

“It’s Time to Focus on Humanity”: Millennial Business Students’ Perceptions of Competencies Needed by Future Leaders

Jonna Koponen, Essi Heikkilä, Sari-Johanna Karhapää, Mirjami Ikonen and Esa Hiltunen

Abstract

Technological innovations and increasing digitalization are changing business environments, workplace communications, and leadership practices rapidly. Yet, existing studies have not explored the competence that is required by leaders to lead efficiently in the digital age of the future. This study examines millennial business students’ perceptions of the competence needed by leaders in the digital age of the future. The data were collected from focus group interviews with business students (n=28) utilising the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. The findings indicate that the competence needed by leaders in the digital age of the future consists of five dimensions: the humanity dimension, the communication dimension, the remote work dimension, the technical and digital dimension, and the business foresight dimension. Today’s business students place great value in humanity and leaders’ communication competence, rather than merely stressing the leaders’ technical and digital competence.

Keywords:

millennial business students, leadership, competence, higher education

Jonna Koponen is an Associate Professor of Service Management and Communication and an Academic Research Fellow at the UEF Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland.

Essi Heikkilä is a Marketing Manager in the energy industry.

Sari-Johanna Karhapää is a University Lecturer in International Retail & Service Management and an Accreditation Manager at the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland.

Mirjami Ikonen is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Leadership and a Research Manager in DigS Research Community at the UEF Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland.

Esa Hiltunen is a Senior Lecturer in Management and Marketing & Innovation Management at the UEF Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland.

1. Introduction

We are witnessing a revolution of work with an opportunity to re-imagine how we work and lead people in the future (De Smet et al., 2021). The current state of the world depicts an epoch of change: the global pandemic, COVID-19, has forced many organizations to innovate new business strategies and apply new e-leadership practices when leading people in remote work environments (Contreras, Baykal & Abid, 2020). All in all, artificial intelligence (AI) and increased automation have begun to increasingly shape business strategies, organizational structures, and leadership practices (Bolden & O'Regan, 2016; Huang et al., 2019; vom Brocke et al., 2018). Developments in ICT and the increased use of digital communication tools at work have changed the way people communicate and connect, both of which are critical aspects in leadership (Webber & Forster, 2017). The question then arises (Allen, 2019), how should the understanding of leadership competence progress in this new era of rapid dissemination of information, distinct communication models, and constant technological change?

Besides digitalization, other megatrends will shape the workplace in the future. Megatrends move forward steadily and influence our future (Sitra, 2020). In addition to digitalization, the Finnish Innovation Fund, Sitra, has named the aging population (especially in the Western world) or demographic shift as well as diversity as two megatrends. Today, many organizations are dealing with a diverse and multigenerational workforce. For the first time, the global workforce comprises four separate generations working cooperatively: baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, also referred to as millennials, and Generation Z (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Koponen, 2019; Magano et al., 2020). Several authors have debated the issue of how millennials (born between 1981/1982 and 2002) are going to challenge and reform business practices (Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Gilbert, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2017), which is important because already now (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021) and in the near future, it will be millennials who will occupy most of the top-level positions in the organizations that make up the world's business environment. Most existing research provides insights of current or former CEOs or other executives' perceptions of future leadership competence (see, e.g., Westerman et al., 2014; Morikawa 2017; Van Wart et al., 2019; Müller & Klus, 2021). Although one can agree that experienced chief executives, managers, and leaders have essential knowledge of the matter, the future lies with the younger generations. As far as this present study is aware, prior research has not focused on millennial business students' perceptions of the necessary leadership competence for the digital age of the future.

Therefore, we examine millennial business students' perceptions of the leadership competencies required in the digital age of the future. With our findings, we bring forward a new understanding of leadership competence, and also the roles that leaders need to adapt to when leading people in the digital age of the future. We have selected to focus on the millennial generation as it sets itself apart from previous generations in several respects, one of which is that their relationship with technology is substantially closer and more open than that of previous generations (Gong et al., 2018). Through this relationship, it has been seen that millennials tend to have a lower tolerance of boredom than older generations, to expect variety, to be independent and autonomous, and to exhibit high levels of confidence in themselves and their peers (Roehling et al., 2011).

Many portrayals of millennials today are based on popular or business sources whose conclusions are not grounded in empirical study (Rosa & Hastings, 2017). Millennials are for example labelled "job hoppers" with a low commitment to organizations (Adkins, 2016; Landrum, 2017). Academic research supports this claim: a meta-analysis of 20 studies on generational

differences shows that compared with other generations millennials have greater intentions of leaving their organizations (Costanza et al., 2012). This challenges the development of leadership practices and competencies to commit young employees to the organization (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). Although previous studies on the competencies of leaders in the digital age exist (see e.g., Lawson, 2019; Van Wart et al., 2019) there is no consistent theoretical leadership framework that covers all the competencies listed in the existing literature. Moreover, existing leadership theories do not specifically consider the impact of digital transformation on leadership (Henderikx & Stoffer, 2022), and we lack an understanding of the leaders' competencies needed for the digital age of the future. Therefore, this present study will not seek to contribute to any specific leadership theory as such but will rather seek to identify the dimensions of the necessary leadership competence for the digital age from the millennial business students' perspective. Thus, the research question of this study is:

RQ1: How do millennial business students perceive the leadership competencies needed for the digital age of the future?

