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# The Human Adaptation Gap: A Mechanism-Based Explanation of Behavioral Breakdown in AI-Driven Organizations

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## Abstrak

*Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital transformation have accelerated organizational systems, creating environments characterized by increasing complexity, speed, and uncertainty. Despite significant technological advancements, organizations continue to face persistent human-related challenges, including technostress, burnout, disengagement, and resistance to change. Existing research has examined these issues from fragmented perspectives, focusing separately on technological capabilities, human resource development, and individual behavior, without adequately explaining the underlying mechanisms linking system-level transformation to human-level breakdown. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of the Human Adaptation Gap, defined as the structural misalignment between the exponential acceleration of socio-technical systems and the inherently bounded capacity of human adaptation. Drawing on insights from artificial intelligence, organizational behavior, technostress, and socio-technical systems theory, this paper develops a mechanism-based conceptual framework explaining how system acceleration generates cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption, leading to behavioral outcomes such as disengagement and resistance. The study contributes by proposing a novel construct, advancing a mechanism-based explanation, and integrating fragmented research streams into a unified framework. The findings offer important implications for human-centered digital transformation and adaptive organizational design.*

## Keywords

human adaptation gap; artificial intelligence; digital transformation; technostress; adaptive performance; organizational behavior; socio-technical systems

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# 1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the nature of work, organizational processes, and human–technology interactions. Across industries, organizations are experiencing unprecedented levels of system acceleration, characterized by increasing complexity, speed, and uncertainty in decision-making and task execution (Malik et al., 2023; Jarrahi, 2018). While these technological developments promise efficiency and innovation, they simultaneously impose escalating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral demands on employees, often exceeding their adaptive capacity (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Bala & Venkatesh, 2016).

Emerging evidence suggests that the widespread adoption of AI and digital systems is associated with growing challenges at the human level, including technostress, burnout, disengagement, and resistance to change (Tarafdar et al., 2015; Braganza et al., 2021). Notably, these challenges persist despite substantial organizational investments in skill development and digital transformation initiatives (Nicolás-Agustín et al., 2022). This paradox indicates that technological advancement alone does not guarantee effective human adaptation, and in some cases, may even exacerbate psychological strain and performance instability (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015).

Existing research streams have examined this phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Studies on AI and digital transformation primarily emphasize technological capabilities and organizational performance outcomes (Chowdhury et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). Human resource management (HRM) research, in contrast, focuses on competencies, skills, and readiness for change (Holt et al., 2007). Meanwhile, organizational behavior (OB) literature explores individual responses such as resistance, proactivity, and adaptation (Oreg et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2010). Although these streams provide valuable insights, they remain conceptually fragmented and insufficiently integrated.

Critically, prior studies have largely overlooked the underlying mechanism that links system-level transformation to human-level breakdown. Specifically, there is limited theoretical explanation of how the accelerating pace of socio-technical systems interacts with the inherently bounded nature of human cognition, emotion, and behavior (Weick et al., 2005; Leonardi, 2011). As a result, existing frameworks tend to treat issues such as technostress, resistance, and disengagement as isolated outcomes, rather than manifestations of a deeper structural misalignment between systems and human adaptation processes.

This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of the Human Adaptation Gap (HAG), defined as the structural misalignment between the exponential acceleration of socio-technical systems and the inherently limited, linear capacity of human adaptation. Building on insights from AI research, organizational behavior, technostress literature, and socio-technical systems theory, this paper develops a mechanism-based conceptual framework that explains how system acceleration generates cognitive overload, emotional strain, identity disruption, and ultimately behavioral breakdown.

The novelty of this study lies in three key contributions. First, it introduces the Human Adaptation Gap as a new theoretical construct that shifts the focus from isolated individual responses to systemic misalignment. Second, it advances a mechanism-based explanation by integrating cognitive, emotional, and identity processes that mediate the relationship between system acceleration and behavioral outcomes. Third, it provides an integrative framework that bridges previously fragmented research streams, offering a more holistic understanding of human adaptation in AI-driven environments.

