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# Digital transformation of work: Theorizing the process from an identity theory perspective<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Organizations increasingly engage in digital transformation (DT) of work. Previous research has shown that DT of work can engender intended and unintended consequences, such as tensions signaling organizational inertia. Scholars and practitioners often attribute transformation failure to such inertia. However, not inertia but the failure to evaluate and address it entails transformation failure. To evaluate inertia, we must dissect the nature of tensions signaling it. For this, we must understand how the DT of work process, from which they emerge, unfolds.

We theorize that DT of work unfolds from an interplay of DT work and function work. We empirically study this interplay through an ethnography of a large car manufacturer's human resources function. We draw on identity theory—the concepts of identity claim and understanding—and illustrate that DT of work unfolds in three evolutionary periods marked by shifting identity claims and understandings reflected in DT work. We reveal that DT of work involves vertical (i.e., between claims and understandings) and horizontal (i.e., among coexisting understandings) identity tensions. Against previous literature's contentions, these tensions indicate that DT of work shifts identity by addition, not substitution.

We contribute twofold. First, we conceptualize a process model of how DT of work unfolds from an identity theory perspective. This model outlines how revised identity claims initiate DT work and how DT of work produces multiple identity understandings entailing vertical and horizontal identity tensions. While vertical tensions trigger revisions of identity claims that initiate adjustments in DT work, horizontal tensions suggest DT of work shifts identity by addition. Second, we outline how our insights into identity tensions in DT of work can inform research into DT-induced identity tensions and underlying inertia.

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## Introduction

Digital transformation (DT) changes firms' value creation and identity (Vial, 2019; Wessel et al., 2021). These deep-structure changes (Besson and Rowe, 2012) involve, and emerge from, DT at the level of work (Baptista et al., 2020; Brünker et al., 2024; Zimmer et al., 2023). That is, changes in organizational value creation or identity can engender changes at the level of work (e.g., Utesheva et al., 2016; Zimmer et al., 2023). Conversely, changes at the level of work can entail changes in value creation or identity (Baptista et al., 2020). *DT of work* thus refers to the process that alters how organizational members carry out *function work*, that is, the ongoing operational and strategic activities performed within an organizational function as part of its everyday responsibilities (Baptista et al., 2020; Jensen, 2018). This process stems from *DT work*, which refers to organizational members appropriating, innovating with, and using digital workplace technology with the aim of changing their function work (Baptista et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2023).

Previous literature has shown that DT of work can lead to both intended and unintended changes in the nature of function work (Baptista et al., 2020; Grønsund and Aanestad, 2020; Rossi et al., 2020). For example, scholars have found that DT of work leads to flexible ways of working (Marx et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020), to altered understandings of the role of digital workplace technology (e.g., Benbya et al., 2024), to new digital leadership routines (Braojos et al., 2024; Eberl and Drews, 2021; Gierlich-Joas et al., 2024), or to changes in workplace arrangements (Zimmer et al., 2023).

However, we also find reports of tensions toward DT of work that signal organizational inertia (Besson and Rowe, 2012; Haskamp et al., 2021; Utesheva et al., 2016). These tensions can surface as employees resisting adoption of new digital workplace technology, which can ground in habit, perceived competence loss, or identity threats (Rowe et al., 2017), or as institutional rigidity, entrenched logics, or legacy systems that resist digital reinvention (Utesheva et al., 2016; Hanelt et al., 2021). Theorizing about DT of work through the lens of identity shift, scholars suggest that these tensions emerge when organizational members cling to the existing—or old—identity rather than embrace the new identity. Accordingly, organizations can overcome the inertia that underpins these identity tensions by facilitating the substitution of the old identity (Keilbach et al., 2023; Tripsas, 2009; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021).

We argue that the prevalent substitution view on DT-induced identity shift runs the risk of mistaking the nature of the organizational inertia signaled in identity tensions. This is problematic from both an academic and practical viewpoint because “[...] it is not inertia that causes the failure of [organizational transformation], but rather poor evaluation of this inertia [...] and the resulting errors in design and conduct” (Besson and Rowe, 2012, p. 107). Indeed, in contrast to the prevalent substitution view, identity can also shift by addition. That is, rather than a new identity replacing an old one, it emerges alongside and coexists in parallel to the existing one (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Within this addition view, identity tensions do not signal inertia toward DT of work. Instead, they signify that multiple identities are at play as DT of work unfolds. Consequently, altering our view from substitution to addition amends how we apprehend DT-induced identity tensions. We argue that they become tensions *in* DT of work rather than *toward* DT of work and that this has theoretical and practical implications for how we understand DT of work and how organizations address identity tensions in DT of work (Graf et al., 2023; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Hence, we posit that to dissect the nature of organizational inertia in DT of work, we must comprehend how related DT-induced identity tensions emerge. We therefore ask the following research question: *how does DT of work unfold?*

To answer this question, we draw on an ethnography of DT of work in the human resources (HR) function of Auto, a large car manufacturer. We position our study within the prior literature on DT of work and employ the theoretical lens of identity shift. That is, we first synthesize DT of work literature into a theoretical framework for how DT of work unfolds from the interplay of DT work and function work. Second, we turn to the lens of identity shift. Specifically, we draw on the concepts of identity claims and understanding (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) to theorize the interplay of DT work and function work at Auto and how, through this interplay, DT of work unfolded and identity tensions emerged. Examining this process, we demonstrate that DT of work shifts identity by addition, which alters how we understand the nature of organizational inertia in DT of work.

Based on our analysis, we make two contributions to the DT of work literature. First, we provide a process theory for how DT of work unfolds along evolving DT work that reflects and produces different identity claims and understandings. Furthermore, we show that DT of work produces not one but multiple identity understandings which suggests that DT of work shifts identity by addition. Second, we argue that this alters how we understand the nature of organizational inertia in DT of work and outline a research agenda to advance scholarly debate on DT-induced tensions from the perspective of identity theory.

## Understanding digital transformation of work through identity shift

The foundation for theorizing the process of DT of work is synthesizing existing literature into a theoretical framework and, considering our empirical case, providing an overview of previous studies on the DT of HR work. Second, we introduce concepts from identity theory, specifically identity claim and identity understanding, as our theoretical lens for investigating the DT of work process.

### *Digital transformation of work*

#### *Synthesizing the digital transformation of work literature*

Practitioners' reports of DT disrupting organizations and industries have spurred extensive research (e.g., Carroll et al., 2023; Rowe and Markus, 2023; Vial, 2019) that shows that DT entails deep structure changes (Besson and Rowe, 2012; Markus and Rowe, 2023) like changes in value creation (Vial, 2019; Wessel et al., 2021), organizational identity (Wessel et al., 2021), or the nature of work (Baptista et al., 2020; Hanelt et al., 2021). Exploring respective changes to the nature of work, scholars have foregrounded that the

appropriation and use of digital workplace technology alter work arrangements (Jensen, 2018). For example, they observed the transformation of workplace arrangements (Zimmer et al., 2023), leadership routines (Eberl and Drews, 2021; Gierlich-Joas et al., 2024), or the emergence of digital nomadism (Marx et al., 2025). Accordingly, Jensen (2018) referred to DT of work “as ‘flexible work arrangements’; [...] [and] the goal of working smarter by using digital technology and [...] a variety of methods—mobile work, distance work, distributed work, telework, digital nomadism, and crowd work” (p. 29). Her definition emphasizes that DT of work involves changes to work arrangements that underpin organizations’ workplaces and the work performed in organizations (Jensen, 2018; Dery et al., 2017; Zimmer et al., 2023).

Further delving into how DT changes work, Baptista et al. (2020) abstracted existing observations on DT of work into a sequence of three orders of effect. First, DT of work leads to intended and expected convergent changes (Besson and Rowe, 2012). These convergent changes, or first-order effects, often refer to performance improvements—that is, efficiency gains in existing work (Baptista et al., 2020). However, often in hindsight, we can observe emergent, sometimes even unintended, changes in work patterns (i.e., second-order effects) and eventually in the nature and understanding of work (i.e., third-order effects; Baptista et al., 2020). Thus, while *second-order effects* refer to how DT of work transforms work, *third-order effects* refer to how DT of work transforms organizations. That is, DT of work engenders “that organizations adapt and modify core capabilities and structures and eventually shift the nature of their identity, culture, and strategic position in markets” (Baptista et al., 2020, p. 7). This quote indicates that DT of work involves *meta-work*.

*Meta-work* refers to “the work that enables work” (Salzman and Palen, 2004) or “the work of making work go well” (Gerson, 2008). Thus, *meta-work* describes efforts and activities that enable, facilitate, or support the execution of work tasks. Often, these efforts remain hidden or invisible because they are not part of actual work (Rikala et al., 2025), for example, because they address effects that emerge from changes to work or work arrangements (Aroles et al., 2023). Translating this concept of *meta-work* to Baptista et al.’s (2020) three orders of effect, we can construe DT of work as emerging from or involving *meta-work*. That is, Baptista et al. theorize that DT of work emerges from identifying and using new digital workplace technologies to improve existing work (cf. first-order effects). They argue that this requires modification of work patterns and work designs because of how the use of new digital workplace technologies entails changes in work (cf. second-order effects). These changes can eventually engender efforts to adapt and modify organizational capabilities and structures (cf. third-order effects). From this, we infer that DT of work involves *meta-work* that modifies existing work and enables changes to such work by appropriating, innovating with, and using digital workplace technology. Referring to this *meta-work* as *DT work* and to the existing work as *function work*, because organizational members often perform this existing work in organizational functions, we synthesize from the literature that DT of work emerges from an interplay of DT work and function work. This foregrounds that DT of work not only refers to the intended and unintended changes of work that result from DT (Jensen, 2018), but also to the interplay of DT work and function work and, hence, the change process that this interplay enacts (Baptista et al., 2020; Wiener et al., 2025; Zimmer et al., 2023). Accordingly, *DT of work* can refer to the process that emerges from a sequence of DT work or to the engendered intended and unintended changes in the patterns and nature of function work (Baptista et al., 2020). Table 1 provides an overview of our synthesis of the previous DT of work literature that will serve as our conceptual framework for theorizing the process of DT of work, a pre-requisite for apprehending organizational inertia in DT of work.

Indeed, previous studies have investigated tensions in the context of DT of work as organizational inertia (Keilbach et al., 2023; Tripsas, 2009; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021), with *inertia* referring to the “propensity for an organization to continue its run on the same path” (Rowe et al., 2017, p. 406). Because the existing DT of work literature has grounded our understanding of this inertia in identity theory, we proceed by analyzing DT of work through the theoretical lens of identity shift. However, first, we will review the literature on the DT of HR work to provide background for our empirical observations of Auto’s DT of HR work.

#### Digital transformation of work in the organizational function of human resources

We can infer three triggers for DT of work in organizations’ HR functions. First, organizational DT leads to new workforce demands (Colbert et al., 2016) and new workplace requirements (Dery and Sebastian, 2017; Zimmer et al., 2023). Organizations seek to hire

**Table 1**  
Synthesizing DT of work from the previous literature.

Concept	Definition	Indicative references
DT of work	<i>DT of work</i> refers to the process that emerges from a sequence of DT work or to the engendered intended and unintended changes in the patterns and nature of function work.	Baptista et al. (2020) Jensen (2018) Zimmer et al. (2023)
DT work	<i>DT work</i> refers to <i>meta-work</i> that aims at changing function work by appropriating, innovating with, and using digital workplace technology.	Jensen and Stein (2021) Hanelt et al. (2021) Rikala et al. (2025) Salzman et al. (2004) Zimmer et al. (2023)
Function work	<i>Function work</i> refers to the existing, ongoing operational and strategic activities performed within an organizational function as part of its everyday responsibilities.	Baptista et al. (2020) Jensen (2018)

personnel who have the skills and competencies to support their DT and to operate digital business models (Colbert et al., 2016). Simultaneously, this new workforce demands changes to organizations' workplaces (Dery and Sebastian, 2017; Jensen and Stein, 2021; Zimmer et al., 2023). They request HR functions to develop work arrangements that facilitate remote work (e.g., Brünker et al., 2024), cross-unit collaboration (e.g., Zimmer et al., 2023), or digital leadership (e.g., Dery and Sebastian, 2017; Eberl et al., 2025; Gierlich-Joas et al., 2024). Second, new workforce demands and workplace requirements create a strategic imperative for the DT of HR work (cf. Eden et al., 2019), and organizations "are recognizing the need to adapt their human resources (HR) practices in the age of digitalization to attain organizational success" (Poulose et al., 2024, p. 2). While HR functions are often not a core function, their structural embedding creates manifold ties to other organizational functions that have different expectations of what HR work is or what HR does. Third, HR functions also face digital disruptions in new digital workplace technologies that digitalize and automate HR work, such as recruiting (e.g., van den Broek et al., 2021) or training (e.g., Gélinas et al., 2022). These three triggers underpin why HR functions engage in DT work to change their function work.