To begin, this study will present the theoretical background, focusing on digital transformation and leadership competence, leadership in the digital age, and millennials as a generation. This will then be followed by an introduction to the method of the study, the findings of which are derived from the data collected from business students in Finland. Finally, the implications of this study's results for leadership and management education as well as for business practitioners will be addressed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Digital transformation and leadership competence

Different theories and theoretical approaches to leadership have emerged over the years. Leadership theories have evolved from focusing on leaders' traits (e.g., Trait theories, Great Man theory), to leaders' skills and adaptation to leadership styles (e.g., situational, behavioural, and contingency theories) (Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022; Northouse, 2016). More recently, leadership theories have focused on employee engagement and person-centred styles (e.g., transformational leadership, collaborative leadership, servant leadership) (Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022; Northouse, 2016). In the field of leadership research, the focus of research has also shifted from a leader-only approach to one which acknowledges the role of followers, peers, the working environment, and culture (Larjovuori et al., 2018). Today, leadership is seen as a dyadic, strategic, and socially complex phenomenon (Yukl et al., 2002; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). All in all, theories of leadership have transformed from static leadership theory (e.g., Trait theories) to emphasize relationships in leadership practice (Auvinen et al., 2019; Northouse, 2016; Raelin, 2016). Still, existing leadership theories do not specifically consider the impact of digital transformation on leadership (Henderikx & Stoffer, 2022), and we are lacking an understanding of the competence leaders will need in the digital age of the future.

Digitalization, the use of digital technology as a pervasive phenomenon, is a crucial part of an ongoing transformation in business, organizations, and society. Westerman et al. (2014) divide the digital business transformation into three main elements: transforming the customer experience, rethinking operational processes, and reshaping business models. Digital transformation, therefore, indicates a broad, strategic business transformation that is driven by customers and requires an all-encompassing organizational change, often involving digital

technologies (Hanelt et al., 2020). It has been noted (Forrester, 2019) that such a transformation is a fundamental challenge for leaders as they must prepare for the disruptive future that might evolve in any direction.

A leader's role in the digital transformation is crucial (Westerman et al., 2014; Sainger, 2018; Müller & Klus, 2021), and lately researchers have paid special attention to electronic leadership (e-leadership). Avolio and colleagues (2000) were the first to define e-leadership as: "a social influence process embedded in both proximal and digital contexts mediated by AIT [Advanced Information Technology] that can produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and performance" (Avolio et al., 2014, p. 107). More recently, e-leadership has started to emphasize ICT and communication, as Van Wart et al. (2019) state: "e-leadership is the effective use and blending of electronic and traditional methods of communication. It implies an awareness of current ICTs, selective adoption of new ICTs for oneself and the organization, and technical competence in using those ICTs selected" (p. 83). Because e-leadership is a special form of leadership and as e-leadership practices are increasingly required in today's workplace, researchers have started to explore new competencies that e-leadership requires.

Competence is generally understood to consist of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Crawford, 2005; Magano et al., 2020), however, according to Loufrani-Fedida and Missonier (2015), competence is thought to be the ability of an individual, team, or company to combine and mobilise resources (skills, knowledge, attitudes) to implement an activity in a situation. Despite the different views of competence, in this study, we focus on the individual level, and we are interested in the competence of leaders in the digital age of the future.

In the existing literature, many insights and aspects of a leader's competence in the digital age can be found. While some experts predict that interpersonal skills and capabilities are likely to diminish in the digital future (Clerkin, 2015), others see that the future human workforce is likely to carry out more creative and strategic exploration work than that which is currently being done (Huang et al., 2019; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). As the work itself is changing, the competencies of leading people are also undergoing changes, and many authors have formulated the required competencies for business leaders in the digital landscape. Examples of core leadership competencies established by several social science and management researchers are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Suggested leadership competencies in the digital age found in the previous literature.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES	AUTHORS
Taking risks and enhancing decision making	Horney et al. (2010)
Promoting transparency	Bennis (2013)
Engaging with employees and cherishing relationships within networks Leading the way with commitment and strong digital governance	Westerman et al. (2014)
Creativity Enhanced social intelligence and critical thinking skills	Clerkin (2015)
Understanding the implications of intelligent digital technologies	Kohnke (2017)
Building a strong vision of the future and communicating clearly	Larjovuori et al. (2018)
Encouraging and emphasizing experimentations, and accepting errors	vom Brocke et al. (2018)
Foresight for new business opportunities	Sainger (2018)
Exercising life-long learning	Moldenhauer and Londt (2019)
Soft (personal) skills such as motivating and collaborating with others, communication, change management, talent management, relationship management, negotiation, conflict management	Lawson (2019)
Awareness of current information technologies (ICTs) Selecting suitable ICT for the organization and for oneself Technological competence in using those technologies. Leaders' e-competence includes e-communication skills, e-change management skill, e-social skills, e-team building skill, e-technological skills, and e-trustworthiness.	Van Wart et al. (2019)
A strong ability to think and act entrepreneurially (self-)organization and IT skills A profound ability to motivate others A high degree of flexibility, commitment, and creativity. Calmness	Müller & Klus (2021)

Regarding examples of leadership competencies, as Table 1 shows, at a time when all major industries are going digital, leaders need to view all aspects of business differently than in the past and need foresight for new business opportunities (Sainger, 2018). As the economic context grows more erratic, business leaders around the globe will be expected to take a more flexible approach to risk and make faster decisions (Horney et al., 2010). Furthermore, promoting transparency (Bennis, 2013), for example, in decision-making, is considered important.

Westerman et al. (2014) have suggested a leader's ability to engage employees and cherish relationships within networks, as well as by leading the way with commitment and strong digital governance to be key, while Clerkin (2015) has pointed out a leader's creativity, social intelligence, and critical thinking skills (see Table 1). In addition, Kohnke (2017) underlines the importance of chief executives' competence in appreciating the implications for leadership of digital and intelligent technologies, which will not only change the manner of working, but will also expedite change in every business area. As a digital age leader needs to encourage a working environment that has room for experimentation and errors, it is only in such an environment that innovation can thrive. Furthermore, leaders should have a clear vision of the purpose of the organization and communicate this to subordinates to foster their genuine commitment to it. Simultaneously, successful leaders should empower their subordinates to reach their full potential in finding creative ways to reach their goals. Indeed, organizations that have a fluid structure are more innovative than those that are more rigid (vom Brocke et al., 2018).