From a practical perspective, the proposed framework has important implications for organizations undergoing digital transformation. It suggests that the success of technological adoption depends not only on system capabilities but also on the organization's ability to

redesign work, manage psychological demands, and support human adaptation processes. Without such alignment, organizations risk intensifying burnout, disengagement, and resistance, ultimately undermining the benefits of technological innovation.

In response to these challenges, this paper develops a conceptual model that explicates the Human Adaptation Gap and its underlying mechanisms, and proposes a set of theoretical propositions to guide future empirical research. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how organizations can navigate the human side of digital transformation in an era of accelerating technological change.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies has generated a growing body of research examining their implications for work, organizations, and human behavior. While this literature offers important insights, it remains conceptually fragmented, with different research streams focusing on specific aspects of the phenomenon without providing an integrated explanation of how system-level transformation translates into human-level breakdown. To situate the HAG within the broader scholarly landscape, this section critically synthesizes five key streams of literature: (1) AI and system acceleration, (2) human adaptation and bounded capacity, (3) technostress and psychological strain, (4) organizational change and resistance, and (5) socio-technical systems theory.

### 2.1 AI and System Acceleration: The Escalation of System Demands

Research on AI and digital transformation consistently highlights the increasing speed, complexity, and interdependence of organizational systems. AI-enabled technologies facilitate real-time decision-making, automate complex tasks, and continuously learn from data, thereby intensifying the dynamism of work environments (Jarrahi, 2018; Malik et al., 2023). From an economic perspective, technological advancement has historically reshaped labor demand and task structures, but contemporary AI systems introduce unprecedented levels of adaptive complexity and decision density (Autor, 2015; Acemoglu et al., 2022).

Organizational studies further suggest that algorithmic systems alter control mechanisms, redistribute authority, and redefine coordination processes, creating new forms of work that are both highly efficient and inherently unstable (Kellogg et al., 2020; Faraj et al., 2018). These developments collectively contribute to what can be conceptualized as system acceleration, a condition in which technological systems evolve at an exponential rate, continuously increasing performance expectations and environmental uncertainty.

However, despite its analytical richness, this stream of research primarily emphasizes system capabilities and organizational outcomes. It largely assumes that human actors will adapt to these changes, without systematically theorizing the limits of such adaptation. As a result, while the literature effectively explains *what systems can do*, it provides limited insight into *how escalating system demands interact with human constraints*.

### 2.2 Human Adaptation and Bounded Capacity: The Limits of Adjustment

In contrast to system-focused perspectives, research in organizational behavior and human resource management has extensively examined human adaptation, emphasizing constructs such as adaptive performance, proactivity, and readiness for change (Pulakos et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2010; Holt et al., 2007). These studies highlight the capacity of individuals to adjust their behavior in response to changing demands, often framing adaptation as a function of motivation, resources, and contextual support (Griffin et al., 2007).

At the same time, foundational theories of bounded rationality and cognitive limitation suggest that human information processing, attention, and decision-making capacity are

inherently constrained (Bala & Venkatesh, 2016). Individuals cannot process unlimited information, respond instantaneously to change, or sustain continuous adaptation without experiencing diminishing returns.

Despite acknowledging these constraints, the adaptation literature tends to adopt an implicitly optimistic assumption: that with sufficient resources, training, or motivation, individuals can effectively cope with environmental change. This assumption becomes problematic in AI-driven contexts, where system demands are not only increasing but doing so at a pace that may exceed the natural limits of human adjustment.

Consequently, while this stream provides valuable insights into *how individuals adapt*, it does not adequately address *whether adaptation remains feasible under conditions of continuous system acceleration*. This limitation creates a theoretical gap between the expanding demands imposed by technological systems and the bounded capacity of human actors.

### 2.3 Technostress and Psychological Strain: Symptoms Without Structural Explanation

A third stream of research addresses the psychological consequences of digital work environments, particularly through the lens of technostress. Studies in this area document how technology-induced demands—such as information overload, constant connectivity, and system complexity—lead to stress, fatigue, and reduced well-being (Tarafdar et al., 2015; Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015).

