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Strengthening the Practice Pillar of Sustainable Development: A Survey-Based Assessment of AI, Digital and Leadership Competencies among Romanian Public Servants

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ABSTRACT:
The acceleration of the digital transformation of public administration in Romania, supported by the reforms undertaken by the new European regulations on artificial intelligence, requires the strengthening of institutional capacity and the skills of civil servants in relation to the sustainable development objectives. Although the specialized literature addresses digitalization and algorithmic governance, there is a gap regarding the empirical assessment of the real skills and training needs of civil servants in the context of AI implementation and skills-based reform. The study aims to analyze the level of training and existing gaps in the field of advanced digital skills, AI literacy, cybersecurity, administrative skills and leadership skills in the Romanian public sector.
The methodology consists of an online questionnaire applied to civil servants in central and local administration, complemented by comparative analyses between executive and management functions and regression models to identify the relationship between skills, confidence in the use of AI and the perceived capacity to implement digital reforms. The results highlight significant differences between hierarchical levels, as well as gaps in strategic competencies regarding algorithmic governance and change management.
The added value lies in the empirical substantiation of the practical dimension of sustainable development, by correlating individual competencies with the institutional capacity to implement responsible digitalization. The study contributes to the literature on sustainable digital governance and provides recommendations for public policies and training programs. Limitations concern the self-reported nature of the data and the cross-sectional design of the research. Future directions include longitudinal analyses and comparative extension at the European level.

Keywords: AI, digital competencies, leadership competencies

1. Introduction

The accelerated digital transformation of public administration represents one of the most significant structural changes affecting contemporary governance systems. The increasing integration of advanced technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and algorithmic decision-making—has fundamentally reshaped how public

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institutions design policies, deliver services, and interact with citizens. This transformation is not merely technological, but systemic, influencing organizational structures, administrative processes, and the competencies required of public servants.

At the European level, the digitalization agenda has been further intensified by strategic frameworks such as the Digital Decade 2030 and the regulatory developments associated with the Artificial Intelligence Act, which emphasize both the opportunities and the risks associated with AI deployment in the public sector. These initiatives highlight the necessity of building resilient, transparent, and accountable digital governance systems, capable of balancing efficiency gains with ethical considerations, including fairness, explainability, and data protection. Consequently, public administrations are increasingly expected to move beyond basic digitalization toward more advanced forms of algorithmic governance, where decision-support systems and automated processes play a central role.

In this context, the role of human capital becomes critical. The effectiveness of digital transformation in the public sector is not determined solely by technological infrastructure, but by the capacity of public servants to understand, adopt, and responsibly use digital and AI-based tools. This shift implies a transition from traditional administrative skill sets toward more complex competency profiles that integrate digital literacy, data interpretation abilities, cybersecurity awareness, and strategic leadership in technologically mediated environments. At the same time, the growing reliance on AI systems introduces new forms of cognitive and ethical responsibility, requiring public employees to critically assess algorithmic outputs and ensure their alignment with public values.

Moreover, the digitalization of governance processes generates new organizational challenges. The integration of AI technologies often requires changes in decision-making hierarchies, interdepartmental coordination, and institutional cultures. Public organizations must adapt to increased levels of uncertainty, technological complexity, and dynamic policy environments. As a result, leadership competencies acquire a more prominent role, particularly in terms of change management, strategic vision, and the ability to foster trust in digital systems among both employees and citizens.

The Romanian public administration reflects these broader global and European trends, being engaged in an ongoing process of digital transformation supported by national and European funding mechanisms. However, this transformation takes place within a specific institutional context characterized by structural constraints, varying levels of digital maturity, and heterogeneous administrative capacities across different levels of government. The adoption of digital technologies, including AI-based applications, is therefore uneven and often accompanied by challenges related to organizational readiness, workforce skills, and resistance to change.

Within this evolving landscape, the interaction between digital competencies, leadership capabilities, and the capacity to implement sustainable administrative reforms become increasingly relevant. Sustainable development, understood not only in environmental but also in institutional and governance terms, requires public administrations to develop long-term capabilities that ensure adaptability, inclusiveness, and resilience. The integration of digital technologies into administrative processes must therefore be accompanied by the development of competencies that support responsible innovation and the effective management of complex socio-technical systems.