Implementing digital transformation within organizations calls for commitment,

strategic actions, and investments (Larjovuori et al., 2018). Larjovuori et al. (2018) recommend that executives absorb digital business transformation into an operating strategy. Ultimately, leading the digital transformation will involve managing change (Sainger, 2018), and leaders are expected to be life-long learners (Moldenhauer & Londt, 2019). Leadership competence is seen as a part of the Management Accounting Competence Framework, which includes six knowledge domains (strategy, planning and performance; reporting and control; technology and analytics; business acumen and operations; leadership; and professional ethics and values; see Lawson, 2019). This framework has been created by the Institute of Management Accountants (IMA), where leadership competence includes soft (personal) skills such as motivating and collaborating with others, communications, change management, talent management, relationship management, negotiation, and conflict management.

Van Wart and colleagues (2019) have suggested that e-leadership requires leaders' awareness of current information technologies (ICTs), selecting suitable ICTs for the organization and for oneself, and technological competence in using those technologies (see Table 1). Van Wart et al. (2019) identified a need for six e-competencies that e-leaders require (SEC model). These competencies include e-communication skills, e-change management skills, e-social skills, e-team building skills, e-technological skills, and e-trustworthiness. While such competencies have been found to be prevalent in the context of the public sector, they are not found to be so in a business context per se. Finally, Müller & Klus (2021) emphasized leaders' ability to think and act entrepreneurially, their (self-)organization and IT skills, and the ability to motivate others. Leaders are expected to have a high degree of flexibility, commitment, and creativity. Furthermore, calmness is appreciated during the fast-speeding digitalization.

Even though studies on leaders' competence in the digital era exist (see Table 1), it seems there is no consistent theoretical leadership framework that covers all the competencies listed in the table. Therefore, this present study will not seek to contribute to any specific leadership theory as such but will rather seek to identify the dimensions of leadership competence needed for the digital age from the millennial business students' perspective. This information is relevant for business educators as well as businesses as the millennial business students are or will be leaders in the future.

2.2 Characteristics of the millennial generation

Since it is suggested that each generation has its own typical personality, comprising distinct models of behaviour and values that are dominant within that group of people (Magano et al., 2020), many authors have described the characteristics of the millennial generation. The millennial generation has many names including Generation Y, Generation Me, the Look at Me Generation and the iGeneration (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021; Rosa and Hastings, 2018). However, the idea can be criticized that social categories such as occupation, age, generation, or gender, are suitable for categorizing people (Holliday, Kullman & Hyde, 2016), and results should be generalised with caution. Although generation stereotypes with certain characteristics provide a map for action, it is important to remember that stereotypes are generalizations which need to be viewed with caution (Fox, 2010; Rosa and Hastings, 2018). Still, Kultalahti (2017) states that although it is challenging to verify the differences between generations, and it is questioned that millennials are a coherent group, studying millennials' perceptions of working life is worthwhile.

Millennials have been named millennials as they were raised in the digital age in the new millennium (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). When one considers their character in the genera-

tional discussion, millennials are seen as able to use technology with ease and have adopted technology as an important element in their lives. Thus, technology has shaped millennials as a partly different generation compared to the previous age cohorts. In the discussion of millennials, technology is usually seen as very natural for millennials as they have spent their formative years with a variety of technologies, including the Internet and video games (see Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Shrivastava et al., 2017).

Some authors (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021) make a distinction between the so-called late-millennials and early-millennials. Late millennials are now entering their mid-20s and early millennials are in their 30s. Therefore, it is not so straightforward to describe millennials as a coherent group, by for instance referring to stereotypes of millennials depicting them as a self-centred and disrespectful generation (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). On the other hand, in previous studies, millennials have been described as well-educated, sociable, optimistic, collaborative, open-minded (see Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Millennials have been described as having good homes and care in their childhood and their parents have tended to praise and give positive feedback to them. Therefore, they tend to have good self-esteem, feel confident and assertive, and they are longing for recognition and praise (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Researchers have also studied how millennials behave in the workplace, how they should be led, and what they seek in a job (Roehling et al., 2011; Shrivastava et al., 2017). Tending to believe in equality and freewill, millennials, therefore, spurn authoritarian and inflexible hierarchical structures (Roehling et al., 2011). For instance, millennial employees seek meaning in what they do for a living, have a casual attitude to their supervisors, place a high value on their personal lives, and a flexible work environment (Shrivastava et al., 2017). In addition, the millennial workforce exhibits a desire for growth opportunities and promotion, competitive wages, variety in projects, and constant supervision (Shrivastava et al., 2017). Nevertheless, as far as this present study is aware, there is no previous research on the perceptions of millennial business students of the digital future and of the leadership competencies required to manage it.

3. Methodology

With regard to methodology, this study applies a qualitative approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016) using focus group interviews and employing the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET; Zaltman, 1997), which has been developed to encourage dialogue between participants (Olson et al. 2009).

3.1 Data collection

The data collected for this study was acquired through focus group interviews (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999) during 2020–2021 with 28 graduate business students who participated in seven focus groups in a medium-sized Finnish university. To allow for more flexible scheduling and safety due to the pandemic situation, the focus groups' interviews were conducted using video-conferencing technology. The participants in this study were asked in the invitation to bring images (a picture) with them to the interviews/workshop that they felt represented their thoughts about leaders' competence needs in the digitalized future. In the Zaltman metaphor-elicitation technique ZMET (Zaltman, 1997; 2003) the interviewees are encouraged to take a picture with them to the interview. This is thought to facilitate the cognitive process of the participants and to enhance discussion (Coulter, Zaltman & Coulter, 2001). The ZMET technique exploits detailed interviews that enable the researcher to capture the thoughts and feelings of an informant about

the research problem more extensively (Coulter et al. 2001). Zaltman (1997) argues that many substantive research issues such as emotion, metaphor, nonverbal communication, and visual imagery are often missed or are misrepresented by previous and current methods of research. That is, the manner of thoughts that emerge can differ dramatically from how those thoughts are communicated to an audience (van Dessel, 2005). Therefore, having the participants collect visual images increases the likelihood that significant but previously unconsidered topics will be revealed and discussed (Zaltman, 1997). The ZMET interview enables asking informants to create a tangible expression of interpretations that they wish to share during the interview and finally, with the summary image(s), the participants create a composite of their thoughts and feelings associated with the topic (Woodside, 2017). However, the data analysis is based on the transcribed text of the focus group interviews, not the images as such.