Empirical evidence further suggests that these stressors negatively affect job satisfaction, engagement, and performance, reinforcing the idea that digital transformation has unintended human costs (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015). Technostress research thus provides a robust account of the psychological strain associated with modern work environments.

However, this literature primarily treats technostress as an outcome variable, focusing on its antecedents and consequences at the individual level. It rarely situates these phenomena within a broader systemic context. In other words, technostress is explained as a response to specific stressors, rather than as a manifestation of a deeper structural condition.

As a result, while technostress research effectively captures *what individuals experience*, it does not fully explain *why these experiences emerge systematically across organizations undergoing digital transformation*. This limitation suggests the need for a higher-level construct that can account for these recurring patterns.

### 2.4 Organizational Change and Resistance: Misinterpreting Behavioral Responses

The literature on organizational change offers another perspective, focusing on how individuals respond to transformation initiatives. Research in this domain identifies resistance, openness, and readiness as key constructs shaping change outcomes (Oreg et al., 2011; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Resistance, in particular, is often conceptualized as a barrier to successful implementation, associated with negative attitudes, fear, and uncertainty (Oreg, 2006).

While this perspective provides important insights, it tends to frame resistance as a problem located within individuals, implying that negative reactions stem from psychological deficiencies or inadequate communication. This framing overlooks the possibility that resistance may represent a rational response to excessive or misaligned demands.

In highly dynamic environments, where system changes occur rapidly and continuously, individuals may resist not because they are unwilling to adapt, but because the conditions for effective adaptation are absent. This interpretation challenges dominant assumptions in

the change literature and suggests that resistance may be better understood as a signal of systemic imbalance rather than individual failure.

Thus, although the change literature explains *how individuals respond to transformation*, it does not sufficiently account for *whether the transformation itself is aligned with human capacity*. This omission further highlights the need for a framework that incorporates structural considerations.

## 2.5 Socio-Technical Systems: The Illusion of Stable Alignment

Socio-technical systems theory provides a broader integrative perspective, emphasizing the interdependence between social and technological elements in organizations (Leonardi, 2011; Faraj et al., 2018). According to this view, optimal outcomes are achieved when there is alignment between human capabilities and technological systems.

While this framework is conceptually powerful, it often assumes that such alignment is achievable through appropriate design and management. In relatively stable environments, this assumption may hold. However, in AI-driven contexts characterized by continuous innovation and rapid system evolution, alignment becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

The dynamic nature of modern technologies suggests that alignment is not a fixed state but a moving target. As systems evolve faster than humans can adapt, misalignment becomes not an exception but an ongoing condition. This introduces a temporal dimension that is insufficiently addressed in traditional socio-technical models.

Therefore, although socio-technical theory recognizes the importance of alignment, it does not fully account for the possibility of persistent and systemic misalignment under conditions of acceleration. This limitation creates an opportunity to extend the theory by incorporating the concept of dynamic misalignment.

## 2.6 Toward an Integrative Explanation: The Need for a Structural Mechanism

Taken together, these research streams provide valuable but incomplete explanations of human adaptation in AI-driven organizations. AI and digital transformation literature explains system acceleration but neglects human limits. Adaptation research highlights individual capabilities but underestimates systemic escalation. Technostress studies capture psychological strain but lack structural grounding. Change literature identifies behavioral responses but misattributes their origins. Socio-technical theory emphasizes alignment but assumes its stability.

Although prior research provides valuable insights into AI, human adaptation, and organizational behavior, these perspectives remain analytically fragmented. A structured comparison is therefore required to clarify their respective contributions and to identify the underlying gap that has yet to be addressed.