Overall, the transformation toward AI-enabled public administration creates a multidimensional challenge, situated at the intersection of technology, human capital, and institutional capacity. Understanding this context is essential for analyzing how public servants adapt to pressures of digitalization and how their competencies contribute to the broader objective of building sustainable and effective governance systems.

2. Literature Review

The expansion of digital technologies in public administration has progressively evolved toward the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), redefining governance processes, decision-making mechanisms, and the interaction between public institutions and citizens. This transformation is increasingly conceptualized not as a linear technological upgrade, but as a systemic shift that affects institutional capacity, administrative logic, and workforce requirements. Early contributions in the Romanian and regional literature emphasize the link between digital public administration and sustainable development, highlighting that digital transformation must be supported by human resource development and organizational adaptation. In this regard, digital governance is framed as a strategic enabler of sustainability, requiring both technological infrastructure and the development of competencies that allow public servants to effectively use digital systems (Burlacu et al., 2019; Burlacu et al., 2021; Burlacu et al., 2022). More recent work extends this perspective by emphasizing integrative digital governance as a post-pandemic paradigm, where public administration must simultaneously address technological innovation, institutional resilience, and sustainability objectives (Burlacu et al., 2024).

The growing presence of AI in public administration has generated a distinct research stream focused on its implications for governance and public management. At a broader analytical level, Criado et al. (2025) propose a multi-level framework for understanding AI in public administration, distinguishing between macro-level governance structures, meso-level organizational arrangements, and micro-level interactions involving public employees and citizens. This multi-level perspective is complemented by empirical and review-based studies that document the rapid expansion of AI applications in public administration, ranging from predictive analytics to automated decision-making systems (Babšek et al., 2025). Together, these contributions suggest that AI is becoming a structural component of contemporary governance, requiring not only regulatory adaptation but also changes in administrative practices and competencies.

A central theme in the literature concerns the competencies required for AI adoption in the public sector. Medaglia et al. (2024) provide one of the most comprehensive frameworks, identifying a multidimensional set of competences that include technical, managerial, and ethical dimensions, as well as attitudinal and governance-related components. This perspective is reinforced by UNESCO (2022), which emphasizes that civil servants must develop integrated competencies combining digital literacy, policy understanding, and the capacity to manage AI-driven processes responsibly. Empirical evidence further supports the importance of such competencies. Auth et al. (2026), analyzing job postings in the German public sector, show that demand for AI-related skills extends beyond technical expertise to include analytical, organizational, and

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governance capabilities. Similarly, Sandoval-Almazan et al. (2024) demonstrate that public managers' ability to implement AI is strongly associated with their competencies in digital management and execution, while Lāma and Lastovska (2025) highlight the role of training and workplace context in shaping employees' self-assessed AI competence. These findings indicate that AI adoption in public administration depends on complex competence profiles rather than isolated technical skills.

In parallel, the literature emphasizes the importance of trust, ethics, and governance in shaping the use of AI in the public sector. Lahusen et al. (2024) argue that trust and trustworthiness are fundamental components of AI governance, influencing both institutional legitimacy and the acceptance of AI systems by public employees and citizens. This perspective aligns with studies on automated decision-making, which show that AI systems transform the decision space in public administration by redistributing authority between human actors and algorithmic processes (Rizk & Lindgren, 2025). The implications of these transformations extend beyond efficiency considerations, raising questions about accountability, transparency, and fairness. From a policy perspective, the World Health Organization (2025) similarly highlights that the readiness of public institutions to adopt AI depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on workforce skills, governance capacity, and organizational culture. These contributions collectively suggest that AI adoption is a socio-technical process, where competencies, trust, and institutional arrangements interact dynamically.

The role of training and professional development is another recurrent theme, particularly in studies focusing on administrative contexts characterized by rapid change. Gaf-Deac et al. (2024) show that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for adaptive training in Romanian public administration, highlighting the importance of continuous learning in maintaining institutional functionality under crisis conditions. Although this study does not focus explicitly on AI, it provides relevant insights into how public administrations respond to disruptive technological and organizational pressures. Complementary perspectives from the field of digital education (García-Herrera, n.d.) further emphasize that digital transformation requires structured policy approaches and systematic competence development, reinforcing the idea that skills acquisition must be institutionally supported.