HR function work comprises operational and strategic HR work (Dulebohn and Johnson, 2013; Johnson et al., 2016). Operational HR work deals with day-to-day tasks, such as paying employees' salaries, hiring new personnel, or issuing notices of warning. This also includes defining policies, for example, regarding business travel or decision making that underpin organizational workplaces (cf. Zimmer et al., 2023; Eberl et al., 2025). Strategic HR work is forward looking, forecasting future demands for skills and personnel (van den Broek et al., 2021). This includes, for example, demographic planning, occupational training to reskill or upskill existing personnel, or organizational development (Dulebohn and Johnson, 2013). HR functions use digital workplace technologies to change this HR work.

Indeed, HR functions have used workplace technologies since the early 1940 s. Back then, they supported operational HR work, such as administering employee data or paying employees' salaries. In the 1980s, they evolved into decision support systems and later into cloud-based HR information systems (HRIS; Johnson et al., 2016). While early workplace technologies for HR work supported specific HR work, HRIS aims at integrating and (partly) automatizing all types of HR work, from operational recruitment, salary payment, and training to strategic demand forecasting (Bansal et al., 2023; Thakral et al., 2023). They support the collection, management, and strategic use of data to continuously improve operative and strategic HR work and, through this, the employee experience (Gal et al., 2017; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018). The previous literature suggests that HRIS presents the technological response to changing organizational and workforce demands for HR work (Giermindl et al., 2022; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018).

The referenced benefits of HRIS are performance improvements in HR work. However, scholars also mention datafication, unintended nudging, and algorithmic opacity (Gal et al., 2020; Giermindl et al., 2022). Accordingly, the DT of HR work not only leads to automated and/or digital HR work (Bansal et al., 2023; Marler and Boudreau, 2017) but also transforms the understanding of the meaning of HR work. For example, Thakral et al. (2023) found that HR work increasingly incorporates aspects of data science, producing a sense of IT identity among HR employees. This suggests that appropriating or using HRIS transforms organizational members' understanding of HR work (cf. Baptista et al., 2020).

### *Identity shift induced by digital transformation*

#### *Identity and identity shift concepts at the organizational, group, and individual levels*

Studying DT, scholars increasingly draw on identity theory (e.g., Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2013b; Graf et al., 2023; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021; Wessel et al., 2021). Employing this theoretical lens, they investigate questions of "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" among organizational members (Brünker et al., 2024).

At the *organizational level*, identity is a "self-referential concept defined by the members of an organization to articulate who they are as an organization to themselves as well as outsiders" (Gioia et al., 2013a, p. 126f.). Organizational identity manifests in organizational practices, products, and values and describes what distinguishes an organization from others or, in return, which shared attributes connect its organizational members (Gioia et al., 2013a). Wessel et al. (2021) drew on organizational identity when distinguishing between DT- and IT-enabled organizational transformation. While the first redefines organizational identity, the second reinforces it (Wessel et al., 2021). Although they were not the first to use identity theory in IS research (e.g., Utesheva et al., 2016; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021), their study sparked interest in identity theory among scholars studying phenomena of DT (e.g., Graf et al., 2023) and DT of work (e.g., Brünker et al., 2024).

At the *group level*, scholars study how groups employ identity to draw boundaries between themselves and others by focusing on shared or distinct attributes and values (Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021). For example, scholars have employed the concept of occupational identity to analyze how "people make sense of their work and give meaning to what they do, to their careers, and to their interactions with others" (Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021, p. 1089). Thereby, it links to people's sensemaking of their work based on a shared job or organizational function. In this vein, digital workplace technologies disrupt or transform occupational identity (e.g., Utesheva et al., 2016).

At the *individual level*, we find that identity describes how individuals attach meanings to themselves (Gecas, 1982) and which attributes they associate with themselves (Markus, 1977) and their actions. In the context of work, individuals' identity ties to how they perceive their characteristics as workers and their specific work experience (Abbott, 1993). Moreover, job roles, responsibilities, tasks, and memberships shape this self-understanding (Dutton et al., 2010). Hence, at all three levels, the previous literature indicates that DT induces identity shifts.

#### *Identity shift: substitution vs. addition*

Identity presents a dynamic concept; that is, internal and external identity triggers cause identity to continuously shift over time (e.

g., Abbott, 1993; Gioia et al., 2013a). Internal triggers can be a perceived mismatch between organizational identity (i.e., what we claim) and organizational practices (i.e., what we do; Tripsas, 2009). External triggers can be digital disruptions, such as new digital market trends or digital technologies (Vial, 2019), which question or threaten who we are and/or what we do (Goto, 2021; Stein et al., 2013). Besides these triggers that entail reactive identity shifts, organizational leaders and members can also proactively shift identity by setting a vision for their identity that redefines who they are to change what they do (Brünker et al., 2024). In the context of DT of work, this means that if we understand identity as shifting reactively, we view it as a consequence of DT of work (Utesheva et al., 2016; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021). If we understand identity as shifting proactively, we conceive of it as a precondition or conception for DT of work (Brünker et al., 2024; Utesheva et al., 2016; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021).

Furthermore, identity shift can engender identity substitution or addition (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2013a). *Identity shift by substitution* implies the emergence of a new identity that replaces the existing one (Albert and Whetten, 1985). In contrast, *identity shift by addition* produces a new identity that emerges alongside the existing identity, resulting in multiple coexisting identities (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Scholars who have studied DT-induced identity shifts have emphasized identity substitution. For example, we find this emphasis in Wessel et al.'s (2021) conceptualization of DT redefining organizational identity or in Utesheva et al.'s (2016) description of how digital workplace technologies entail the metamorphosis of work-related identities. This emphasis on substitution informed scholars' conceptualization of identity tensions in the context of DT and, specifically, DT of work, as signs of inertia (Keilbach et al., 2023; Tripsas, 2009; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021). However, the addition view suggests that identity tensions could signify coexisting identities. Thus, to understand the nature of identity tensions and the underlying organizational inertia in DT of work, we must understand how DT of work shifts identity, that is, by substitution or addition.

Identity shifts, whether by substitution or addition, are not straightforward adoptions of new or different job roles but occur through revisions of identity claims and identity understandings (Pratt et al., 2006; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). *Identity claims* are institutional statements by organizational leaders "to influence how internal and external audiences define and interpret the organization" (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006, p. 435). Consequently, they present self-definitions that provide organizational members with a narrative of who they are as an organization. *Identity understandings* are the "shared understandings [as] the results of a sensemaking process carried out by [organizational] members" (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006, p. 435). They reflect organizational members' interpretations of identity claims as they embed them into their daily work. Correspondingly, identity shifts present a continuous revision of claims and understandings (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Tensions can arise when organizational leaders communicate unclear identity claims, when revised claims do not match members' understandings (and vice versa) or when multiple coexisting understandings emerge.

Fig. 1 visualizes our theorizing of DT of work from the perspective of identity theory, employing the concepts of identity claim, understanding, and tensions. Accordingly, a revision of the identity claim initiates DT work that aims at changing function work. The resulting DT of work process produces a new identity understanding. Within the prevalent substitution view on identity shift, this entails identity tensions that signal organizational inertia toward the new identity (i.e., identity claim and/or understanding). These tensions trigger subsequent revisions of the identity claim and understandings to replace the old identity with a new identity.

### Research approach

We conducted an ethnography of a large car manufacturer's HR function that engaged in DT of work. Before we describe our empirical observations of how DT of work unfolded in this HR function from an identity theory perspective, we outline our data collection and data analysis.

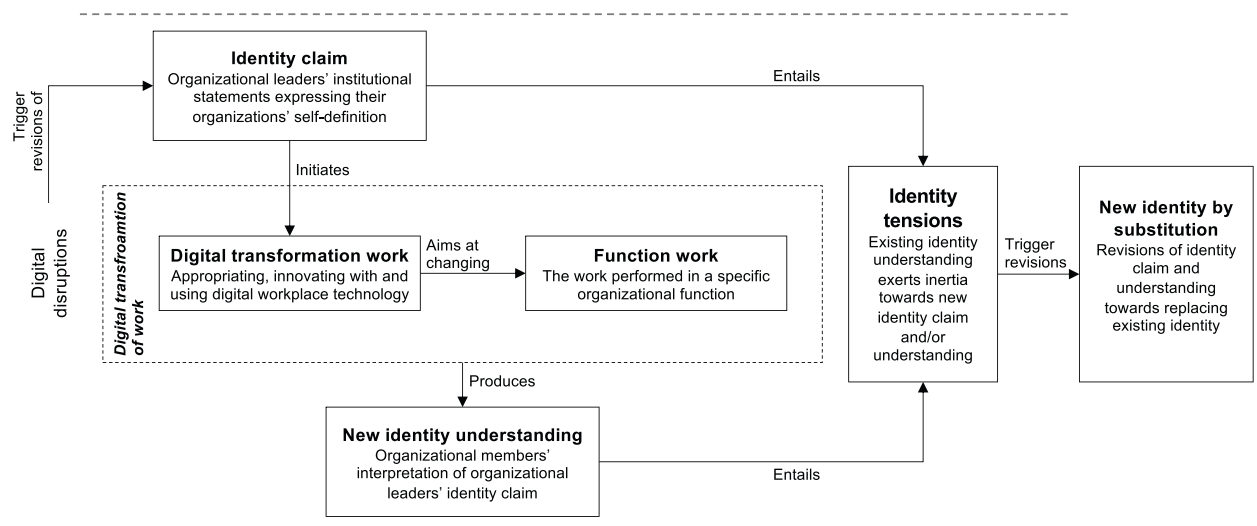


Fig. 1. Substitution view of digital transformation of work based on our synthesis of previous literature.

### Data collection: ethnography of auto's human resources

Data collection at the car manufacturer, which we call Auto, started in July 2017 and ended in June 2020. One author gained access to Auto based on an employment contract with Auto's HR function. This contract involved an equal split of part-time, internal consultancy work and field research. After the author entered the field, he observed that Auto's HR function announced its "Digital HR Revolution". The announcement framed this initiative as supporting Auto's DT by changing HR work through digital innovations. Intrigued, he started to systematically collect data.