**Table 1.** Integration of Fragmented Research Streams through the Human Adaptation Gap Framework

| Research Stream | Primary Focus | Key Limitation | Contribution of HAG |
|---|---|---|---|
| AI and Digital Transformation | Technological capabilities, system performance, and organizational outcomes | Assumes human adaptation without theorizing its limits | Introduces structural misalignment between system acceleration and human capacity |
| Human Adaptation and HRM | Adaptive performance, skills, readiness for change | Overestimates scalability of human adaptation under continuous acceleration | Reframes adaptation as bounded and subject to systemic constraints |

| Research Stream | Primary Focus | Key Limitation | Contribution of HAG |
|---|---|---|---|
| Technostress Literature | Psychological strain from technology use (stress, overload, fatigue) | Treats stress as an outcome without structural explanation | Positions technostress as a manifestation of underlying systemic misalignment |
| Organizational Change and Resistance | Individual reactions to change (resistance, openness, attitudes) | Attributes resistance to individual factors rather than system conditions | Reinterprets resistance as a rational response to excessive or misaligned demands |
| Socio-Technical Systems Theory | Alignment between social and technical subsystems | Assumes alignment is achievable and stable | Extends theory by introducing dynamic and persistent misalignment under acceleration |

*Source: Developed by the authors*

Table 1 shows that each research stream captures a specific aspect of the phenomenon while leaving a critical limitation unaddressed. Studies on AI emphasize system capabilities but overlook human constraints, whereas adaptation and HRM research focuses on individual capacity without fully accounting for escalating system demands. Technostress and change literature explain psychological and behavioral responses but do not situate these outcomes within a broader structural context. By contrast, the Human Adaptation Gap integrates these perspectives by identifying a common mechanism that links system acceleration to human-level consequences. This integration shifts the analysis from isolated explanations to a unified account of systemic misalignment.

What is missing across these perspectives is a unifying mechanism that explains how accelerating systems interact with bounded human capacity to produce consistent patterns of psychological strain and behavioral breakdown.

This gap calls for a conceptual framework that moves beyond isolated constructs and integrates system-level dynamics with human-level processes. Specifically, there is a need to theorize the structural misalignment between system acceleration and human adaptation capacity, and to explain how this misalignment generates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences.

In response to this need, the present study introduces the concept of the HAG as a central mechanism that bridges these fragmented perspectives. By conceptualizing adaptation failure as a systemic condition rather than an individual deficiency, the HAG framework provides a more comprehensive and theoretically coherent explanation of human behavior in AI-driven organizational environments.

## 3. Conceptual Development

### 3.1 Defining the Human Adaptation Gap

Building on the preceding theoretical foundations, this study introduces the concept of the HAG to explain the growing mismatch between technological systems and human capacity. While prior research has examined system acceleration (Malik et al., 2023; Autor, 2015), human limitations (Bala & Venkatesh, 2016), and adaptation processes (Pulakos et al., 2000), these perspectives have largely evolved in isolation. As a result, the underlying structural tension between these domains remains insufficiently theorized.

Given the introduction of a new central construct and multiple related mechanisms, it is necessary to establish clear conceptual boundaries across the model. Without such

clarification, there is a risk of overlap between constructs and ambiguity in their analytical roles. The following table defines each construct, specifies its role within the model, and distinguishes its level of analysis.

**Table 2. Construct** Clarification and Level of Analysis

| Construct | Definition | Role in Model | Level of Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|
| System Acceleration | The exponential increase in complexity, speed, and uncertainty driven by AI-enabled socio-technical systems | Exogenous driver | System level |
| Human Adaptation Gap (HAG) | Structural misalignment between system demands and bounded human adaptive capacity across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and temporal dimensions | Core mediating mechanism | Cross-level (system–individual interface) |
| Cognitive Overload | Excessive information-processing demands exceeding human cognitive capacity, leading to reduced decision quality | Psychological mechanism (mediator) | Individual level |
| Emotional Strain | Stress, fatigue, and burnout resulting from sustained exposure to high demands and uncertainty | Psychological mechanism (mediator) | Individual level |
| Identity Disruption | Perceived loss of role clarity, relevance, and professional identity in AI-mediated environments | Psychological mechanism (mediator) | Individual level |
| Behavioral Breakdown | Observable responses such as disengagement, reduced proactivity, and resistance to change | Outcome | Individual level |
| Organizational Impact | Aggregate consequences such as reduced transformation effectiveness and performance instability | Distal outcome | Organizational level |
| Organizational Trust | Confidence in organizational systems and leadership that reduces perceived uncertainty | Moderator | Organizational level |
| Meaningful Work | Perceived purpose and significance of work that stabilizes engagement | Moderator | Individual level |
| Organizational Support | Availability of resources, psychological safety, and support systems facilitating adaptation | Moderator | Organizational level |