Overall, literature converges toward several key conclusions. First, digital transformation and AI are reshaping public administration in fundamental ways, affecting governance structures, decision-making processes, and public service delivery. Second, the successful adoption of AI depends on the development of multidimensional competencies that integrate technical, managerial, and ethical dimensions. Third, trust, governance, and institutional readiness play a critical role in mediating the relationship between technological innovation and administrative outcomes. Finally, although existing studies provide valuable conceptual frameworks and empirical insights, there remains a need for context-specific analyses that examine how different categories of competencies relate to confidence in AI use and to the perceived capacity of public institutions to implement digital reforms.

3. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the relationships between civil servants' competencies, confidence in the use of artificial intelligence (AI), and the perceived institutional capacity to implement digital reforms. The empirical analysis is based on a primary dataset collected through an online questionnaire administered to civil servants in central and local public administration in Romania.

The sample includes respondents occupying both executive and management positions, enabling comparative analysis across hierarchical levels. Additional socio-demographic variables (e.g., age, education, professional experience) are included as controls to improve the robustness of the analysis.

The questionnaire operationalizes three main constructs: (1) competencies, including digital skills, AI literacy, cybersecurity awareness, administrative and leadership capabilities; (2) confidence in the use of AI; and (3) perceived institutional capacity for digital reform. All variables are measured using Likert-type scales, and composite indices are constructed where appropriate.

The analytical strategy combines descriptive statistics, comparative tests between executive and management staff, and multiple regression models. Comparative analyses are used to identify differences across hierarchical levels, while regression models assess the extent to which competencies predict confidence in AI and, subsequently, the perceived capacity of institutions to implement digital reforms.

The use of self-reported data and a cross-sectional design limits causal inference and generalizability. However, the approach provides a consistent empirical framework for identifying competency gaps and hierarchical differences relevant to AI-enabled public administration.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis indicates moderate levels of digital and AI-related competencies among respondents, with higher scores for general digital skills and lower values for AI literacy and cybersecurity awareness. Leadership and administrative competencies show greater dispersion, suggesting heterogeneous preparedness for managing digital transformation. Confidence in the use of AI is moderate, while perceived institutional capacity for digital reform reflects a balanced assessment between progress and existing constraints.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables

Variable	N*	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
Digital skills (software knowledge index)	172	2.17	0.67	1.00	4.00	0.71	0.16
AI literacy / familiarity index	131	1.66	0.74	1.00	4.42	1.62	2.09

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Confidence in AI use (feasibility index)	129	2.71	1.12	1.00	5.00	0.25	-0.69
Perceived institutional capacity for digital reform	171	3.72	0.99	1.10	5.00	-0.54	-0.52
Need for AI-related training	128	3.01	1.06	1.00	5.00	-0.12	-0.50

N varies across variables due to item non-response.*

Source: Authors' own calculations based on the database

Recorded for perceived institutional capacity for digital reform (M = 3.72, SD = 0.99), suggesting a moderately favorable assessment of organizational readiness for digital change. By contrast, the lowest score is observed for AI literacy / familiarity (M = 1.66, SD = 0.74), indicating limited exposure to or knowledge of specific AI technologies. Confidence in AI use remains moderate (M = 2.71, SD = 1.12), while the need for AI-related training is relatively pronounced (M = 3.01, SD = 1.06), supporting the interpretation that institutional openness to digital reform is not yet matched by sufficiently developed AI-related competences. Skewness and kurtosis values indicate acceptable distributional properties for subsequent parametric analyses, except for AI familiarity, which shows stronger asymmetry.

4.2. Comparative Analysis: Executive vs. Management

Comparative analyses reveal statistically significant differences between executive and management staff. Respondents in management positions report higher levels of leadership competencies, strategic digital skills, and confidence in AI use. The largest differences are observed in competencies related to algorithmic governance and change management, indicating a structural gap between operational and strategic levels.

Differences in basic digital skills are less pronounced, suggesting that disparities are more relevant in higher-order competencies rather than in foundational digital literacy.