Data collection involved participant observations (Klein and Myers, 1999; Van Maanen, 2011), formal and informal interviews (Myers and Newman, 2007), and obtaining video material and archival records (Akemu and Abdelnour, 2020). The author conducted participant observations of meetings, DT workshops, and daily interactions within Auto's HR function. For example, he joined and observed more than four of the HR function's DT workshops, each of which lasted two days. He recorded his participant observations in field notes (Emerson et al., 2011), which started as jottings—scribbles during the moment of observation—that he shortly afterward extended to descriptive accounts of the observed events (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). He conducted nine interviews with HR managers and personnel involved in both HR work and DT work (e.g., implementing digital initiatives for Auto's DT of HR work). These interviews focused on the HR function's DT of work (for the interview script, see Appendix A). The collected video material comprised 23 recordings of HR employees presenting their proposed ideas for changing HR work during the HR function's DT workshops and two recordings of messages exchanged among HR management and employees (for a list of collected videos, see Appendix B). Last, he continuously screened Auto's enterprise social media, internal memos, and strategy documents for archival records of the car manufacturer's DT process and the HR function's DT of work. He collected documents on the HR function's organizational leaders announcing the DT of HR work as well as their and organizational members' comments on the transformation process.

Combined, the participant observations, interviews, and video material provided insights into the HR function's organizational leaders' and members' sensemaking of how their DT work changed their HR work. The archival records complement these insights with information on Auto's overall DT and how the HR function links its DT of work to the organization's DT. Table 2 lists the collected data.

### Data analysis

The data analysis comprised three steps. First, we employed temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999), which led to bracketing the HR function's DT of work into three periods. Second, we used inductive, qualitative coding (Gioia et al., 2013a; Urquhart et al., 2010) when engaging with the collected data per period to build a process theory of how DT of work unfolds. Third, we analyzed why the HR function's DT of work moved from one period to the next, resulting in theorizing about vertical and horizontal identity tensions. Table 3 summarizes our three-step analytical process, presenting each step, its tasks, and outputs.

#### First analysis step: three periods of digital transformation of work

In the first step, we employed the temporal bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999). That is, we asked ourselves whether Auto's DT of HR work could be structured into periods that then served as our units of analysis. For this, we analyzed the data and asked ourselves: Why did the HR function initiate the DT of work? What DT work do the interviewees describe? What is the chronology of this DT work? How does this DT work change the context of subsequent DT work? Using these questions, we identified specific instances of DT work,

**Table 2**

Overview of collected data on the DT of work in Auto's HR function.

Data type	Collected data																														
<i>Participant observations</i>	Approximately 300 pages of field notes recording observations of meetings, innovation workshops, and daily interactions regarding Auto's DT of work and its organizational DT																														
<i>Interviews</i>	Nine formal and informal interviews on Auto's DT of HR work (average duration 60 min)																														
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>ID</th> <th>Interviewee's position</th> <th>Interview type</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>A01</td> <td>Chief Digital Officer HR</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A02</td> <td>Manager DT Office HR</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A03</td> <td>Member of DT Office HR</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A04</td> <td>Member of DT Office HR</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A05</td> <td>HR employee</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A06</td> <td>HR employee</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A07</td> <td>HR employee</td> <td>Informal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A08</td> <td>Manager of an DT of HR work initiative</td> <td>Formal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A09</td> <td>Head of organizational development</td> <td>Informal</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	ID	Interviewee's position	Interview type	A01	Chief Digital Officer HR	Formal	A02	Manager DT Office HR	Formal	A03	Member of DT Office HR	Formal	A04	Member of DT Office HR	Formal	A05	HR employee	Formal	A06	HR employee	Formal	A07	HR employee	Informal	A08	Manager of an DT of HR work initiative	Formal	A09	Head of organizational development	Informal
ID	Interviewee's position	Interview type																													
A01	Chief Digital Officer HR	Formal																													
A02	Manager DT Office HR	Formal																													
A03	Member of DT Office HR	Formal																													
A04	Member of DT Office HR	Formal																													
A05	HR employee	Formal																													
A06	HR employee	Formal																													
A07	HR employee	Informal																													
A08	Manager of an DT of HR work initiative	Formal																													
A09	Head of organizational development	Informal																													
<i>Video material</i>	23 videos from HR innovation workshops (average duration 1:59 min) describing proposed initiatives for the DT of HR work (for more details, see Appendix B, Table B.1) Two video messages from Auto's HR management to HR employees and vice versa on the HR function's DT of work (avg. duration 1:28 min; for more details, see Appendix B, Table B.2)																														
<i>Archival records</i>	About 703 archival records including internal strategy documents, internal memos, enterprise social media posts and presentations of which <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 142 records pertained to the HR function's DT of work and</li> <li>• 561 records pertained to Auto's DT</li> </ul>																														

**Table 3**

The three steps of data analysis, including each step's tasks and outputs.

Steps	Tasks	Outputs
1. Structuring the HR function's DT of work into periods	(i) Identifying instances of observed DT work(ii) Dissecting the chronology of identified DT work (iii) Bracketing instances of DT work temporally	(i) Overview of specific DT work (e.g., DT strategy summits, DT workshops, and DT initiatives)(ii) Timeline of events related to Auto's DT and the HR function's DT of work(iii) Three periods that structure the HR function's DT of work: <i>mobilizing DT work</i> (Period A), <i>structural implementation support for DT work</i> (Period B), and <i>digital work infrastructure planning for HR work</i> (Period C)
2. Examining identity claims and understandings per period	(i) Allocating data segments to the three periods(ii) Open coding of data segments(iii) Consulting the literature to identify helpful concepts(iv) Axial coding of DT work(v) Selective coding of DT work	(i) Three data buckets (one per period)(ii) Identification of shifts in organizational leaders' and members' understanding of HR work(iii) Selection of identity theory and, here, identity claims and understandings (iv) Conceptualization of five dimensions of identity claims and understandings (v) Conceptualization of <i>identity claims of HR as a strategic business partner</i> (Period A), <i>HR as a service provider</i> (Period C), and <i>identity understandings of resource manager and growth catalyst</i> (periods A–C)
3. Explicating vertical and horizontal identity tensions	(i) Investigating why we observe revised identity claims and understandings across the three periods (ii) Theorizing identity tensions' meaning for the observed DT of work	(i) Identification of identity tensions(ii) Conceptualization of <i>vertical identity tensions</i> (i.e., between claims and understandings) that explain the progression between periods and <i>horizontal identity tensions</i> (i.e., among understandings) that suggest a shift by addition

for example, DT strategy summits, DT workshops, or specific DT initiatives within Auto's HR function. Dissecting their chronology, we divided the HR function's DT of work into three periods: *mobilizing DT work* (i.e., Period A), *structural implementation support for DT work* (i.e., Period B), and *digital work infrastructure planning* (i.e., Period C).

#### Second analysis step: identity claims and identity understandings

In the second step, we examined our data from participant observations, interviews, video material, and archival records to identify data segments relevant to our research question. Afterward, we allocated these segments to the three periods. We then inductively coded these data segments (i.e., open coding; Gioia et al., 2013a; Urquhart et al., 2010). Continuously comparing the coded segments across the three periods (Langley, 1999; Urquhart et al., 2010), we realized that they show a shift in how organizational leaders and members of Auto's HR function understand the meaning of HR work (Baptista et al., 2020). Because the existing literature emphasizes the role of identity shift in DT, we turned to identity theory (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2013b). We found that our observations of the HR function's DT of work speak to and through the concepts of identity claim and understanding (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) that we then introduced into our axial coding.

Following the definitions of *identity claim* and *identity understanding*, our axial coding distinguished between DT work conducted by organizational leaders and organizational members of Auto's HR function. Accordingly, we posit that organizational leaders' institutional statements and DT work reflect identity claims (i.e., organizational level of analysis of DT of work), while members' DT work reflects identity understandings (i.e., group level of analysis of DT of work). To examine these claims and understandings, we analyzed whether DT work refers to different identity dimensions. This resulted in five dimensions: *organizational purpose*, *required capabilities*, *meaning of digital*, *structural belonging*, and *mindset*. Thus, axial coding produced five dimensions of identity claims and understandings.

Moving on to selective coding, we conceptualized identity claims and understandings during the three periods. For this, we examined and compared the DT work in these periods to conceptualize how this DT work reflects the five dimensions of identity claims and understandings. In Period A, organization-level DT work reflected an identity claim of *HR as a strategic business partner* and projected group-level DT work that engaged in bottom-up digital innovations to change HR function work. This produced two identity understandings, namely, *resource manager* and *growth catalyst*. During Period B, organization-level DT work focused on establishing structural support for implementing group-level DT work but still reflected the claim of HR as a strategic business partner. However, theorizing about Period C, we found that the HR function's organization-level DT work reflected a revised identity claim of *HR as a service provider* and emphasized digital work infrastructure planning. Parsing our data, we found that, during Period C, group-level DT work and how it aimed at changing HR function work dominantly reflected the identity understanding of the resource manager. Hence, after the second step, we theorized that Auto's HR function revised its identity claim (i.e., into HR as a strategic business partner), which reflected in and initiated DT work aimed at changing HR function work, and that the engendered DT of work produced two identity understandings (i.e., resource manager and growth catalyst).

#### Third analysis step: vertical and horizontal identity tensions

In the third step, we asked ourselves: Why did the HR function's organizational leaders revise their identity claim, and whether the two identity understandings indicate an identity shift by substitution or addition. Analyzing our data, we noticed that the interviewees referred to tensions between the organization-level and group-level DT work (i.e., vertical) and among group-level DT work (i.e., horizontal). Examining these tensions, we realized that *vertical tensions* emerged between identity claims and understandings and

marked the progression of DT of work through the three periods. In contrast, *horizontal tensions* occurred between the two identity understandings of resource manager and growth catalyst because of their different sensemaking of how DT work should transform HR work. These horizontal identity tensions suggest that the HR function’s identity shifted by addition. Moreover, we noticed that the resource manager understanding became dominant in Period C. Therefore, we examined whether and how the organizational context of the HR function’s DT of work (i.e., Auto’s DT strategy) changed during the three periods. We found segments in our data that allowed us to link this observation to the changed focus on cost savings instead of developing Auto’s digital business. Hence, the third analysis step revealed vertical tensions that can explain the progression of work’s DT, horizontal tensions that suggest that DT of work shifts identity by addition, and that changes in the context of DT of work affect how the DT of work process and involved identity tensions unfold.

**Digital transformation of work at auto’s human resources function**

We start by presenting Auto’s DT of HR work with a description of the empirical case of Auto and its DT as the context for the HR function’s DT of work. Afterward, we outline and conceptualize the DT of HR work during the identified three periods.

*Empirical site: digital transformation at auto and its human resources function*

Auto is a large car manufacturer that employs more than 100,000 people globally. After the financial crisis between 2008 and 2012, Auto entered a span of successful business years. However, in 2015, Auto noticed trends that had started to change the car industry and automotive market, including autonomous driving, electric vehicles, connectivity services, and an evolving concept of mobility among consumers. Auto turned these trends into themes that underpinned its DT strategy of becoming a mobility service provider. Implementing this strategy, Auto founded digital units that developed digital products and services and created spin-offs, as well as joint ventures. The company’s management recognized that this created new workforce demands and workplace requirements. To support its DT strategy, Auto therefore started an organization-wide digital workplace transformation program in 2016 and Auto’s HR function played a key role in implementing this program.