*Source: Developed by the authors*

Table 2 clarifies that each construct occupies a distinct position within the model and operates at a specific level of analysis. System acceleration is positioned at the system level, while the Human Adaptation Gap functions as a cross level mechanism linking system demands to individual capacity. The psychological mechanisms operate at the individual level and translate structural misalignment into behavioral outcomes, which in turn aggregate into organizational impact. The moderating conditions further specify that these relationships depend on organizational context and available support. This clarification ensures conceptual precision and provides a consistent foundation for subsequent theoretical development and empirical testing.

The Human Adaptation Gap is defined as:

> *the structural misalignment between the exponential acceleration of socio-technical systems and the inherently bounded, linear capacity of human cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptation.*

This definition integrates three core insights. First, AI-driven systems operate under conditions of dynamic complexity, characterized by continuous learning, rapid iteration, and increasing interdependence (Jarrahi, 2018; Faraj et al., 2018). Second, human adaptation is

constrained by bounded rationality, limited attention, and finite emotional regulation capacity (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015). Third, adaptation is not infinitely scalable; it is subject to diminishing returns under conditions of excessive demand (Griffin et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2010).

By conceptualizing adaptation as a structurally constrained process rather than an unlimited capability, the HAG framework shifts the analytical focus from individual deficiencies to systemic misalignment. This perspective also reframes commonly observed organizational phenomena—such as technostress, disengagement, and resistance—not as isolated issues but as manifestations of an underlying adaptation gap (Tarafdar et al., 2015; Oreg et al., 2011).

## 3.2 Dimensions of the Human Adaptation Gap

To capture the multidimensional nature of the Human Adaptation Gap, this study conceptualizes it across four interrelated dimensions.

### a. Cognitive Gap

The cognitive dimension reflects the mismatch between information-processing demands and human cognitive capacity. AI-enabled systems generate high volumes of data and require rapid decision-making, leading to cognitive overload and reduced decision quality (Bala & Venkatesh, 2016; Tarafdar et al., 2019). As system complexity increases, individuals struggle to maintain situational awareness and effective judgment.

### b. Emotional Gap

The emotional dimension captures the discrepancy between environmental demands and emotional coping capacity. Continuous exposure to uncertainty, performance pressure, and technological change contributes to anxiety, fatigue, and burnout (Srivastava et al., 2015). These emotional strains reduce resilience and impair adaptive functioning.

### c. Behavioral Gap

The behavioral dimension refers to the inability to translate adaptive intentions into effective actions. While adaptive performance and proactivity are emphasized in the literature (Pulakos et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2010), excessive demands can lead to withdrawal behaviors, reduced engagement, and resistance to change (Oreg, 2006; Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

### d. Temporal Gap

The temporal dimension highlights the difference in speed between system change and human adaptation. AI-driven environments evolve rapidly, while human learning and adjustment processes require time, repetition, and stability (Autor, 2015; Acemoglu et al., 2022). This temporal misalignment amplifies the overall adaptation gap.

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, the Human Adaptation Gap is specified as a multidimensional construct composed of distinct but interrelated forms of misalignment. This specification clarifies that adaptation challenges do not stem from a single constraint, but from the convergence of multiple limitations across domains.