In this study, each focus group interview invited three to five participants to discuss the effect of digitalization and technological innovations on leaders’ competence in the future. The interviewees were between 19 and 30 years of age and therefore our data focuses more on late millennials than early millennials (see Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). There was an equal mix of female and male business students. Details of the participants’ backgrounds are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants in the study

FOCUS GROUPS	PARTICIPANTS	MAJOR SUBJECT	GENDER	AGE
Group 1	Respondent A	International Business & Sales Management	Male	24
	Respondent B	International Business & Sales Management	Male	27
	Respondent C	Innovation Management	Male	25
	Respondent D	Accounting & Finance	Female	24
Group 2	Respondent E	International Business & Sales Management	Female	25
	Respondent F	International Business & Sales Management	Female	23
	Respondent G	Innovation Management	Male	23
Group 3	Respondent H	Innovation Management	Female	30
	Respondent I	Accounting & Finance	Female	24
	Respondent J	Accounting & Finance	Male	24
Group 4	Respondent K	Accounting & Taxation	Female	30
	Respondent L	Accounting & Taxation	Male	22
	Respondent M	Social Policy & Business	Female	23
	Respondent N	Management & Marketing	Female	19
Group 5	Respondent O	Business Administration	Male	23
	Respondent P	Environmental and Biosciences and Business	Male	30
	Respondent Q	Business Administration	Male	27
	Respondent R	Adult Education & HR	Female	27
	Respondent S	Innovation Management	Female	27

Group 6	Respondent T	Service Management	Female	27
	Respondent U	Service Management	Female	24
	Respondent V	Service Management	Male	23
	Respondent W	Accounting & Business Law	Female	23
	Respondent X	Accounting & Business Law	Male	23
Group 7	Respondent Y	Accounting & Taxation	Male	22
	Respondent Z	Accounting & Taxation	Male	27
	Respondent Å	Service Management	Female	24
	Respondent Ä	Service Management	Female	30

The duration of the interviews ranged from 65 to 100 minutes, and to ensure sufficient flexibility and open discussion—as is characteristic for focus groups—both semi-structured and open-ended questions were used to guide the conversation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). During the interviews, the discussion focused on leadership characteristics and competencies vital for digital age leadership, and the participants were asked to describe which leadership competencies, they considered critical in the future.

To begin, the participants explained why and how the pictures they had chosen best represented their feelings about future leadership and digitalization. A variety of ideas were represented in the pictures, e.g., teamwork, remote work, global networking, age diversity, gender, and colour, combining personal life and working life, powerful cartoon heroes, political leaders, etc. Next, the participants were asked to expand their thoughts on one of the pictures in any direction or dimension. The participants then explained what would start to emerge and how that would affect their thinking about the research topic. During the interviews, the atmosphere was relaxed, informal and conversational. Finally, after all the participants had presented their ideas using the pictures, they were asked to form a mutually agreed collection of three pictures that they believed best represented future leadership skills and competencies in the digital era. To ensure complete comprehension, the interviewer reflected and restated the interviewees' comments (Christensen & Olson, 2002).

The aim of the focus group method is to describe how the group members (people who have something in common) think or feel about a given topic (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The pictures were used in focus group interviews as a trigger to elicit the discussion on leadership in the digital era. In this study, each respondent first presented their own image and then the group eventually selected 1–3 pictures that best illustrated the group's shared understanding of future leadership in the digital era. The images were used in the focus group interviews as a trigger to elicit the discussion on leadership in the digital era. Elicitation is a technique used to enable participants to think and say how they perceive the topic. The pictures provide clues to get the interviewees to express their thoughts and feelings (Woodside, 2017) rather than the researcher providing the explanation.

To avoid the challenges related to the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of the focus group research, these problems (e.g., some individuals dominating the discussion) were identified in advance. For example, the moderator ensured that all members of the group had an opportunity to contribute to the conversation, without being under pressure to do so if unwilling (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Then the moderator asked questions, listened, kept the discussion on track, and ensured that everyone had a chance to share their views (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

3.2 Data analysis

Following the collection of the data, the focus group interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were analysed with a theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis refers to a method used to identify, analyse, and report patterns from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When analysing the data of this study, the transcribed texts were first carefully read to obtain a holistic understanding of the data. Following this, the initial codes were formed in relation to the research question by forming them according to the millennial business students’ perceptions of the leadership competencies needed for the future digital age. Then, the data were systematically coded. All in all, we found 27 different codes. After this, we connected similar codes in illustrative sub-categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, appropriate sub-categories were connected to five main dimensions. To represent the participating millennial business students’ perceptions of leadership competencies, relevant quotations from the data were selected. The illustrative excerpts from the data are used to verify the researchers’ interpretations.

To illustrate the analysis, the audit trail of conceptualizing the humanity dimension is presented as an example in Table 3. First, the millennial business students’ perceptions related to leadership competencies were identified and coded in the transcribed text. The codes related to *leaders’ ability to be a casual, approachable, and coaching mentor*, and to have a *sense of humanity*, as well as the *ability to detect and understand employees’ emotions and personalities*, in addition to having *emotional intelligence*. These codes were then connected with a sub-category called *emotional intelligence*. Besides emotional intelligence, two other sub-categories were found (the ability to motivate others and self-reflection skills), which were connected to form the final humanity dimension.