Organized in a dual structure, the HR function comprised, on one hand, HR units that offered standardized, shared HR services, and on the other hand, HR units that worked closely with business partners to tailor HR services to their needs. Despite its support for Auto’s digital workplace transformation, the HR function increasingly noticed shadow HR services among these business partners. They contracted, for example, external recruiting services or set up their own recruitment teams. They voiced that the HR function was often too slow in responding or not equipped to offer the required HR services. Eventually, the HR function’s management recognized

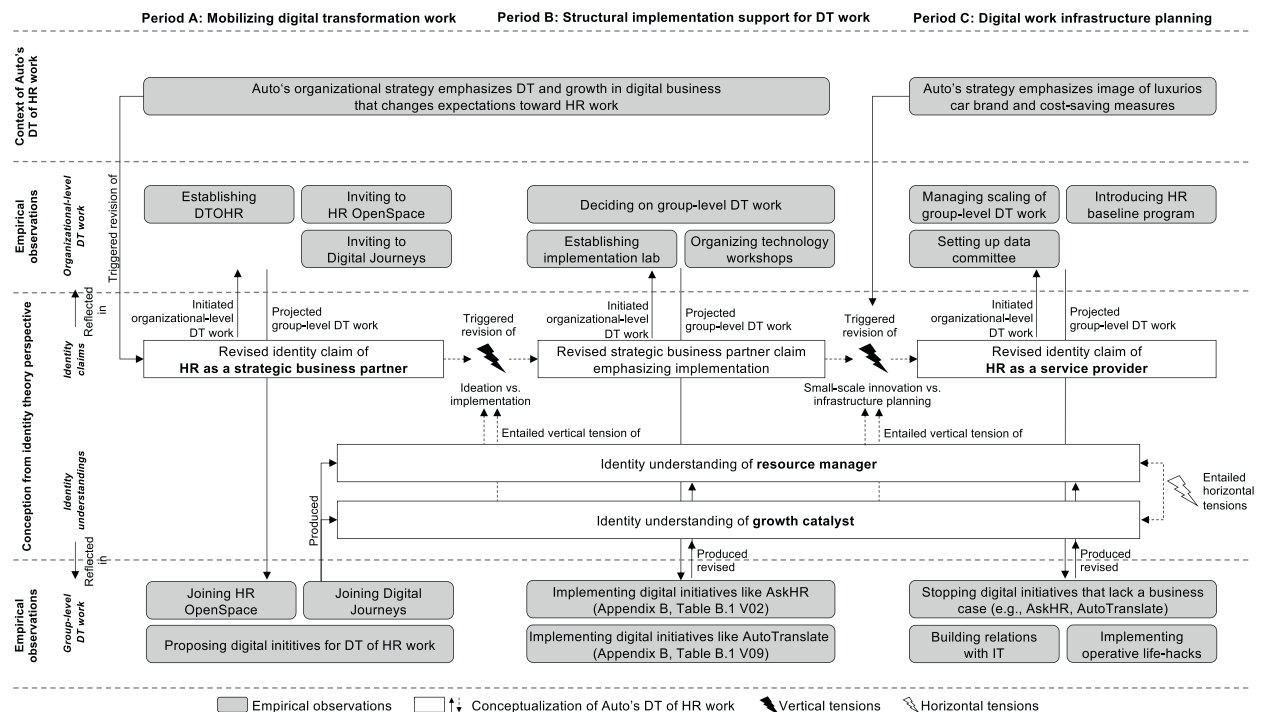


Fig. 2. Process chart of empirical observations of Auto’s DT of HR work and their conceptualization from an identity theory perspective.

that Auto's DT created new expectations for HR work and decided to initiate the function's DT of work.

Archival record on **business partners taking over HR tasks**: "The disruption in automotive means for HR that business partners start covering HR tasks. Business partners run recruiting events, particularly for hiring people with digital skills."

Archival record on **expectations for HR work**: "We face high expectations as HR, and at the same time, we are, as a partner to the business, a critical player in shaping [Auto's] digital transformation."

### *Digital transformation of work at Auto's human resources function*

We bracketed the HR function's DT of work into three periods: (A) mobilizing DT work, (B) structural implementation support for DT work, and (C) digital work infrastructure planning. Fig. 2 visualizes these three periods and the resulting identity shift, including the conceptualized identity claims, identity understandings, and vertical and horizontal identity tensions. Moreover, Fig. 2 grounds these concepts in the empirics of the observed DT work in Auto's HR function. Next, we first describe how identity claims and understandings shifted during these three periods because of vertical identity tensions. Second, we outline the horizontal identity tensions observed throughout the three periods.

#### *Period A: mobilizing digital transformation work*

The HR function's DT of work kicked off in Autumn 2017, when the function's management announced the DT office HR (DToHR). Their announcement described the DToHR's task as initiating and facilitating the DT of work in Auto's HR function to support the DT of Auto's business. For this, the DToHR set up its own enterprise social media channel to inform Auto's employees about past, current, and upcoming organization-level DT work. At the start, the DToHR held keynotes on how the release of new digital workplace technologies, the changes in Auto's business, and new workforce and workplace demands meant that the function faced DT of its HR work. Specifically, they framed these digital disruptions not only as threats but also as opportunities to enhance cost efficiency in routine work while offering individualized HR services that support Auto's DT. However, they not only asserted the rationale for the DT of HR work but also invited HR employees to DT workshops, like the HR OpenSpace or the function's Digital Journeys, to develop ideas for changing HR work.

Archival record on the **goal for the HR function's DT of work**: "It's our goal to accomplish new forms of innovation and excellence in HR to obtain a competitive advantage compared to [digital corporations] but also [other car manufacturers] in areas such as recruiting, leadership, and training."

Archival record on the **DToHR**: "The DToHR supports HR in its digital transformation through coaching, advisory, but also events like HR OpenSpace, a key initiative for nurturing digital innovation in HR. By this, HR walks new paths on which we learn not only about new technology but also our HR customers."

The HR OpenSpace was the first function-wide DT workshop, and the DToHR invited Auto's HR employees from around the globe to apply by submitting their ideas for changing HR work and their motivation to join the event. Based on these applications, the DToHR selected more than 120 employees to participate in a two-day DT workshop aimed at filling an innovation pipeline that drives the HR function's DT of work and allows it to seize the disruption of digital workplace technology as a possibility to transform HR in support of Auto's DT. More than 50 HR employees proposed their ideas and developed them with event participants. They chose ten ideas that were then pitched on stage. The DToHR videorecorded these pitches (see Appendix B, Table B.1) and, alongside a short description, uploaded them to an internal crowd voting platform where all HR employees could vote for their favorite idea. Subsequently, the teams of the top four ideas pitched these ideas to the function's management, who decided who won seed funding for implementation.

Archival record on **ideation at the HR OpenSpace and Digital Journeys**: "Having good ideas means having many ideas so we can select the ones that have the best chances of helping us improve the HR service landscape."

Archival record on **group-level DT work after HR OpenSpace**: "We already test different digital ideas and technology such as predictive analytics to offer better targeted HR products. Like developing tailored career paths or better selection of candidates in the labor market."

Besides the HR OpenSpace, the HR function also organized Digital Journeys. These were two-day DT workshops in one of Europe's startup hubs. On the first day, the participants visited startups that developed digital workplace technology for HR work. On the second day, they ideated how they could change their HR work by innovating with or using digital workplace technology. This ideation started with a video-recorded message from HR management stating that the DT of HR work requires employees' insights and ideas because they handle the daily HR work and, thus, know how to best support the business's DT (Appendix B, Table B.1, V24). While the visits to startups should inspire participants to rethink HR work, the ideation aimed at nurturing HR employees' digital innovation skills. The second day closed with participants pitching their ideas, which the organizers videorecorded (see Appendix B, Table B.1). Afterward, HR management reviewed these pitches to decide on implementation.

The described observations indicate that Auto's DT triggered the HR function's DT of work. The HR function's organizational leaders initiated this DT of work through the new *identity claim of HR as a strategic business partner*. We find this claim reflected in institutional statements (e.g., in archival records) and organization-level DT work (e.g., HR OpenSpace or Digital Journeys). They convey the objective of the DT of HR work as supporting Auto's DT (i.e., function's organizational purpose) and that accomplishing this objective requires a continuous innovation process that nurtures ideation with, and implementation of digital workplace technology (i.e., required capabilities). In fact, they viewed digital workplace technology as disrupting and enabling the HR function's DT of work (i.e., meaning of *digital*). Moreover, the dual objective of DT of work to improve the cost efficiency of routine HR work while creating new

HR work that supports Auto’s DT suggests that the HR function’s leaders understand HR as its own structure embedded in the business structure. That is, the HR structure must enable cost-efficient routine work but also connect to the business structure for individualized HR work (i.e., structural belonging). Last, the organization-level DT work (e.g., HR OpenSpace or Digital Journeys) approaches DT of

**Table 4**  
Identity claims and understandings that emerged from Auto’s DT of HR work.

	<b>Mobilizing DT work (Period A):</b> DT strategy triggers revised identity claim that initiates the DT of HR work	<b>Structural implementation support for DT work (Period B):</b> The DT of HR work produces two identity understandings	<b>Digital work infrastructure planning (Period C):</b> Identity tensions and changed DT strategy trigger the revision of identity claims	
<b>Identity claims/ understandings</b>	<b>Identity claim: HR as a strategic business partner</b>	<b>Identity understanding: Resource manager</b>	<b>Identity understanding: Growth catalyst</b>	<b>Identity claim: HR as a service provider</b>
<i>Function’s organizational purpose:</i>	<i>HR as a strategic business partner:</i>	<i>HR supports business operations:</i>	<i>HR supports the DT of the business:</i>	<i>HR as a service provider:</i>
<i>Refers to claims/ understandings regarding DT of work and its meaning for the function, its role, and the function work performed to accomplish business goals</i>	The <i>claimed</i> function’s organizational purpose for DT of work is being a strategic business partner by developing HR services that support the DT of the business	DT work reflects the <i>understanding</i> that HR acts as a <i>resource manager</i> that supports the operation of business by efficiently managing its human resources	DT work reflects the <i>understanding</i> that HR acts as a <i>growth catalyst</i> that creates and offers new HR services that address the business’ changing needs in human resources	The <i>claimed</i> function’s organizational purpose of DT of work is being a competitive HR service provider regarding the cost efficiency of HR services
<i>Required capabilities:</i>	<i>Continuous innovation process to transform function work:</i>	<i>IT capabilities:</i>	<i>Digital innovation capabilities:</i>	<i>Digital work infrastructure planning:</i>
<i>Refers to claims/ understandings regarding the capabilities required for DT of work</i>	The <i>claimed</i> capabilities required for DT of work are innovation processes that continuously nurture ideation with, and implementation of digital workplace technology for changing HR work	DT work reflects the <i>understanding</i> that HR requires IT capabilities in organizing and utilizing digital workplace technology to improve efficiency in managing the business’s human resources	DT work reflects the <i>understanding</i> that HR requires digital innovation capabilities for creating and offering individualized, business-focused HR work	The <i>claimed</i> capabilities required for DT of work are a standardized digital infrastructure and HR processes as well as basic IT and process design capabilities among HR personnel
<i>Meaning of digital:</i>	<i>Digital workplace technology as a disruptive possibility:</i>	<i>Digital workplace technology as an exploitation resource:</i>	<i>Digital workplace technology as an exploration resource:</i>	<i>Digital workplace technology as infrastructure:</i>
<i>Refers to claims/ understandings regarding the meaning of digital workplace technology for DT of work</i>	The <i>claimed</i> meaning of digital views digital workplace technology as a disruption to HR work that offers possibilities for improving routine HR work and developing business-focused HR services	DT work reflects the <i>understanding</i> that digital workplace technology can be exploited to improve efficiency in managing human resources	DT work reflects the <i>understanding</i> that digital workplace technology can be designed and formed in conjunction with HR processes to explore and develop new HR services	The <i>claimed</i> meaning of digital views digital workplace technology as an infrastructure that underpins and intertwines with HR work
<i>Structural belonging:</i>	<i>HR is embedded in business structure:</i>	<i>HR focused:</i>	<i>Business focused:</i>	<i>HR is a cost center:</i>
<i>Refers to claims/ understandings of the function’s structure and its relation to the business’s structure (and the sense of belonging that this relation creates)</i>	The <i>claimed</i> structural understanding views the function as embedded in the business structure with shared and individualized HR services that balance cost-efficient, high-quality, business-partner-facing HR services	DT work reflects a structural <i>understanding</i> of the HR function being an autonomous structure that develops its HR services to efficiently manage the business’s human resources	DT work reflects a structural <i>understanding</i> that views the business strategy and business needs toward HR services as the imperative for creating and developing HR services	The <i>claimed</i> structural understanding views the HR function as a cost center that provides HR services to the business
<i>Mindset:</i>	<i>Bottom-up strategic change:</i>	<i>Operation driven:</i>	<i>Innovation driven:</i>	<i>Top-down, cost-driven change:</i>
<i>Refers to claims/ understandings regarding the mindset for approaching DT of work</i>	The <i>claimed</i> mindset invokes a bottom-up approach to change that is rooted in openness to change and innovation to change HR work in support of the DT of the business	DT work reflects a mindset focused on developing the operational efficiency of HR work	DT work reflects a mindset focused on innovating to support the DT of the business	The <i>claimed</i> mindset invokes a top-down approach to change that emphasizes the need for standardization to meet budget goals when changing HR work

work as a bottom-up strategic change (i.e., mindset). Accordingly, HR employees' DT work of appropriating, using, and innovating with digital workplace technology drives the function's DT of work. Table 4 summarizes the identity claim of HR as a strategic business partner along the five identity dimensions, while Appendix C, Table C.1, provides further empirical illustrations.