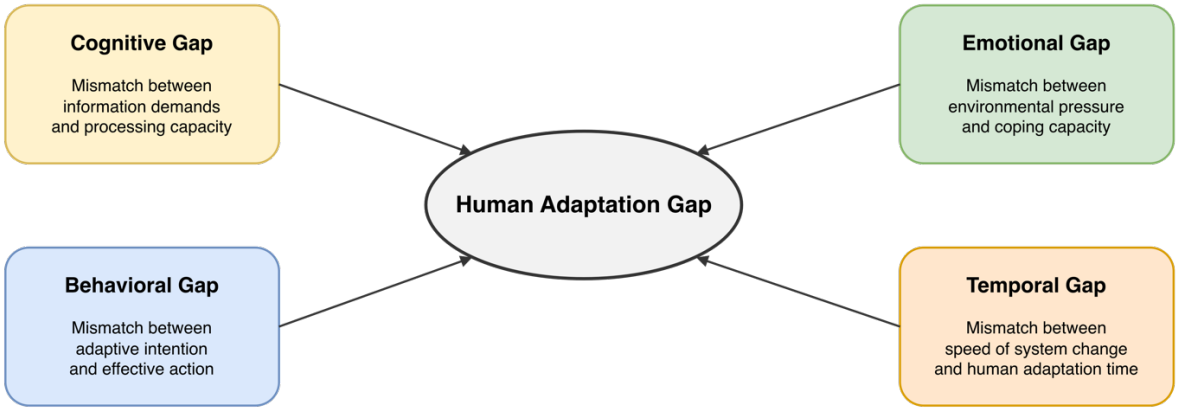


**Figure 1.** Structure of the Human Adaptation Gap
*Source: Developed by the authors*

As articulated in Figure 1, the Human Adaptation Gap emerges from the interaction of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and temporal misalignments. This multidimensional configuration strengthens the construct by distinguishing analytically separate constraints while preserving their systemic interdependence. As such, adaptation failure is understood not as a singular deficit, but as the cumulative effect of overlapping limitations operating across domains.

Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive representation of how the Human Adaptation Gap manifests across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and temporal domains.

### 3.3 Mechanism Development

The Human Adaptation Gap operates through a set of interconnected psychological mechanisms that translate system-level dynamics into individual-level outcomes.

To specify how structural misalignment produces observable consequences, the analysis turns to the underlying psychological mechanisms that connect the Human Adaptation Gap to individual behavior. The focus is therefore on causal processes rather than variable associations, emphasizing how multiple mechanisms operate in parallel to transmit system-level pressures into human responses.

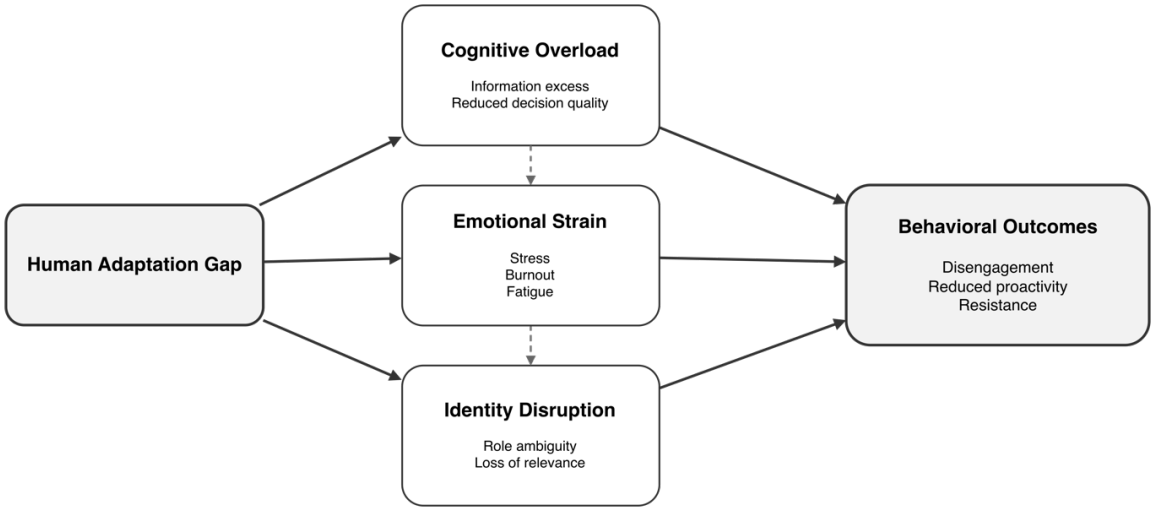


**Figure 2.** Mechanism Pathway Linking the Human Adaptation Gap to Behavioral Outcomes
*Source: Developed by the authors*