Table 3. Example of the data analysis focusing on the humanity dimension

EXAMPLE FROM THE DATA	CODE IN THE DATA	SUB-CATEGORY	DIMENSION
<p>“It is precisely a leader’s task to secure ... the communality in the job. Unofficial encounters ... coffee breaks are important. A leader should interact with the team at the same level, for example, by participating in quizzes at lunch breaks.” (Respondent E, Group 2)</p>	- Ability to be a casual, approachable, and coaching mentor	Emotional intelligence	Humanity dimension
<p>“A great leader is someone who knows people and is a good guy.” (Respondent J, Group 3)</p>	- Sense of humanity		
<p>“It is not easy for a leader to ‘read’ how the subordinates are doing if they can only reach out to each other remotely and meet on a computer screen.” (Respondent W, Group 6)</p>	- Ability to detect and understand employees’ emotions and personalities and have emotional intelligence		

When considering research ethics, the participants are presented anonymously in this study. Furthermore, the interviewees participated voluntarily in this study, and they had the opportunity to withdraw at any stage. The research participants were also informed of the aims of the research, how the research data would be analyzed, and how the findings would be reported.

4. Findings

To answer the research question of this study, the findings are organized to explain millennial business students' perceptions of leadership competencies in the digital age of the future.

4.1 Millennial business students' perceptions of leadership competencies in the digital age of the future

The findings are illustrated in Table 3 below. We found five dimensions indicating the leaders' competencies the interviewees considered most important in the digital age of the future: the humanity dimension, the remote work dimension, the technological and digital dimension, the business foresight dimension, and the communication dimension.

Table 4. Findings composed of codes, sub-categories and dimensions.

CODE IN THE DATA	SUB-CATEGORY	DIMENSION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to be a casual, approachable, and coaching mentor - Sense of humanity - Ability to detect and understand employees' emotions and personalities and have emotional intelligence 	Emotional intelligence	Humanity dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to establish a sense of communality - Ability to detect value in employees' expertise and knowledge - Ability to motivate and engage employees 	Ability to motivate others	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to question one's own capabilities and reflect on one's behaviour - Ability to improve one's own skillset and diverse knowledge 	Self-reflection skills	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding the nature of remote work (e.g., working from home, office, or summer house) 	Remote work conditions	Remote work dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time management skills - Self-management skills 	Work-life balance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to make decisions about which data to collect - Ability to manage reputation through data 	Data management skills	Technological and digital dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding robotics, AI, and other technologies - Ability to lead with diverse technologies 	Managing robotics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to detect future business opportunities - Ability to detect trends and news about trends - Ability to question and test current strategies 	Strategic understanding	Business foresight dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to be agile to enable change - Ability to adapt to different roles depending on the leadership situation 	Change management agility	

- Ability to show interest and caring to employees - Ability to create meaning in work	Interpersonal communication skills	Communication dimension
- Ability to communicate clearly and effectively about strategy and change - Ability to communicate using digital channels and tools - Ability to activate employees	Internal corporate communication	
- Ability to justify the business's legitimacy to external stakeholders - Ability to apply social media in an appropriate manner to support good leadership	External communication	

4.1.1 Humanity dimension

The first dimension, humanity, included the sub-categories related to a leader’s emotional intelligence, the ability to motivate others, and self-reflection skills. According to the interviewees, the ability to identify employees’ emotions, work conditions, and taking an interest in employees’ personal lives were the biggest concern. The interviewees believed that when most of the social interaction between executives and employees takes place on digital platforms, a leader’s ability to interpret people’s emotions becomes more significant. Even on a computer screen, remote work makes it more crucial for a leader to detect employees’ true meanings and feelings. A good leader should give an impression of being laidback, easily approachable, and act more like a coaching mentor, and be able to show emotions and a sense of humanity. Due to the continued virtual communication trend in the future, detecting the employees’ genuine emotions and feelings is more complex and difficult. One of the interviewees explained this:

“It is not easy for a leader to ‘read’ how the subordinates are doing if they can only reach out to each other remotely and meet on a computer screen.” (Respondent W, Group 6)

The interviewees also indicated that a supportive role enhances survival in the digital age. According to the interviewees, leaders should also be aware of the health risks associated with digitalization and remote work. Thus, a leader’s responsibility to create an organizational culture and work ethics was highlighted: one that would pre-empt burnouts, social isolation, and both physical and mental illnesses. Indeed, the interviewees expected future leaders to be good guys who both help and support their followers. This was explained for instance as follows:

“A great leader is someone who knows people and is a good guy.” (Respondent J, Group 3)
“It is precisely a leader’s task to secure ... the communality in the job. Unofficial encounters ... coffee breaks are important. A leader should interact with the team at the same level, for example, by participating in quizzes at lunch breaks.” (Respondent E, Group 2)

As well as this, the interviewees pointed out that work communities are being disrupted due to digitalization, and that employees are starting to demand more from their job and their employers, which reflects a leader’s ability to detect the value in their employees’ expertise. Furthermore, future leaders will need to find new ways to motivate their employees.

The findings drawn from the data suggest leaders should constantly reflect on and question their own skills and capabilities. Consequently, as the following response illustrates, the interviewees stressed that leaders should be open to new opportunities to learn and take the

initiative to develop themselves rather than solely rely on old habits:

“I’d say [leaders] must be open to developing and enhancing their expertise in terms of technology and digitalization ... you cannot just state that we’ll continue doing things like we always have ... leaders who deny change will not succeed in the long run.” (Respondent G, Group 2)

4.1.2 Remote work dimension

The second dimension, remote work, includes the sub-categories of remote work conditions and work-life balance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work increased both suddenly and rapidly in 2020 and is thought to have an enduring effect on leadership. Based on the interviewee responses, remote work is seen to be less expensive for the employer since physical offices are no longer required and, in this sense, technology-mediated work is cost-effective.