At Auto, the identity claim of HR as a strategic business partner mobilized DT work. At the organizational level, this DT work emphasized ideation and proposed ideas for using or innovating with digital workplace technology to transform HR work. At the group level, HR employees chipped in their ideas, though few progressed into implementation. This led to frustration among both employees and management, and the HR function adjusted its organization-level DT work to establish structural implementation support. We inferred from this the *vertical tension of ideation vs. implementation*.

Interviewee (A01) on **ideation vs. implementation tensions**: "We [DToHR] received the feedback that we had talked plenty, but now, we should start acting and support the implementation of ideas. [...] We then started to coach specific digital initiatives and establish a community for their implementation."

Archival record on the **shift in organization-level DT work**: "Jointly, we have accomplished great feats regarding the digital transformation of HR, but we have to professionalize our approach to implementation to take the next step."

#### Period B: structural implementation support for digital transformation work

The vertical tension of implementation vs. ideation initiated new organization-level DT work. The DToHR phased out DT workshops that focused on ideation but instead organized technology workshops. During these, they invited HR employees to become hands on by applying digital workplace technologies, such as robotic process automation (RPA), to selected use cases of HR work at Auto. Moreover, the DToHR founded an implementation lab where HR employees could submit their ideas for DT of work initiatives to receive coaching and training for their implementation. Among the first to enter this structural implementation support were two initiatives proposed and developed by HR employees at the HR OpenSpace, namely, AskHR and AutoTranslate.

Archival record on the **implementation lab**: "The [implementation lab] allows HR units to implement their digital initiatives and supports them through coaching and an open workspace."

Interviewee (A01) on **technology workshops**: "Yeah, we started organizing [technology workshops]. We asked employees to tell us use cases, for example, for RPA. We then developed suggestions for how RPA could help. We discussed these suggestions with participants, and they got hands on, fixing their use cases with RPA."

The team of AskHR proposed the development of a chatbot that handles employees' inquiries regarding HR services (Appendix B, Table B.1, V02). Their pitch problematized that Auto's employees spend hours searching for answers to HR service-related questions (e.g., "How many holidays do I have (left)?", "Where do I send my sick note?", "How can I recruit an intern?," etc.). The benefits of AskHR are a faster response rate to employees' inquiries while "reduc[ing] analog and expensive processes but still meet[ing] [HR's] core role of supporting our employees and the business" (Archival record).

AutoTranslate was a DT of work initiative that developed an Auto-specific translation app built on artificial intelligence (Appendix B, Table B.1, V09). The team behind AutoTranslate framed "language barriers [as] one of the biggest roadblocks to mutual understanding and driving change" (Archival record). Appropriating technology for speech recognition, speech-to-text transcription, and text-to-speech engines, AutoTranslate should improve "communication in meetings and make things happen faster" (Archival record), supporting collaboration in Auto's new workplace and, by this, helping the workforce and business implement its DT strategy.

Interestingly, the group-level DT work that emerged from the HR OpenSpace and Digital Journeys (see Appendix B, Table B.1) reflected different identity understandings. While some emphasized improving HR work to efficiently manage Auto's human resources, others engaged in rethinking HR work to catalyze Auto's digital business growth. We construe these *identity understandings* as *resource manager* and *growth catalyst*.

Group-level DT work that reflected the resource manager understanding views the objective of DT of HR work as changing HR work to efficiently manage the business's human resources (i.e., function's organizational purpose). For example, AskHR aims to efficiently respond to employees' inquiries. Respective DT work draws on IT capabilities, such as unifying the underlying data structure, developing data analytics skills, or appropriating known digital workplace technology to HR work (i.e., required capabilities). This makes digital workplace technology a resource that, if appropriated and mastered correctly, can ameliorate the efficiency of HR work (i.e., meaning of digital). Moreover, this understanding emphasizes shared HR services over individual ones across HR units to simplify the function's structure, which indicates an HR focus to DT of work (i.e., structural belonging). The approach underlying this resource manager DT work is operation driven (i.e., mindset), that is, focused on optimizing inefficiency in existing processes (e.g., AskHR or Digital Recruitment): "[...] it's not like we're bored, but we're under pressure to make processes leaner" (A05).

Video pitch (V03) reflecting **resource manager DT work**: "We handle many certificates in paper form, for example, notes of sick leave, marriage, or birth. This is resource intensive for HR, but we have the solution: the app CeHRti. In four clicks, employees can submit certificates digitally. Open the app, select the correct certificate, take a picture, and submit it to HR. It will automatically be processed, making HR agile and faster."

Video pitch (V04) reflecting **growth catalyst DT work**: "You know Tinder, right? [...] HR will create HR Finder. On the one hand, applicants and employees have a lot of skills and experience. On the other hand, managers have open positions and need new employees. So, we have a lot of skills and expectations, as well as open positions. HR Finder will help them match skills by simply swiping left or right."

In contrast, group-level DT work that reflected the growth catalyst understanding views DT of work as changing HR work to support

the DT of the business (i.e., function's organizational purpose). For example, AutoTranslate aims to offer a new HR service that supports Auto's business through international collaboration. Such DT work emphasizes experimenting with digital workplace technology, prototyping, and entrepreneurship to develop new HR services (i.e., required capabilities). Accordingly, digital workplace technology presents opportunities for a better understanding of business needs and for creating new HR work that meets these needs. Thus, digital workplace technology is an exploration resource (i.e., meaning of digital). Growth catalyst DT work reflects a business focus that understands "the business strategy [...] in essence [as] the North Star" (A03) and aims at changing HR work to better support business growth and employees' personal growth (i.e., structural belonging). Supporting this growth means engaging in innovation-driven DT work that, for example, develops revolutionary concepts for recruiting (e.g., HR Finder) to support Auto's growth in digital business (i.e., mindset). We summarize our conception of both identity understandings in Table 4 and provide further empirical illustrations in Appendix C, Table C.2.

The organization-level DT work supporting implementation advanced selected group-level DT work. For example, AskHR and AutoTranslate developed prototypes as proof of concepts. However, group-level DT work continued to struggle with the HR function's digital work infrastructure. Suggestions for DT work often emerged from HR units that had individualized processes or used specific HRIS to address their business partners' needs. This individualization engendered the fragmentation of workplace technology, processes, and data, which impeded the HR-wide implementation of the respective DT work. At one Digital Journey, HR employees discussed that their bottom-up DT work often failed to scale from one HR unit to another because of the fragmented HRIS landscape. They voiced this issue in a video message to HR management and pushed for digital infrastructure planning (Appendix B, Table B.2, V25). We construed this as the *vertical tension of small-scale digital innovations vs. digital work infrastructure planning*, which triggered a revision of the HR function's identity claim.

Interviewee (A04) on **small-scale digital innovations vs. digital infrastructure planning**: "We have many RPA use cases, more than 700 Power-BI use cases. We have an echo and ideas, but we haven't improved any single HR service. Why? We lack a clear strategy and ownership for changing big systems like ePeople."

Interviewee (A02) on the need for **digital work infrastructure planning**: "[...] how'd a target state for our HR-IT looks like, let's say in five years [...], because small ideas, here an app, there a Sharepoint, and here something small and fancy won't reap the potential that you had if you tackled big processes and big systems."

#### Period C: digital work infrastructure planning

The HR function initiated adjustments to its organization-level DT work to address the vertical tension of small-scale digital innovations vs. digital work infrastructure planning. While the DTOHR continued its technology workshops and its implementation lab, it started establishing committees that worked on standardizing the HR function's digital work infrastructure in terms of workplace technology, processes, and data. For example, they started assessing the existing HRIS landscape to identify interfaces among HRIS and plan sunsetting as well as replacing HRIS. Moreover, the HR function set up committees that discussed emerging group-level DT work from different HR units to ensure the resulting initiatives consider HR processes end to end across HR units. Similarly, they established a data committee that aimed to define technical data standards as well as policies for data protection and privacy. While the first should facilitate DT work across HR units, the second should address regulatory needs and standards for HR data. The underlying notion was that the DT of HR work first required planning a digital infrastructure for HR work to allow DT work to scale. Accordingly, organization-level DT work switched from mobilizing and supporting the implementation of group-level DT work from small-scale solutions to large-scale digital work infrastructure planning.

Interview (A02) on creating a **committee for group-level DT work**: "We created a new structure, which we called Digi Driver, and in each HR unit, we have a Digi Driver, a person that drives digitalization in this unit but also picks up and shares ideas with other units [...]. We wanted them to work together across units so that these ideas would scale."

Archival record on creating a **standard for data analytics**: "[...] forming an HR swarm to lay the foundation for future analytics projects in HR. It will define the application possibilities but also clarify the challenges surrounding ethics, privacy, and general handling of HR data. The goal is to implement a standard process for all analytics projects [...]."

The shift in organization-level DT work coincided with changes in Auto's business context demanding cost-cutting measures that Auto addressed in a new business strategy and an internal cost-saving program. The HR function's management responded to this cost-saving program by shutting down ongoing group-level DT work that lacked an immediate business case. Moreover, they announced the HR baseline program, which aimed at reducing HR work to what is essential for managing Auto's HR. Accordingly, the function's DT of work would, from now on, focus on improving this essential HR work's cost efficiency.

Archival record of the CEO on **Auto's financial situation**: "[...] I'm determined to heave profitability back to a level that we can be proud of. For this, we initiated a set of efficiency measures to cut costs. But let's be honest: We face difficult years."

Interviewee (A02) on the **HR baseline program**: "[...] we have to essentially think about what's the core of the HR function and what's beyond that, which we may have to cut to become leaner."

The new emphasis on organization-level DT work to drive standardization and cut costs indicates a revision of the HR function's identity claim from HR as a business partner to *HR as a service provider*. Statements demonstrate that the goal of Auto's DT of HR work shifted from "rethinking HR work" (Archival record) to "improving the profitability of HR services" (Archival records) to remain a competitive HR service provider for Auto's business (i.e., function's organizational purpose). This required that the HR function

reduces the complexity of its digital work infrastructure through standardization, creates end-to-end process designs, and starts planning its HRIS infrastructure: “[...] we noticed that we must tackle the big HRIS” (A01; i.e., required capabilities). The revised claim views digital workplace technology as an infrastructure entangled with HR work that can facilitate or impede HR work (i.e., meaning of digital). Last, we can observe a top-down, cost-driven change that circuits DT work—or decisions about such work—to the HR function’s management: “If there’s money involved [to implement DT work], we have to relay it to the management, but with current cost pressures, we’d likely just drop it” (A02; i.e., mindset). Table 4 summarizes our conception of this revised identity claim, and Table C.3 in Appendix C provides further empirical illustrations.