Table 2. Independent samples t-test (executive vs. management)

Variable	Position	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	df	p-value
Digital skills	Executive	138	2.10	0.64	-2.14	170	0.034
	Management	34	2.39	0.71			
AI literacy	Executive	105	1.54	0.68	-3.02	129	0.003
	Management	26	2.12	0.82			
AI use confidence	Executive	104	2.58	1.08	-2.41	127	0.017
	Management	25	3.24	1.15			
Institutional capacity	Executive	137	3.68	0.98	-1.12	169	0.264
	Management	34	3.88	1.02			
Need for AI training	Executive	103	3.08	1.05	0.89	126	0.376
	Management	25	2.86	1.09			

Source: Authors' own calculations based on the database

The independent samples t-test results reveal statistically significant differences between executive and management staff in terms of digital competencies and AI-related capabilities. Management-level respondents report higher levels of digital skills ($p < 0.05$),

AI literacy ($p < 0.01$), and confidence in AI use ($p < 0.05$), indicating a stratification of technological readiness across hierarchical levels.

In contrast, no statistically significant differences are observed regarding perceived institutional capacity or the need for AI-related training ($p > 0.05$), suggesting a relatively uniform perception of organizational readiness and training demand across positions.

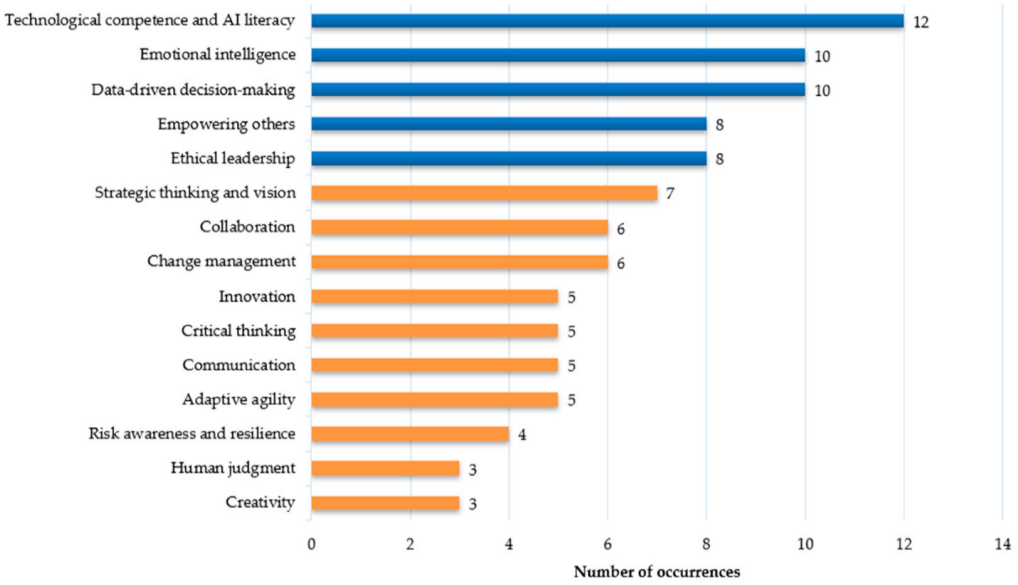

Figure 1. Distribution of key competencies for AI-enabled public administration
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on survey data

Figure 1 presents the distribution of key competencies associated with AI-enabled public administration, based on their frequency of occurrence. The results indicate a clear predominance of technological and analytical competencies, with *technological competence and AI literacy* (n = 12), *emotional intelligence* (n = 10), and *data-driven decision-making* (n = 10) emerging as the most frequently emphasized skills.

In contrast, transversal and adaptive competencies such as *innovation*, *critical thinking*, and *communication* show moderate representation (n = 5–6), while *human judgment* and *creativity* are among the least frequently mentioned (n = 3), suggesting a relative underestimation of reflective and interpretative capacities in AI-driven administrative contexts.

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Figure 3. Comparative evolution of key digital and AI-related indicators across respondent groups

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on survey data

The comparative analysis presented in Figure 3 reveals systematic differences between executive and management staff across all key indicators. Management-level respondents consistently report higher mean values for digital skills, AI literacy, and confidence in AI use, confirming the existence of a hierarchical digital divide within public administration.