Furthermore, the essence of physical offices is changing, as the following responses illustrate:

“Work does no longer happen only in one place, you may work in your summer cabin, for example.” (Respondent U, Group 6)

“Will there be any offices at all, or are there only places to get together?” (Respondent Å, Group 7)

Other examples of skills considered important in future leadership were those related to time management and self-management. Concerning the relationship between work and an employee’s free time, the interviewees wondered whether there was any evidence so far to suggest how remote work will affect employees’ well-being:

“As the separation between work and free time continues to blur ... and you take it as your responsibility to respond to every single work matter and be available 24/7... in the long run, this’ll have an impact on people’s well-being and hinder living in the moment.” (Respondent K, Group 4)

4.1.3 Technological and digital dimension

The third dimension, the technological and digital dimension, included data management skills in addition to managing robotics, and the interviewee responses stressed the significance of data analytics and other technology-related studies in the future of work. As well as this, the interviewees emphasized that current leaders need to be open to technological advancements and to develop themselves in this field because a leader with no competence in digital or technological applications was seen by the interviewees to pose a risk to the smooth operation and information flow of a business. Additionally, a leader denying digitalization, technology, and change was considered by the interviewees to be problematic for business success, as illustrated in the following responses:

“... denying change and not staying open to enhancing one’s own competence is a critical pitfall.” (Respondent G, Group 2)

“A leader who isn’t competent with the latest technology endangers the information flow within a company.” (Respondent C, Group 1)

According to the participants of this study, technology had been influential for so long that they did not expect any major advancements to happen in the near future that would drastically change the way businesses operate:

"I don't think that digitalization or technology will really change current leadership models a lot as digitalization and technology have been around in organizations for so long ... probably the value of data and expert work will increase." (Respondent G, Group 2)

In their responses, the interviewees agreed that robotics and artificial intelligence would make up major parts of the supply chain and workflow in the future. Although many of the interviewees stressed that future leaders need to lead not only people but also technologies, the interviewees considered leading people to be the more important requirement. Furthermore, being competent in technology was thought to open new opportunities for younger employees to step up to positions of leadership.

4.1.4 Business foresight dimension

The fourth dimension, business foresight, refers to strategic understanding and agile change management skills. When it comes to strategic understanding, the interviewees believed that leaders will need to detect future business opportunities, business trends as well as news concerning trends. In addition, leaders need to understand that to remain in competition and maintain a competitive advantage, they must frequently question and test their current strategies:

"Leaders should listen to discussion and news about big data ... and get to know people who know something about it rather than burying their heads in the sand." (Respondent D, Group 1)

Regarding change management agility, the interviewees reasoned that to successfully navigate a competitive environment, leaders must be "agile and brave" enough to enable change within an organization:

"I'd say that a leader should demonstrate a transformative and optimistic attitude toward change while being agile, that is, to be able to adapt to new situations and contexts." (Respondent H, Group 3)

Furthermore, the interviewees emphasized a leader's ability to adapt to different roles depending on the leadership situation. For example, while an agile and transformative attitude towards change was required, at the same time many interviewees believed that the traditional leadership traits would also be required in the future, with one respondent stating that, a leader "should be like a lighthouse" (Respondent A, Group 7), showing the way firmly for employees.

4.1.5 Communication dimension

The fifth dimension, communication, included three sub-categories: interpersonal communication, internal corporate communication, and external communication. First, interpersonal communication skills were emphasized in the data, especially in relation to a radical increase in remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. As remote work and communication through technical mediated channels were seen to be the new normal in the work environment in the future, a leader's interpersonal communication skills will be highly important. From the results of the focus groups, interpersonal communication skills were tied to social and cultural intelligence which the interviewees suggested would translate to leaders being sensitive to employee well-being and efficiency. This was explained as follows:

*"The most important skill in leadership is the ability to communicate with people."
(Respondent M, Group 4)*

"It is important to be able to be present for the people. I'm sure there's going to be many different aspects and layers to this...there will be more coaching. A leader's task is to keep all subordinates aboard so that no one drops out (from the work community)." (Respondent A, Group 1)

As well as this, the interviewees emphasized a leader's ability to ask their employees questions such as how they are doing to create meaning for the job and the employees. In particular, one interviewee stated the following:

"In a world where we have everything, people start to search for meaning and leaders need to... create meaning for the everyday operations in an organization." (Respondent F, Group 2)

Regarding the second sub-category, internal corporate communications, the interviewees perceived that leaders of the future will need to be clear in their communication about strategy and goals. Additionally, in the future, digital channels and tools will make up most of the corporate communication channels. The ability of the leaders of the future to utilise these channels and tools effectively was underlined by the interviewees. Since some older leaders lack competence in digital channels, the interviewees in the focus groups considered them not only as posing a risk to the organization's data infrastructure, but also as being unprofessional:

*"A leader should communicate clearly to the employees and reinforce clear operating models."
(Respondent D, Group 1)*

Another important skill in this sub-category expressed in the results was the ability to activate employees. To be able to reach employees and to communicate through digital channels was perceived as a challenge for leaders in the future. Therefore, a leader should be able to activate the employees and make them understand how their own behaviour impacts the work community and atmosphere in the workplace. To aid this, employees should be encouraged to express their opinions and feelings.

Regarding the third sub-category of leaders' communication competence, external communication, a leader's ability to communicate the *legitimacy* of the company to external stakeholders was stressed as important in the interviewee responses. According to the interviewees, digitalization has made the world more transparent, giving rise to the need for more fluent

corporate communications. The following response reveals the interviewees' perceptions:

"Due to the competitive circumstances that digitalization has given rise to...leaders need to be able to communicate their business's legitimacy...and right to make a profit." (Respondent D, Group 1)

According to the interviewee responses, a leader should make a clear decision over whether to be on social media at all and that there should be no in-between position. If a leader decides to be present on social media, then he or she should be a leader there as well, thus enabling leaders such as Donald Trump or Elon Musk to acquire an almost infinite number of followers. Social media offers a platform for anyone, even the most unscrupulous of individuals, to become a leader, if not necessarily a business leader. This was not considered a benefit by the interviewees, but rather as an unfortunate side effect of digitalization:

"Social media and technology may enable more unscrupulous people to become leaders or bring out characteristics that in real-life people would frown upon." (Respondent D, Group 1)

5. Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate how millennial business students perceive the competence needed by leaders in the digital age of the future. The findings indicate that, according to millennial business students, the main competencies leaders will need in the digital age constitute the humanity dimension, the remote work dimension, the technical and digital dimension, the business foresight dimension, and the communication dimension. Consequently, business students today are found to place great value on humanity and communication, rather than merely stressing the positive aspects of digitalization and technology.