#### *Horizontal identity tensions between resource manager and growth catalyst*

Describing the HR function’s DT of HR work, we have outlined the three periods and how we can understand these periods from the perspective of identity claims, identity understandings, and vertical identity tensions between claims and understandings. However, we can also observe horizontal identity tensions between the two identity understandings, specifically among their dimensions of required capabilities, meaning of digital, structural belonging, and mindset. These tensions seem to emerge because of how the two identity understandings coin how DT work should change HR work, and how they reflect in observations, interview statements, and archival records contrasting respective DT work. Unlike vertical identity tensions, which triggered revisions to identity claims, these horizontal identity tensions were observable throughout all three periods.

When DT work reflected the understanding of required capabilities, we observed tensions of *IT capabilities vs. digital innovation capabilities*. HR employees who assumed a resource manager understanding voiced that the focus on digital innovation in the growth catalyst’s DT work produced solutions not needed across the HR function: “We want to avoid that each HR unit builds their own stuff. We don’t want to control but ensure efficiency by avoiding individual solutions” (A02). They argued that the growth catalyst’s digital innovations increased the fragmentation of the digital infrastructure of HR work, leading to inefficiencies because this fragmentation impedes scaling HR services organization-wide. Instead, they stressed IT capabilities that focus on using digital workplace technology as a tool, while the HR function centrally standardizes the digital infrastructure for HR work: “[...] everyone should be able to improve their individual level of knowledge and apply new tools [...]” (Archival record). In contrast, HR employees following the growth catalyst continued to embrace digital innovation to rethink HR work toward business-focused individualized HR services.

When engaging with digital workplace technology, the two understandings exerted tensions between *exploiting vs. exploring digital workplace technology for HR work*. The resource manager understanding engaged with digital workplace technology that could be appropriated as a tool for existing HR work: “Rather than starting from a technology, we must make processes leaner and select the technology that best supports this process” (Archival record). Resource managers were not interested in another app that helped business partners, but HRIS that improved their HR work. Growth catalysts, however, explored digital workplace technology to develop new digital solutions but noticed that when facing the integration of their initiatives into the existing digital work infrastructure, “people cling to processes and systems” (A08). Surmising, we found that resource managers’ DT work exploited digital workplace technology to improve their HR work while growth catalysts explored how they could rethink their HR work using digital workplace technology.

Interviewee (A06) on **exploiting digital workplace technology for HR work**:  
“At the moment, it’s about making life for HR people easier. Once we have that, we can think about business partners.”

Interviewee (A02) on **exploring digital workplace technology for HR work**:  
“We experimented and discussed what should be in the MVP [minimal viable product], what’s necessary, and how should the GUI [graphical user interface] look like.”

The structural belonging showed horizontal tensions between *HR-focused vs. business-focused DT of work*. Following the resource manager understanding, HR employees engaged in DT work that focused on their HR unit and its processes to make them leaner because they can only change what they control. Thus, rather than thinking big—about the business—they think within the confinement of their process ownership. In contrast, HR employees with a growth catalyst understanding pushed them to break down silos among HR units for their business partners. One employee stated that “the notion that it’s beneficial to work across [HR] units and [business] functions hasn’t reached everyone” (A04). Hence, while growth catalyst DT work expanded HR work to tie into and address business needs, resource manager DT work targeted their immediate HR unit to improve the efficiency of their direct HR work.

Interviewee (A05) on **HR-focused DT work**: “If you take it [DT of work initiatives] big immediately, it means stop. [...] We often realize that we can’t change much because we only have a process for, let’s say, three days. Before and after, some shared services cover it.”

Interviewee (A03) on **business-focused DT work**: “We pushed for a shared target vision for the HR function’s digital transformation because otherwise it is difficult to link HR better with the business.”

When observing how resource managers and growth catalysts approach DT work, we construed horizontal tensions of *operation-driven vs. innovation-driven DT work*. The resource manager understanding emphasized daily operations and acting as a growth catalyst meant “[...] that you have to do this on top because until you’ve convinced others of your ideas, you won’t get extra time to develop it” (A01). Moreover, DT work should benefit the daily operations of HR work rather than develop new HR services. Since Auto’s HR work was often distributed across HR units, growth catalysts’ DT work faced silo thinking: “It’s really difficult to accomplish something in existing, rigid silo structures” (A01). For example, when bottom-up growth catalyst DT work depended on HR units for implementation, they (employees with a growth catalyst understanding) noticed that they “can’t move anything forward without the HR unit handling the daily business” (A06). Thus, while resource managers envisioned DT work with HR service owners, growth catalysts

placed it in bottom-up initiatives. This outlines the observed horizontal tensions among the dimensions of the identity understandings of resource manager and growth catalyst, which we summarize in Table 5.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In this study, we investigated how the process of DT of work unfolds through the lens of identity shift. Theorizing about our insights, we contribute twofold. First, we present a process theory that explains how DT of work unfolds in three periods marked by evolving DT work as well as vertical and horizontal identity tensions, with the latter suggesting that DT of work shifts identity by addition rather than substitution. Second, we outline the implications of these insights for how we understand and study DT-induced identity tensions.

*Theorizing digital transformation of work through identity theory*

Departing from the previous literature on DT of work, we know that the appropriation and use of digital workplace technology alters work arrangements (Jensen, 2018) and how work is performed in organizations (Jensen, 2018; Dery et al., 2017; Zimmer et al., 2023). Furthermore, scholars have described that DT of work engenders three orders of effect: first, intended, expected convergent changes in terms of efficiency gains in existing work; second, emergent, sometimes even unintended changes in work patterns; and third, changes in the nature and understanding of work (Baptista et al., 2020). These changes can entail tensions at the individual and organizational levels (Haskamp et al., 2021; Utesheva et al., 2016), which scholars have theorized as signaling inertia toward DT of work (Haskamp et al., 2021). This understanding has advanced our knowledge of why organizations’ DT of work stalls or fails. However, it largely conceives of inertia as a barrier to be overcome to set the transformation in motion rather than a dynamic stickiness of the deep structure (Besson and Rowe, 2012) that evolves with and/or through the process of DT of work. We have argued that understanding the nature of these tensions and the underlying inertia is critical because DT of work—or organizational transformation in general—fails not because of inertia but because of its evaluation and how organizations address it (Besson and Rowe, 2012). Yet to understand tensions in DT of work, we had to first theorize how DT of work unfolds.

Synthesizing the previous literature, we theorized that DT of work emerges from an interplay of DT work and function work, with the first presenting *meta-work* that aims at changing the latter by appropriating, innovating with, and using digital workplace technology (Jensen and Stein, 2021; Zimmer et al., 2023). We then drew on identity theory—specifically, the concepts of identity claim and understanding—to empirically examine this interplay through an ethnography of Auto’s HR function. At Auto, we observed that the car manufacturer’s DT involved digital disruptions (e.g., changing workforce and workplace requirements, or HR work becoming a strategic imperative) that led to changed expectations for HR work. The HR function’s management assumed these *digital disruptions* required DT of HR work. They started communicating a *revised identity claim*, which *initiated* and *reflected in organization-level DT work* that also *projected group-level DT work*. That is, DT work at the HR function’s organizational level provided claims on how HR work should change and invited its organizational members to engage in *group-level DT work* in accordance with these claims. Thus, jointly, organization-level and group-level DT work *aimed at changing HR function work*. This resulted in an interplay of DT work and function work, which *produced* organizational members’ *identity understandings*.

However, the resulting DT of work *entailed vertical identity tensions* (see Table 4). Vertical identity tensions emerged when identity claims and understandings were misaligned. This triggered subsequent revisions of the identity claims reflected in adjusted organization-level DT work and how this organization-level DT work projected group-level DT work. At Auto, we observed the emergence of two vertical identity tensions that divided the process of the HR function’s DT of work into three periods. These periods were *mobilizing DT work* (Period A), *structural implementation support for DT work* (Period B), and *digital work infrastructure planning* (Period C). At Auto, DT of work progressed from periods A to B because the vertical tension of *ideation vs. implementation* triggered a revised identity claim. Similarly, the vertical tension of *small-scale digital innovation vs. digital work infrastructure planning* triggered a revision of the identity claim that led to Period C. Besides this tension, we observed changes in Auto’s organizational context, i.e. cost

**Table 5**  
Horizontal identity tension along the inferred identity dimensions.

Horizontal identity tensions	Resource manager	Growth catalyst
<i>Required capabilities:</i> <i>IT capabilities vs. digital innovation capabilities</i>	Resource manager understanding emphasizes IT capabilities to use digital workplace technology to improve HR work in the small (i.e., within specific HR units) while standardizing it in the large (i.e., standardized shared HR services)	Growth catalyst understanding emphasizes digital innovation capabilities to change HR work to individualized, business-focused HR work
<i>Meaning of digital:</i> <i>Exploiting vs. exploring digital workplace technology</i>	Resource manager understanding emphasizes exploiting digital workplace technology to improve existing HR work	Growth catalyst understanding emphasizes exploring digital workplace technology to rethink HR work
<i>Structural belonging:</i> <i>HR-focused vs. business-focused DT of work</i>	Resource manager understanding reflects an HR focus that emphasizes standardizing HR work to improve efficiency	Growth catalyst understanding reflects a business focus that emphasizes tailoring HR work to business partners’ needs
<i>Mindset:</i> <i>Operation-driven vs. innovation-driven DT of work</i>	Resource manager understanding reflects an operation-driven approach that places DT work with HR service owners	Growth catalyst understanding reflects an innovation-driven approach that places DT work in emergent bottom-up initiatives

pressure, that coincided with the revision of the identity claim in Period C. Here, we assume that the move to standardization (i.e., digital work infrastructure planning) followed from the vertical identity tension in Period B (i.e., small-scale digital innovation vs. digital work infrastructure planning), suggesting theoretical generalizability of this observation, whereas the cost pressure stemmed from the context of Auto’s DT of HR work.

Hence, we can conceptualize our observations of Auto’s DT of HR work such that the DT of work process unfolds through revised identity claims that initiate organization-level DT work that projects group-level DT work. Jointly, this DT work aims at changing function work. The resulting interplay of DT work and function work produces identity understandings that can entail vertical tensions between claims and understandings, triggering subsequent revisions of identity claims. Hence, from an identity theory perspective, DT of work presents an iterative process of shifting identity claims and understandings that reflect and manifest in the interplay of DT work and function work. We visualize this processual conception of DT of work from an identity theory perspective in Fig. 3.

Besides vertical identity tensions, we observed horizontal identity tensions between identity understandings. Indeed, at Auto, the DT of HR work produced two coexisting identity understandings: HR as a resource manager vs. HR as a growth catalyst. The horizontal tensions between these two understandings (see Table 5) emerged in all three periods, suggesting that the DT of work produced two coexisting identity understandings, rather than a new identity that would replace the existing one. Thus, we can presume that DT of work shifts identity by addition rather than substitution.

*Theoretical implications for research on digital transformation-induced identity tensions*

Grasping DT-induced identity shifts as adding rather than substituting identity has theoretical implications for how we interpret entailed identity tensions and the underlying inertia that they signal. The previous literature has described DT-induced tensions, for example, among digital units and existing business units (Keilbach et al., 2023) or digital units and IT units (Svahn et al., 2017; Tumbas et al., 2018; Lorenz and Buchwald, 2023). Scholars who employed identity theory construed these tensions as signals of organizational inertia toward DT (Keilbach et al., 2023; Tripsas, 2009; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021). This conception suggests that DT-induced identity tensions emerge because organizational members cling to the existing identity, which signals organizational inertia toward DT of work (Besson and Rowe, 2012). Accordingly, DT of work fails if organizations cannot resolve this inertia, that is, mobilize all—or enough—organizational members to shift and to adopt the new DT-induced identity. This evaluation of identity tensions and the underlying inertia is grounded in the previous literature’s prevalent substitution view on DT-induced identity shift. However, our insights into horizontal identity tensions suggest that DT of work shifts identity by addition, which changes our interpretation of the underlying organizational inertia. In fact, we argue that the horizontal tensions signal inertia in DT of work rather than toward DT of work, which alters how we investigate DT-induced identity tensions and underlying organizational inertia.

