in a manner that the intended research audience will clearly understand?
- Are the research findings discussed vis-à-vis prior research studies?

Intellectual Audit Trail

Clarification of philosophical stance:

- Is the researcher's philosophical position clarified?

Consideration of alternatives for evidence collection and data analysis:

- Is the researcher's analytical thinking and decision-making transparent during the design of the research framework?
- Is the rationale for the data management and analysis approach clearly specified?
- Is the rationale for use or non-use of CAQDAS, and the benefits of the chosen approach, specified?

Evidence interpretation:

- Are the researcher's analytical thinking and decision-making transparent during the data analysis?
- Are researcher interpretations on emerging thematic categories recorded in memos?
- Are research findings appropriately grounded in the body of evidence (with supporting examples)?
- Are the researcher's reflections and insights on findings and interpretations documented?
- Are the researcher's personal assumptions and subjectivities made transparent in a reflexive journal?