The most pronounced gap is observed in AI literacy, suggesting that familiarity with advanced technologies remains unevenly distributed and concentrated at higher organizational levels. This pattern indicates that exposure to strategic decision-making contexts may facilitate greater engagement with AI-related tools and concepts.

In contrast, perceived institutional capacity for digital reform shows only moderate variation between groups, while the need for AI-related training remains relatively high across both categories. This suggests that, despite differences in individual competencies, there is a shared recognition of the necessity for continuous upskilling to support digital transformation.

4.3. Correlation Analysis

The correlation matrix shows positive and statistically significant relationships between competencies, confidence in AI, and perceived institutional capacity. The strongest associations are identified between:

- leadership competencies and institutional capacity,
- AI literacy and confidence in AI.

These findings suggest that both technical and strategic competencies contribute to shaping perceptions of digital transformation readiness.

Table 3. Correlation matrix between key variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Digital skills	1				

2. AI literacy	0.42**	1			
3. AI use confidence	0.38**	0.56**	1		
4. Institutional capacity	0.29**	0.34**	0.47**	1	
5. Training need	-0.21*	-0.33**	-0.28**	-0.19*	1

Source: Authors' own calculations based on the database

The correlation analysis reveals a consistent pattern of positive and statistically significant relationships between competencies, AI-related confidence, and perceived institutional capacity. AI literacy exhibits the strongest association with confidence in AI use ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that familiarity with AI technologies is a key determinant of individuals perceived ability to engage with such systems.

Digital skills are moderately correlated with both AI literacy ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and confidence ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that general technological proficiency supports, but does not fully explain, AI-related capabilities. Institutional capacity is positively associated with both competencies and confidence, with the strongest relationship observed for AI confidence ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting the role of perceived self-efficacy in shaping organizational readiness.

In contrast, the need for AI-related training is negatively correlated with all other variables, particularly with AI literacy ($r = -0.33$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that lower levels of competence are associated with higher perceived training needs.

These correlations provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships and justify the use of regression analysis to further examine the predictive role of competencies and AI-related confidence.

4.4. Regression Analysis

The regression models provide further evidence regarding the explanatory relationships between variables.

In Model 1, competencies significantly predict confidence in the use of AI, with AI literacy and digital skills emerging as the strongest predictors. Leadership competencies also display a positive effect, although less pronounced.

In Model 2, both competencies and AI-related confidence significantly predict perceived institutional capacity for digital reform. Leadership competencies and administrative skills have the strongest direct effects, while confidence in AI contributes additionally, indicating that trust in AI enhances perceived institutional readiness.

Table 4. Multiple regression results

Variables	**Model 1 (AI confidence)**		**Model 2 (Institutional capacity)**	
	B	**β**	**B**	**β**
Digital skills	0.31**	0.24	0.18*	0.15
AI literacy	0.62***	0.48	0.27**	0.22
AI confidence	—	—	0.41***	0.36
Constant	0.94	—	1.52	—
R^2	0.41		0.46	
Adjusted R^2	0.39		0.44	
F-statistic	29.87***		31.12***	

Source: Authors' own calculations based on the database

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The regression results provide strong empirical support for the proposed relationships between competencies, AI-related confidence, and perceived institutional capacity.

In Model 1, AI literacy emerges as the most significant predictor of confidence in AI use ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), followed by digital skills ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that familiarity with AI technologies plays a central role in shaping individuals' perceived ability to use AI, while general digital competencies have a complementary effect. The model explains a substantial proportion of variance ($R^2 = 0.41$), suggesting good explanatory power.

In Model 2, both competencies and AI-related confidence significantly predict perceived institutional capacity. AI confidence has the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individual-level perceptions of technological feasibility translate into broader assessments of organizational readiness. AI literacy ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$) and digital skills ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) also contribute positively, though to a lesser extent. The model explains 46% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.46$), indicating a robust explanatory structure.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the growing body of literature emphasizing that the digital transformation of public administration is not solely a technological process, but a complex socio-technical transition shaped by competencies, organizational factors, and individual perceptions. In line with previous research (Medaglia et al., 2024; Criado et al., 2025), the results confirm that competencies play a central role in enabling the adoption and effective use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the public sector.