Our findings contribute to the previous leadership literature (Clerkin, 2015; Westerman et al., 2014; Larjovuori et al., 2020; van Wart et al., 2019) in that we have focused on future leadership competence associated with the digital future from the perspective of millennial business students. Focusing on students of the next generation is essential since they will be the fundamental players in business to come (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Four of the leadership competence dimensions found in this study (the communication, remote work, technological and digital, and business foresight dimensions) have also been mentioned in the previous literature (Kohnke, 2017; vom Brocke et al., 2018; Clerkin, 2015; Van Wart et al., 2019), although highlighted in a different manner. However, this present study expands our understanding of a leader's competence and introduces a new dimension to leadership competencies, namely the humanity dimension. Previous studies focusing on leaders' competence (see Table 1) have not explicitly pointed out this aspect before. To illustrate the competence needed and the roles of future leaders in the digital future, reference will be made to the following figure (Figure 1) when discussing the findings of this study in relation to previous studies.

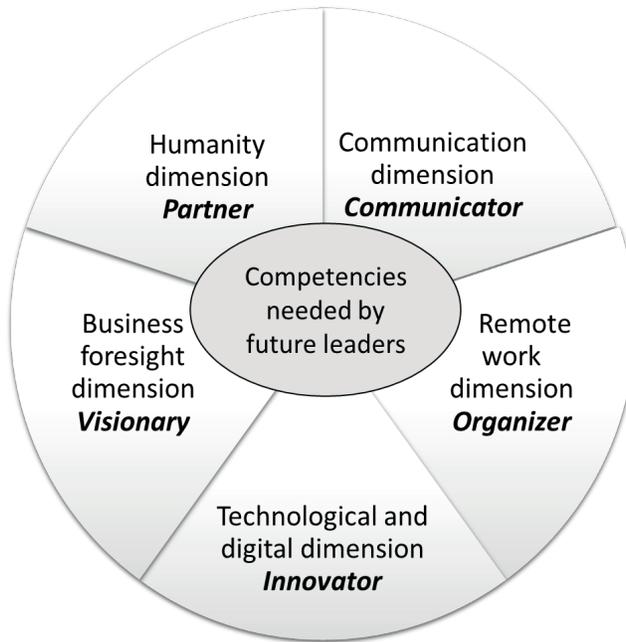


Figure 1. Future leaders' areas of competence in the digital era

This study has contributed to the previous literature with the addition of the humanity dimension, which includes a leader's emotional intelligence, the ability to motivate others, and self-reflection skills. According to millennials, the ability to identify people's emotions, work conditions, and take an interest in their personal lives were the greatest concern for leaders. Our findings indicate that leaders need to show humanity, understand their employees' emotions and personalities, and show emotional intelligence, even virtually when meeting from a distance. While major parts of the current literature on the future of leadership focus on areas of technical competence, risk-taking, and creative or innovative leading methods (Westerman et al., 2014; Horney et al., 2010; Clerkin, 2015), the data obtained from this present study reveals the importance of humanity, and this can be used to argue that a future leader should be more like a *partner* for employees.

Besides humanity, our findings indicate that millennial business students stressed the importance of the communication dimension. Since interpersonal communication refers to the way in which people negotiate meanings, identity, and relationships, and how they share information and feelings through verbal and nonverbal person-to-person communication (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008), possessing such skills means that a person can exhibit appropriate, effective, and ethical verbal and nonverbal communication behaviour in a certain context (see Koponen, Julkunen & Asai, 2019). Examples of interpersonal communication skills revealed as processes in a person's behaviour (Hargie, 2010) include listening, asking questions, showing empathy, providing social support, interpreting feelings, negotiating, and managing conflict (e.g., Koponen et al., 2019; Purhonen, 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). This present study's findings resonate with the idea that millennials respect leaders who encourage, listen, and support their followers (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021).

Besides interpersonal level communication, our findings indicate the importance of internal corporate communication and external communication, focusing on the use of social media, for example. Today, leaders are increasingly expected to handle external communications via social media (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram), and researchers are increasingly investigating CEOs' social media use regarding their social disclosure on Twitter, for example (see Yue et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the findings, this study proposes that a leader will need to be a good *communicator* in the future.

In addition to understanding remote working conditions and the importance of a work-life balance in the remote work dimension, the findings of this study indicate that time management skills and self-management skills are becoming more important than before. Globally, remote work increased rapidly in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is thought will have an enduring effect on leadership. For instance, the latest data regarding remote work in Finland (Blomqvist et al., 2020) indicates that Finns have been satisfied with remote working conditions, but social aspects of work were among the more challenging aspects of adjusting to remote work. Remote work was found to be the cause, for example, of feeling isolated from co-workers as well as society, and missing opportunities to develop workplace friendships (Blomqvist et al., 2020). Taking these aspects into account, when leading people, future leaders must be good *organizers* and provide opportunities for both task-related and social meetings between employees, which is supported by the findings of this present study.

Although the technical and digital dimension was considered important for future leaders in this study, the millennial business students—who are often referred to as digital natives (Howe & Strauss, 2000)—seemed not to value digitalization and technological advances as much as emphasizing the human aspects of the work of future leaders. Still, they considered data analytics, data management skills, and the ability to manage robotics important. Our findings highlighted that the current leaders need to be open to technological advancements, a field in which they need to be receptive to develop themselves. As the first generation to have grown up with technology, millennials have a more natural relationship with it (Becton et al. 2014; Gong et al. 2018). Therefore, they consider it important to have an open attitude towards technology and a willingness to innovate and learn new forms of technology. When it comes to the technological and digital dimension, this study proposes that a future leader is expected to be a good *innovator*.

