



# E-leadership: Re-examining transformations in leadership source and transmission

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## ABSTRACT

At the turn of the century, the first integrative review and conceptualization of the work on *e-leadership* was published in *The Leadership Quarterly*. During the late 1990's, with the rapid rise in advanced information technology (AIT) such as the Internet, e-mail, video conferencing, virtual teams, and groupware systems (GDSS), there were a number of authors beginning to examine how AIT would transform how organizations organize their work and the implications for leadership in those organizations. Much of this discussion fell under the broad label of "virtual" with authors at that time speculating how such technology might impact how leadership was practiced and investigated. Now, over a decade later, we re-examine how the theory, research, and practice domains have evolved with respect to the work on e-leadership and its implications for the way leadership functions. In this review, we have broadened the notion of what constitutes e-leadership, considering how AIT affects the leadership dynamic, how the leadership dynamic affects the faithful or unfaithful appropriation of AIT, how AIT can and is being used to develop leadership, and ultimately how each will shape how organizations function well into the future. In sum, we examine what we've learned about e-leadership, what needs to be learned, and what might constitute emerging topics that could drive the e-leadership agenda over the next decade and beyond.

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## 1. Introduction

Thomas Edison suggested at the turn of the 20th century that human beings have an enormous capacity to build amazing technology but figuring how to best implement it, remains a formidable challenge (see [www.edisonfordwinterstates.org](http://www.edisonfordwinterstates.org)). This certainly appears to be true of the advanced information technology (AIT) that has been developed since the mid-1990s and deployed in organizations because there have been amazing transformations in what technology can now do *for* and *to* us. Yet, how such technology is implemented in organizations and its effects on the way people work together has not been fully examined nor understood. Although the potential impact of AIT has been recognized by both leadership scholars and practitioners as important, what we know about the interaction between AIT and leadership still remains at the very nascent stages of development.

The position we take in this updated review regarding the examination of e-leadership is broader than simply focusing on how leaders use AIT when interacting virtually. Specifically, we attempt to "zoom out" in our examination of leadership and AIT, by considering how AIT and leadership – in the broadest sense – affect each other over time, distance, and cultures. We do so, because, information is a fundamental building block for considering how organizations function. Consequently, to the extent that

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information generation and distribution in organizations is changing as a function of advances in information technology, we suggest that what actually constitutes an organization is also transforming, which then centrally affects how we view leadership in current and future organizations.

We argue that e-leaders are affected by time, distance, and cultural considerations in how they actively shape their followers', customers' and society's views and use of AIT, and potentially the context that embeds them. Work on strategic leadership suggests that there are windows of opportunities defined by market, economic, societal, and political factors that place limits on when technologies can be developed and/or adopted (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2007), and therefore when leaders are required to communicate these factors to followers or customers. For example, the determination of when and how to best apply technologies to develop and introduce an innovative computer for the higher-education market was essential to the success of NeXT, the company Steve Jobs founded after leaving Apple in 1985. To overcome market-defined time limitations in the fast-paced computer industry, Jobs recognized the importance of eliminating social and physical distance among his top managers and designers. To close the time/space gaps and create a more participative context, he used a mix of intensive company retreats and technology. This approach facilitated discussions among employees about NeXT's vision and culture and how customers could use the new technology his employees were creating (Nathan, 1986). Thus, e-leadership not only considers how AIT mediates leadership influence processes, but also describes how leadership influences the creation, adaptation, or adoption of AIT by all constituents within what we call the *total leadership system* (described below), and how technology may aid leaders to better reveal, frame, and communicate truths hidden within the ambiguities of complex social systems and their contexts (Heidegger, 1977).

In their review of e-leadership, Avolio, Kahai, and Dodge (2001) indicated, "we chose the term e-leadership to incorporate the new emerging context for examining leadership" (p. 617). The authors went further in their discussion to emphasize that they would focus on how AIT was mediating social influence processes that are typically associated with leadership at individual, group, and organization levels. However, in their abstract, they also stated, "organizational structures, including leadership, may themselves be transformed as a result of interactions with Advanced Information Technology" (p. 615) and further into their review, they suggested that "leaders will need to play a more proactive role in creating the social structures that foster the implementation of AIT" (p. 617).

Reflecting on their main focus, we assume that Avolio et al. (2001) used adaptive structuration theory specifically because they were interested in not only how leaders appropriate technology, but also how technology impacts leadership. Consequently, we set out here to examine how leaders lead virtually, as well as how teams interact virtually, but this in our view is only a very small piece of the transformation that is occurring in organizations as a consequence of introducing AIT. Yet, we cannot focus on every aspect of organizations or organizational theory in this updated review, so we direct our attention specifically to examining how AIT and leadership interact with each other to affect individuals, groups, organizations, and larger communities.

Looking back and building on Avolio et al. (2001), our focus here is to examine the changing complex leadership dynamic that is affected by the introduction of new forms of AIT. Dasgupta (2011) perhaps articulated this broader focus best stating, "leadership and technology, therefore enjoy a recursive relationship, each affecting and at the same time being affected by the other; each transforming and being transformed by the other" (p. 2). Similarly, Avolio and Kahai (2003) in their discussion of how technology is affecting leadership, viewed e-leadership as being "a fundamental change in the way leaders and followers related to each other within organizations and between organizations" (p. 15).

With this focus in mind, we examine how the interaction between leadership and AIT will permanently change what we conceive of as representing an organization in which future practitioners lead and future leadership scholars study leadership, as noted by Avolio et al. (2001), when they stated, "the repeated appropriation of information technology generates or transforms social structures, which over time become institutionalized" (p. 621). Fundamentally, we build on the foundational question guiding earlier work on e-leadership to ask, *how does the appropriation of AIT affect the total leadership system in organizations and in turn, how does leadership affect the appropriation of AIT in the sense of their co-evolution?* We assess whether leadership is the source of organizational structures/processes and how leadership affects and is affected by the structures arising from the appropriation of the AIT. Referring to Katz and Kahn's (1978) notion that organizations are interconnected systems whereby a change in one aspect of the system will affect changes in other parts, we emphasize from the outset of this article that we are considering both social and technical systems, as well as their interaction over time.

Our review of the literature indicates that advances in AIT and its appropriation at all levels of organizations and societies have far outpaced the practice and science of leadership. Indeed, it seems fair to say that the field of leadership has largely assumed what we might call an anthropological approach to understanding how AIT affects the leadership dynamics in organizations, communities, and societies. By anthropological, we mean the leadership field has studied the traces left behind after AIT has been appropriated, following what the impact has been, versus predicting what it could be. This includes but is not limited to how AIT has dis-intermediated the relationship between leaders and leaders, leaders and followers, leaders and their organization, community and nation states, global and non-global team members, governments and the citizens they serve, and the business enterprise and its customers.

We begin our discussion by first highlighting critical aspects of the original discussion on e-leadership in terms of some of the fundamental operational definitions and theoretical frameworks used to interpret what constituted e-leadership at that time. Next, we examine how e-leadership has evolved in both science and practice over the past ten plus years, exploring it from a micro to macro perspective. We then examine emerging areas that were not included in the 2001 review (e.g., gamification, explained below) that are changing the way organizational members and consumers interact around the globe. After these discussions, we provide a review and integration of the existing literature, in Table 1, and propose a framework to guide future

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