Understanding identity tensions as signs of inertia in DT of work changes the evaluation of this inertia from being a barrier or threshold to inertia being dynamic. If apprehended as a barrier, organizations must overcome this barrier to set the transformation process in motion. If apprehended as dynamic, inertia surfaces as evolving vertical and horizontal identity tensions. Accordingly, the research questions change from investigating how organizations can overcome identity tensions toward DT of work—or the barrier that stops the organization from digitally transforming—to how identity tensions emerge, evolve, and play out in DT of work and how organizations can address these dynamic tensions to trigger and facilitate their DT. For this, we must first define identity tensions.

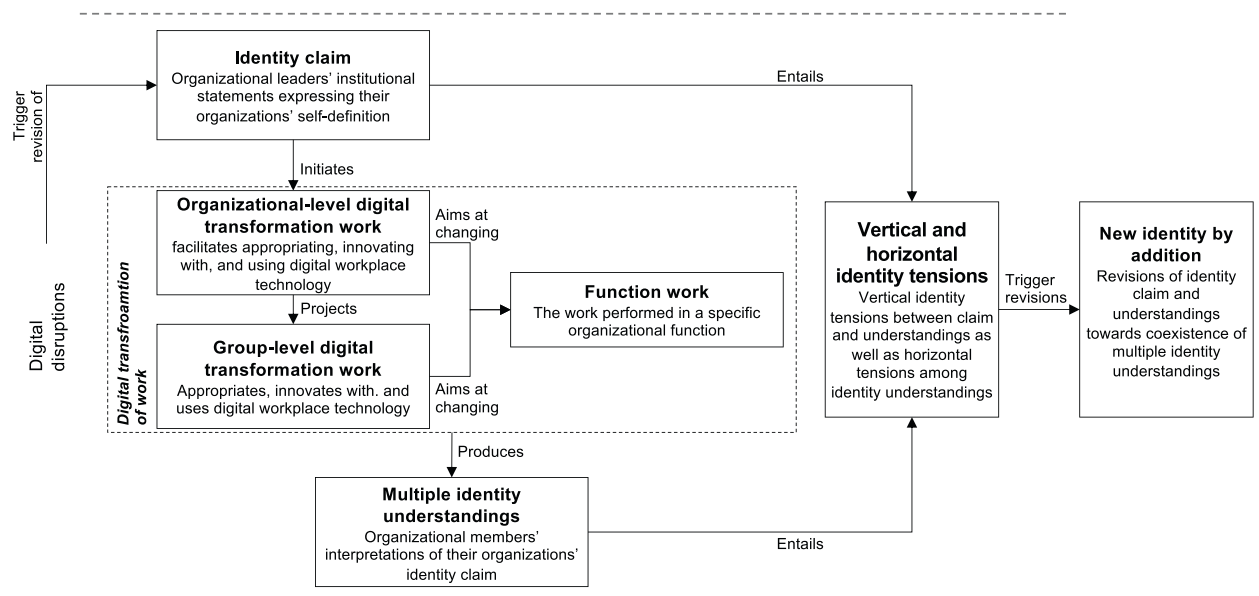


Fig. 3. Process model of digital transformation of work from an identity theory perspective.

Turning to identity theory (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), we construed from our study that identity tensions refer to misaligned identity claims and understandings (i.e., vertical identity tensions) or conflicting identity understandings of the same claim (i.e., horizontal identity tensions). We can find horizontal identity tensions in Auto's DT of HR work (e.g., the vertical tension of ideation vs. implementation, periods A to B) or in existing research on incumbent organizations that shows that not all units buy into the claimed digital identity (cf. Chanas et al., 2019; Svahn et al., 2017). The previous literature that has followed the substitution view has studied how vertical identity tensions emerge and how organizations can resolve them by decoupling identity understandings (e.g., Tumbas et al., 2018) or by fully substituting the old with the new identity (cf. Keilbach et al., 2023). Accordingly, these tensions are temporary and resolving them involves change management to fully substitute the existing identity understanding (see Fig. 1). However, the addition view (see Fig. 3) highlights that these tensions reflect coexisting identity understandings.

Hence, for both vertical and horizontal identity tensions, the addition view calls for research that investigates how identity claims can accommodate multiple coexisting identity understandings. This question involves considering reactive, as in the case of Auto, or proactive revisions of identity claims (cf. Brünker et al., 2024). Regardless of being reactive or proactive, this change in apprehending identity as shifting by addition requires scholars to theorize how institutional statements reflect and formulate identity claims that call for multiple yet complementary identity understandings. Moreover, scholars can investigate the dynamics among identity understandings and how they may influence subsequent revisions of identity claims. Identity theory defines three levels of identity: organizational, group, and individual level identity (e.g., Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2013b; Graf et al., 2023; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021; Wessel et al., 2021). Analytically, we distinguished between organization-level and group-level DT work and linked the first to identity claims and the second to identity understanding. This indicates that identity claims reflect organization-level identity, and identity understandings reflect group-level identity (Ravasi and Schulz, 2006). While we do not draw specifically on this conceptual link, we call for future research that investigates how DT shifts identity at different levels. Exemplary research questions ask how DT-induced identity shifts play out and interact across these levels, whether DT-induced identity shifts follow different views (i.e., substitution or addition) at different identity levels, or how organizational actors can address identity tensions that emerge across these three identity levels.

Moreover, the dual reason for the revised identity claim in Period C suggests problematizing the context of DT and DT of work. That is, our analysis shows that Auto's HR management revised their identity claim after the vertical tension in Period B to emphasize standardization of the digital infrastructure for HR work. Besides this, we also observed that they responded to external shocks (i.e., changes in Auto's DT and business strategy) that exerted cost pressure and a need for efficiency of HR work. This response emphasized the resource manager understanding over the growth catalyst understanding (Period C), thus affecting the observed horizontal identity tension. We posit that this calls for future research that problematizes and investigates how context, such as external shocks, influences the DT of work process and the involved DT-induced identity shift.

Last, we call for research that delves into the effect of horizontal identity tensions on relational organizing (Baiyere et al., 2025)—that is, whether and how different identity understandings among different business units affect their collaboration. This research agenda can provide us with insights that can inform our theory building on DT-induced identity shifts as well as practitioners on how they can address organizational inertia in DT.

## Limitations

Our study of the process of DT of work has certain limitations. We chose identity theory to conceptualize DT of work because the empirical data spoke through the concepts of identity claim and understanding and because of its prevalence in previous DT research. This theoretical lens allowed us to theorize about the process of DT of work and to surface the addition view on DT-induced identity shift as an important insight. However, we acknowledge that other theoretical lenses—for example, paradox theory (e.g., Smith and Lewis, 2011) or digital infrastructure evolution (Henfridsson and Bygstad, 2013)—can also provide meaningful explanations for DT of work. Concepts of digital infrastructure evolution offer avenues for future research into DT of work and its entanglement with existing digital infrastructures for work (Pipek and Wulf, 2009). Furthermore, our analytical cut places the inception of DT of work with the HR function, revising their identity claim in response to digital disruptions (i.e., digital disruptions trigger a revised identity claim) and theorized about the unfolding of the DT of work process from here. Organizational leaders can also decide to revise their identity claim because they seek proactive change (cf. Brünker et al., 2024). Future work could examine respective cases or compare processual differences between reactive and proactive DT of work. Last, we outline that Auto's DT work aimed at changing HR work; we provide no detailed insights into how HR work at Auto changed. Consequently, we consider the theoretical foundations, analytical cutting of the DT of work process, and examining DT of work outcomes future research opportunities.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Markus P. Zimmer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Maren Gierlich-Joas:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. No funding was received to conduct this research.

**Appendix A. Interview script**

Appendix A provides the interview script (Myers & Newman, 2007; see Table A1). The script outlines the topics addressed in the interviews and their sequence as well as lists exemplary questions for each topic. In brief, the interviews involved questions about why the HR function engages in DT of work, how they follow up on DT workshops, or how they steer and support the implementation of ideas proposed at these workshops. The below presentation of the interview script reflects the interviews’ semi-structured nature, which meant that we had prepared a script of topics and exemplary questions but also allowed ourselves to venture from this script to delve into interesting responses

**Table A1**  
Interview script used for formal semi-structured interviews at Auto.

Sequence of topics	Topic’s focus and exemplary questions
<i>Introduction</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to researcher and study</li> <li>• Questions about interviewee’s job role and work experience</li> </ul>
<i>DT of Auto’s HR function</i>	Questions for understanding the DT process of Auto’s HR function: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the HR function’s digital transformation process start?</li> <li>• Who defines the strategy for the HR function’s digital transformation?</li> <li>• Why did the HR function engage in digital transformation?</li> <li>• How are the business strategy, HR strategy, and DT of HR linked?</li> </ul>
<i>Steering the HR function’s DT</i>	Questions for understanding how the HR function steers its DT process, specifically, the digital initiatives in HR: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the HR function identify, create, or nurture digital initiatives?</li> <li>• How does the HR function select digital initiatives for implementation?</li> <li>• How does the HR function staff project teams to implement digital initiatives?</li> </ul>
<i>Notion behind digital initiatives</i>	Questions for understanding the notion behind digital initiatives in the HR function: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the HR function assess digital initiatives (e.g., implement vs. stop)?</li> <li>• Can you describe the criteria for selecting digital initiatives for implementation?</li> <li>• Who decides on the HR function’s digital initiatives (e.g., their implementation)?</li> </ul>
<i>Challenges to the HR function’s DT</i>	Questions for understanding challenges that Auto’s HR function faces during its DT: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe the challenges that the HR function faces regarding its DT?</li> <li>• Can you describe challenges to the HR function’s implementation of digital initiatives?</li> <li>• Can you describe how the HR function addresses these challenges?</li> </ul>

**Appendix B. Overview of collected video material**

Appendix B Contains Tables B.1 and B.2, which list the collected video material. The videos listed in Table B.1 show employees pitching their ideas for DT of work initiatives, which they developed during the HR OpenSpace and the digital Journeys (i.e., organization-level DT work), which we describe in Section 4 (Findings). Moreover, Table B.1 links these proposed ideas for DT of work to the two identity understandings of resource manager and growth catalyst that emerged at the HR function’s group level, that is, how these ideas aim at changing HR work

Table B.2 lists two videos recorded during one of the Digital Journeys. One of these videos presents a message from HR management to the HR employees participating in the Digital Journey, while the other video shows the participants’ response, which demands shifting the focus from sourcing ideas to a strategy and support for their implementation.