Strategic understanding and agility concerning change management are part of the business foresight dimension, and based on this study's findings, future leaders will need to detect future business opportunities, business trends, as well as news concerning trends. Leaders will need to understand that to remain in competition and maintain or restore a competitive advantage, current strategies need to be reformed frequently. These findings are supported by previous studies, which have also indicated the importance of strategy and planning as a part of management accounting competence (Lawson, 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies to rapidly change and renew their business models (Breier et al., 2021), and therefore it is essential that future leaders are *visionaries* who can innovate new strategies and business models.

To conclude, the study findings highlighted the humanity dimension as a unique competence area in future leadership, while these aspects were not similarly highlighted in previous research regarding digital age leadership since the previous research has tended to emphasize more operational, cognitive, and technical areas of competence (Horney et al., 2010; Moldenhauer & Londt 2019; Westerman et al., 2014). One reason for this might be that, commonly, the

informants in previous studies were CEOs and other executives (Westerman et al., 2014; Larjovuori et al., 2018; Morikawa 2017), whereas this present study focused on millennial students.

Even though it is important to remember that stereotypes are generalizations that need to be viewed with caution (Fox, 2010; Rosa & Hastings, 2018), it has been suggested that each generation has its typical personality (McCafferty 2003). Similarly, a generation's position in the world affects their thinking. The question then is, which common values and experiences drive millennial students to emphasize humanity and communication skills? One explanation for this could be the millennials' childhood. Millennials are a generation whose parents spent more time at home and whose knowledge of child psychology was more advanced compared to their predecessors (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Therefore, millennial children were given a lot of shelter and care at home, which might contribute to their sense of caring for others as well. Additionally, millennials have been reported to be team-oriented (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), which could also explain the interviewees' strong emphasis on interpersonal communication skills, socialising, and getting to know their peers in the findings. Thus, our findings do not support the stereotypes about millennials depicting them as a self-centred and disrespectful generation (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Additionally, our findings do not support the idea that millennials are not willing to conduct teamwork (Rosa & Hastings, 2017).

The findings of this present study allow one to propose that alongside digitalization the next big wave in business could be humanization. Therefore, both current and future leaders of any business should continue to care for their employees, more than before (see also Blomqvist et al., 2020). Moreover, these findings emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships and humanity in the workplace. Even if it seems inevitable that AI and robotics will become a significant part of the workforce (Marnewick & Marnewick, 2020), leaders still need to restore their interpersonal and social skills and pay attention to human relationships inside and outside the employer organization. Indeed, while robotics will make more working tasks routine, people will have more time to carry out work that requires competence and characteristics explicit in humans (e.g., creativity, feelings, empathy, interpersonal interaction, problem-solving; see Huang et al., 2019; Lawson, 2009; Marnewick & Marnewick, 2020).

5.1 Managerial implications

The data obtained from this study may help higher education institutions in developing and renewing their leadership studies. Management scholars have a crucial role in installing the right mindset at the nascent stage of managerial development of future leaders in business schools (Acharya et al. 2021). For example, it could be considered and reflected in the existing curriculum to offer studies on handling diverse communication situations, showing humanity and enhancing emotional intelligence or understanding, and leading remote work. Acharya, Garcia-Tapiäl and Jena (2021) state that multiple pedagogies (incident learning, simulations, case analysis) should be applied in business schools for attitude development, e.g., a sense of ownership should be taught, leading future leaders to work for the greater good and becoming more 'Society-Centred'. Furthermore, as managers are hiring millennials and leading them in the workplace, they can benefit from these studies. Since millennials perceive that a leader can be remote in the digital environment, but not necessarily distant for them, this study indicates that millennials appreciate leaders who take care of their employees and offer social support.

5.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Due to the limited scope and depth of this study, there are some constraints to the generalizability of the study results. First, the research was only conducted in a single university. Therefore, to gain more variety in the results, representatives from multiple universities could participate in similar future studies. Furthermore, to gain a more holistic understanding of a leader's competence, the perspectives of managers could have been added as they have more experience in leading people in today's contemporary working environment. Moreover, these findings indicate five important dimensions of future leaders' competence, but it does not explicitly separate these dimensions into knowledge, skills and attitudes, which is considered to be the traditional understanding of competence (Crawford, 2005; Loufrani-Fedida & Missonier, 2015; Magano et al., 2020). Still, this study argues that skills and knowledge are embedded in the communication dimension, remote work dimension, technological and digital dimension, and business foresight dimension, whereas the humanity dimension is mainly concerned with affective aspects of competence. In future studies, the research stream of interest in millennials' perceptions of leadership and humanity practices could be conducted in organizations. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore cultural aspects and the values of millennials in multiple contexts.

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APPENDIX 1 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS:

Name? Age?

Where are you studying and what is your major?

At what stage are your studies?

Which branch would you prefer to work in?

Do you dream of becoming a supervisor/running a business?

MANAGEMENT IN THE FUTURE

What things do you think will change in management, technology, and work over the next ten years?

Would you tell me about the image? Why did you choose this image? How does it describe your thoughts on how you think technology and digitalization are changing leadership in organizations?

The interviewer asks each group member to expand the frames of a single image and describe what it would look like outside the image if the image were larger. The interviewee is further asked to make interpretations describing the topic under study.

Can you say three things that won't change in the next ten years?

In your opinion who is responsible for leading the company's digitalization?

What would a typical leader look like in the future? (gender, hobbies, income level, education, dress etc.)

What fears or threats do you think are associated with the technological future?

And what opportunities do you associate with the same future?

What do you think should/could be done today to achieve the best possible scenario?

What do you think leadership will be like in 10–15 years? What would it be like to be a leader?

The interviewer asks the participants in the group interview to assemble a set of three images.

Together, could you put together a set of three images that best represent your common idea of future leadership skills in the digital environment. Would you tell us why you chose these particular images and what ideas are associated with this as a whole?