A first important result concerns the existence of a hierarchical digital divide within public administration. The comparative analysis shows that management-level respondents exhibit significantly higher levels of digital skills, AI literacy, and confidence in AI use compared to executive staff. This finding is consistent with studies highlighting that exposure to strategic decision-making contexts facilitates the development of advanced competencies and technological awareness (Auth et al., 2026; Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2024). However, the persistence of such disparities suggests that digital transformation may reinforce existing organizational inequalities if not accompanied by inclusive training policies and capacity-building programs.

Second, the results highlight a clear distinction between general digital skills and AI-specific competencies. While respondents report moderate levels of proficiency in standard digital tools, AI literacy remains significantly lower and exhibits a highly skewed distribution. This confirms the argument advanced by UNESCO (2022) that AI-related competencies require a distinct and more complex skill set that goes beyond basic digital literacy. The findings also support the view that the transition toward algorithmic governance depends on the development of specialized knowledge, including data interpretation, system understanding, and ethical awareness.

A third key contribution of the study lies in identifying the role of confidence in AI use as a mediating mechanism. The regression analysis demonstrates that competencies influence perceived institutional capacity both directly and indirectly through confidence in AI. This result extends existing research on AI adoption in public administration by

showing that the relationship between skills and organizational outcomes is not linear, but partially mediated by individual-level perceptions. In other words, possessing competencies is not sufficient; these competencies must translate into a sense of feasibility and trust in AI systems in order to impact institutional readiness. This finding aligns with the literature on trust and AI governance (Lahusen et al., 2024), which emphasizes that confidence is a critical factor in the acceptance and effective use of algorithmic systems.

At the same time, the study reveals an important tension between perceived institutional readiness and actual competence levels. Although respondents report relatively high levels of perceived institutional capacity for digital reform, their AI literacy and advanced digital competencies remain limited. This discrepancy suggests the existence of a *"perceived readiness versus actual capability gap"*, indicating that institutional optimism may not be fully supported by the underlying human capital. Such a gap can have significant implications for policy implementation, as overestimating organizational readiness may lead to premature or ineffective adoption of AI technologies.

Another relevant finding concerns the relatively high and uniform need for AI-related training across hierarchical levels. Despite differences in competencies, both executive and management staff recognize the importance of further skill development. This supports the argument that continuous learning is a critical component of digital transformation in the public sector (Gaf-Deac et al., 2024) and highlights the necessity of designing structured training programs that address both technical and non-technical dimensions of AI use.

From a broader perspective, the results contribute to the literature on sustainable digital governance by empirically linking individual competencies with institutional capacity. While previous studies have primarily focused on conceptual frameworks or sector-specific applications, this research provides quantitative evidence that competencies and confidence jointly shape perceptions of organizational readiness. This integrated perspective reinforces the idea that sustainable digital transformation requires alignment between technological adoption, human capital development, and governance capacity.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between civil servants' competencies, confidence in the use of artificial intelligence (AI), and the perceived institutional capacity to implement digital reforms in Romanian public administration. The findings confirm that digital transformation is fundamentally conditioned by human capital factors, extending beyond technological infrastructure.

The results highlight three main contributions. First, they identify a hierarchical digital divide, with management-level staff demonstrating higher levels of digital and AI-related competencies than executive employees. Second, the study reveals a significant gap between general digital skills and AI-specific competencies, indicating limited preparedness for algorithmic governance. Third, and most importantly, the analysis demonstrates that confidence in AI use acts as a mediating mechanism between competencies and perceived institutional capacity, emphasizing that skills must translate into operational trust to influence organizational outcomes.

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These findings have relevant policy implications. Public administrations should prioritize targeted training programs focused on AI literacy, data-driven decision-making, and change management, while also addressing disparities across hierarchical levels. At the same time, capacity-building strategies should integrate not only technical skills but also mechanisms that enhance trust and usability of AI systems.

The study is subject to limitations related to the use of self-reported data and a cross-sectional design, which restrict causal inference. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches and comparative analyses across countries to further explore the dynamics between competencies, AI adoption, and institutional performance.

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