**Table B1**  
Videos that show pitches for ideas for the DT of HR work.

	Organization-level DT work	Proposed ideas for Auto’s DT of HR work	Reflected identity understanding
V01	HR OpenSpace	<i>New way of learning with augmented reality:</i> Appropriate augmented reality for on-the-job training	Resource manager
V02	HR OpenSpace	<i>Ask HR:</i> Appropriate a chatbot that can answer employees’ questions regarding HR services	Resource manager
V03	HR OpenSpace	<i>CeHRti:</i> Service for document sharing and storage between employees and HR	Resource manager
V04	HR OpenSpace	<i>HR Finder:</i> Improve matching between job seekers and positions to support employees’ personal growth	Growth catalyst
V05	HR OpenSpace	<i>HRme:</i> Single-sign-on service for all internal HRIS with a mobile app to ease employees’ access	Resource manager
V06	HR OpenSpace	<i>Job Tasting:</i> Platform for internal tenders of short-term project work to allow employees to take over work in different business functions for skill development	Growth catalyst
V07	HR OpenSpace	<i>Media Page:</i> Repository for medial files (e.g., images, graphics, etc.)	Resource manager
V08	HR OpenSpace	<i>MyPerfectJob:</i> Service for job fairs that potential candidates can use to find open positions that fit their skills and qualifications	Resource manager
V09	HR OpenSpace	<i>AutoTranslate:</i> On-the-fly translation of conversations trained to detect and correctly translate company-specific terms and acronyms	Growth catalyst
V10	HR OpenSpace	<i>Virtual Onboarding:</i> Virtual onboarding features for new hires before they officially start onboarding to reduce costs	Resource manager

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**Table B1** (continued)

	Organization-level DT work	Proposed ideas for Auto's DT of HR work	Reflected identity understanding
V11	Digital Journey	<i>HR Swipe</i> : Managers can provide feedback on HR services via swiping to collect feedback on these services and their improvement	Growth catalyst
V12	Digital Journey	<i>Digital Recruitment</i> : App for applicants to check the status of their open applications to provide transparency and reduce costs for answering respective queries	Resource manager
V13	Digital Journey	<i>Digital Leadership Training</i> : Development of digital leadership training within HR to transform HR into a business partner that coaches, mentors, and consults management on their digital leadership skills	Growth catalyst
V14	Digital Journey	<i>TeamTime</i> : Central marketplace for HR tasks, allowing HR employees to choose their work tasks besides a fixed quota of operational work. Creates flexibility and possibilities for skill development	Growth catalyst
V15	Digital Journey	<i>PaperDigi</i> : Replace fragmented landscape of HRIS with one central HRIS to move from small-scale innovations for HR service to an integrated development of employees' HR experience	Growth catalyst
V16	Digital Journey	<i>E2E-Innovation</i> : Proposition for how to structurally support implementation of ideas for DT of work in the HR function because they observe that these ideas become stuck	Growth catalyst
V17	Digital Journey	<i>Startup Mentality</i> : Conduct digital leadership development program that establishes a startup mentality as part of the organizational culture	Growth catalyst
V18	Digital Journey	<i>StepUp 2.0</i> : Training program for digital ambassadors that will act as multipliers for the organization's DT	Growth catalyst
V19	Digital Journey	<i>Performance Cockpit</i> : Digital evaluation of employees' competencies supporting HR personnel in helping employees to identify required competencies for their next internal career step as well as to identify employees suitable for open positions	Growth catalyst
V20	Digital Journey	<i>NewWork</i> : Concept for rethinking the digital workplace so employees can choose from different physical spaces depending on the work they need to perform	Growth catalyst
V21	Digital Journey	<i>Agenda Maker</i> : Repository of methods for organizational development from which HR personnel can search and select to create agendas for organizational development events	Resource manager
V22	Digital Journey	<i>CoWorkation</i> : Service that helps employees find colleagues who have needed skills and connect with them for knowledge exchange	Growth catalyst
V23	Digital Journey	<i>Organizational Development Tomorrow</i> : Suggests changing the contracting process for organizational development services from clients contracting individual consultants to clients contracting the organizational development department	Resource manager

**Table B2**

Videos that show message from/to Auto's HR management.

ID	Organization-level DT work	Description of video content
V24	Digital Journey	<i>Message for digital journey</i> : HR management stating that the DT of HR work depends on HR employees' ideas for changing HR work and invites participants of the Digital Journey to propose ideas for this DT of HR work
V25	Digital Journey	<i>Message to HR management</i> : Employees express appreciation for the Digital Journey but also request from management a clear strategy for the HR function's digital infrastructure and support for implementing the proposed ideas

**Appendix C. Conceptual grounding in empirical illustrations**

Appendix C presents empirical illustrations that ground our conceptualization of DT of work in the collected data. Tables C.1-3 depict empirical illustrations for the inferred identity claims and understandings at Auto

**Table C1**

Empirical illustrations of identity claim of HR as a strategic business partner in Period A.

Dimensions of identity claim	Empirical illustrations
<i>Function's organizational purpose: HR as strategic business partner</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "As HR, we must position us as a professional partner for business units that face digital disruption" (Archival record).</li> <li>• "Better reputation with the business and being a critical partner for management" (Archival record)</li> <li>• "HRvolution is a pun that includes 'revolution' and 'evolution,' which we chose to signal that it's about being bold and moving ahead [...]" (A01).</li> <li>• "We guide the company on its digital path and must prepare it for the new digital business models" (Archival record).</li> <li>• "We have to undertake our digital transformation to create space for ourselves and our business partners for strategic and creative tasks" (Archival record).</li> </ul>
<i>Required capabilities: Continuous innovation process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "We have to learn to approach our HR customer and learn about their challenges" (Archival record).</li> <li>• "[...] not only think about good ideas but how we have to change our organization to continuously implement digital innovations" (Archival record)</li> <li>• HR OpenSpace and Digital Journeys nurture participants' digital innovation skills (Observation).</li> </ul>

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**Table C1** (continued)

Dimensions of identity claim	Empirical illustrations
<i>Meaning of digital: Digital workplace technology as a disruptive possibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We must seize the chance that digitalization offers to better fulfill our HR duty [to the business]” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “Routine work will be digitalized, automated, and presumably outsourced. The focus will be on employees and their personal development” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “In some areas, this [digital workplace technology] means evolutionary change, but in others, revolutionary reorientation” (Archival record).</li> </ul>
<i>Structural belonging: HR is embedded in business structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If the business doesn’t benefit, why should they pay our salary? Business benefits are a clear objective!” (Archival record)</li> <li>• “HR plays a special part in [Auto’s] digital transformation. We are partner for business units, but also a function that has its own requirements” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “Digitally enabled HR organization that supports business goals best” (Archival record).</li> </ul>
<i>Mindset: Bottom-up strategic change</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We believe that being digital comes from our employees’ pioneering spirit” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “Recently, the DTOHR organized two events to nurture creativity, innovation, and pioneering spirit” (Archival record).</li> <li>• Employees joining the HR OpenSpace and Digital Journeys developed ideas for the HR function’s DT of work (Observation).</li> </ul>

**Table C2**

Empirical illustrations of produced identity understandings.

Dimensions of identity understanding	Empirical illustrations of resource manager	Empirical illustrations of growth catalyst
<i>Function’s organizational purpose: HR supports business operation vs. DT of business</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We can discuss, of course, how relevant is HR for being competitive? Does individualized recruiting really create a competitive edge?” (A04)</li> <li>• “Specifically, I look at how we can use technology operatively to process and visualize [HR] data” (A04).</li> <li>• “There are colleagues who scrape data and create reports daily. Every machine can do this [reporting] better” (A04).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The goal is to make recruitment more attractive in times that we compete for talent” (Interview A05).</li> <li>• “[...] Everyone speaks of tailored results for employees and business units using chatbots or AI” (A01).</li> <li>• “The ultimate goal is making HR systems that make our business partner comfortable” (A06).</li> </ul>
<i>Required capabilities: IT vs. digital innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We’re far from predictive or prescriptive analytics. We have to first create a database and understanding” (A04).</li> <li>• “We must create central knowledge centers for RPA, data analytics, etc.” (A04).</li> <li>• “[...] sometimes, it’s simple stuff ... showing colleagues how to sign a PDF [...] very basic stuff, because we check Office tools and how can we optimize things” (A05).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Having support on methods and so on for innovation and implementation [...]” (A08)</li> <li>• “We got support from the DTOHR, and they organized a Scrum workshop. Before, I didn’t know what Scrum is. [...]” (A08).</li> <li>• “Different things...knowledge about technology, about creativity methods, customer centricity...being able to implement and not depend on others” (A01).</li> </ul>
<i>Meaning of digital: Digital workplace technology as an exploitation vs. exploration resource</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If you have a standard software, it’s easy to create these reports [...]” (A04).</li> <li>• “Using [digital technology], we can better plan temporary shift workers” (A05).</li> <li>• “We propose a single repository for making media files accessible for all HR employees” (V07).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We look at different technologies and ask ourselves: How could we use this in HR?” (A09)</li> <li>• “How do we have to change HR to best use digital technology in our services?” (A02)</li> <li>• “Job Tasting is a digital platform where you can learn new topics, experience new technologies, and network within our company” (V06).</li> </ul>
<i>Structural belonging: HR focused vs. business focused</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If we tailor everything to the business partner in HR, then it [HR] will never be cheaper” (A01).</li> <li>• “Our decentralized structure makes it difficult to establish standard solutions” (A04).</li> <li>• “HR has a steering function, for example, when recruiting. We have to ensure that head count stays manageable” (A05).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I believe we should look at the business strategy and think how we can support that strategy” (Interview A05).</li> <li>• “At the end of the day, HR’s task is how to best possibly support the business” (A02).</li> <li>• “We shouldn’t develop ideas on our own, but with the business. Otherwise, it’s hard to get their buy-in” (A06).</li> </ul>
<i>Mindset: Operation driven vs. innovation driven</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We decided to start small, see what works, and then dream big. Often, we observe this the other way round” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “They said they do a lot of stuff manually, and if we could then develop a solution for that” (A05).</li> <li>• “Employees must log into many different systems. The solution: HRme. A single-sign-on app that allows employees to access all HR services in one app” (V05).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Colleagues from different units joined, so we worked in a swarm, agile, and so on” (A08).</li> <li>• “[...] we wanted to drive innovation” (A06)</li> <li>• “[...] this requires entrepreneurship that is grounded in a digital mindset” (A02)</li> </ul>

**Table C3**  
Empirical illustrations of identity claim of HR as a service provider in Period C.

Dimensions of identity claim	Empirical illustrations
<i>Function's organizational purpose:</i> <i>HR as service provider</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[...] during the last year, the stance has changed. It's not anymore about making stuff fancy but about efficiency in our processes [...]” (A01).</li> <li>• “For customers' benefit, we optimize HR processes and work on innovative and efficient solutions” (Archival record).</li> <li>• HR's management announced the HR baseline program to reduce HR to the essentially required services (Observation).</li> </ul>
<i>Required capabilities:</i> <i>Digital work infrastructure planning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The biggest challenge is the heterogeneity of our organically grown IT landscape” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “Behind all this lies a complex web of interfacing systems. Changing that requires standardization through a platform logic and use of standards” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “[...] we can only achieve this [efficiency] if we work at the base. 'Base' being the large HRIS [...]. This will be our next project. [...] (A01)”</li> <li>• “[...] the issue starts with process optimization....Often, people don't know how to look at and analyze a process” (A04).</li> <li>• “That's a process we must accept and stumble through ... and accept that this IT stuff is an HR topic now and not outsource like thus far” (A02).</li> </ul>
<i>Meaning of digital:</i> <i>Digital workplace technology as infrastructure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I believe the success of digital initiatives might have been better if we had clarified how we steer these initiatives, meaning, how does this fit into the existing IT landscape?” (A03)</li> <li>• “Why do we store data in several systems? Why do we operate multiple hotlines? Why are colleagues oblivious to each other? [...] We have to break up these silos and better integrate processes, systems, and data” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “They [participants of an HR event] stressed the importance of end-to-end process analysis and optimization before using tools like RPA” (Archival record).</li> </ul>
<i>Structural belonging:</i> <i>HR is a cost center</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No one takes interest in innovation, when on the hallway, all they talk about is how we can reduce head count by 20%” (A05).</li> <li>• “[...] saw the event [digital workshop between HR and finance] as an opportunity to save costs through cooperation” (Archival record).</li> <li>• “We must leverage digitalization to improve efficiency” (Archival record).</li> </ul>
<i>Mindset:</i> <i>Top-down, cost-driven change</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We [management] check whether this idea will save us costs. If not, we drop it” (Interview A01).</li> <li>• “For HR, this means that our ideas have to have a business case...that we avoid complexity or at least keep it manageable and save costs through automation” (Archival record).</li> <li>• The HR management shut down AskHR, AutoTranslate, and other group-level DT work because of lack of a business case (Observation).</li> </ul>

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