The mechanism structure articulated in Figure 2 indicates that the Human Adaptation Gap does not operate through a single pathway but activates multiple psychological processes simultaneously. Cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption emerge as

parallel responses to excessive system demands, each contributing to behavioral outcomes while also reinforcing one another. This interdependence implies that behavioral breakdown is not attributable to isolated factors, but to the accumulation and interaction of pressures across cognitive, emotional, and identity domains. By making these pathways explicit, the model advances a process-based explanation of why disengagement and resistance systematically arise in AI-driven environments.

**System Acceleration and the Emergence of the Gap**

AI and digital transformation increase the speed, complexity, and unpredictability of work systems (Malik et al., 2023; Chowdhury et al., 2023). As these demands intensify, the discrepancy between system requirements and human capacity widens.

**Proposition 1 (P1):** *System acceleration is positively associated with the emergence of the Human Adaptation Gap.*

**Cognitive Mechanism: Overload and Decision Strain**

As the adaptation gap increases, individuals experience cognitive overload due to excessive information processing demands and reduced time for reflection (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Bala & Venkatesh, 2016). This overload diminishes decision quality and increases error rates.

**Proposition 2 (P2):** *The Human Adaptation Gap increases cognitive overload and decision strain.*

**Emotional Mechanism: Stress and Burnout**

The gap also triggers emotional responses, including stress, anxiety, and burnout, as individuals struggle to cope with sustained demands and uncertainty (Srivastava et al., 2015; Valtonen et al., 2025). These emotional states further reduce adaptive capacity.

**Proposition 3 (P3):** *The Human Adaptation Gap intensifies emotional strain, including stress and burnout.*

**Identity Mechanism: Role Disruption and Perceived Irrelevance**

Beyond cognitive and emotional effects, the gap affects individuals' professional identity. AI systems can redefine roles, reduce perceived autonomy, and create ambiguity regarding human contribution (Kellogg et al., 2020; Braganza et al., 2021). This leads to identity disruption and perceived loss of relevance.

**Proposition 4 (P4):** *The Human Adaptation Gap leads to identity disruption and perceived role ambiguity.*

**Behavioral Mechanism: Disengagement and Resistance**

The combined effects of cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption result in behavioral outcomes such as disengagement, reduced proactivity, and resistance to change (Oreg et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2010).

**Proposition 5 (P5):** *Psychological mechanisms mediate the relationship between the Human Adaptation Gap and behavioral breakdown, including disengagement and resistance.*

## 3.4 Moderating Conditions

While the Human Adaptation Gap generates significant challenges, its effects are not uniform. Several organizational conditions can mitigate or amplify its impact.

**Trust as a Buffer**

Trust in organizational systems and leadership can reduce uncertainty and enhance individuals' willingness to engage with change (Braganza et al., 2021). High levels of trust may attenuate the negative effects of the adaptation gap.

**Proposition 6 (P6):** *Organizational trust moderates the relationship between the Human Adaptation Gap and psychological strain, weakening its negative effects.*

**Meaningful Work as a Stabilizer**

The presence of meaningful work can provide a sense of purpose and direction, helping individuals cope with uncertainty and maintain engagement (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Meaning acts as a psychological anchor in rapidly changing environments.

**Proposition 7 (P7):** *Meaningful work moderates the relationship between the Human Adaptation Gap and behavioral outcomes, reducing disengagement.*

**Organizational Support as a Facilitator**

Organizational support, including training, psychological safety, and resource availability, can enhance adaptive capacity and reduce the impact of the gap (Edmondson, 1999; Nicolás-Agustín et al., 2022).

**Proposition 8 (P8):** *Organizational support moderates the relationship between the Human Adaptation Gap and adaptation outcomes, facilitating effective coping.*

### 3.5 Integrative Conceptual Model

Taken together, the proposed framework conceptualizes the Human Adaptation Gap as a central mechanism linking system acceleration to behavioral outcomes. It integrates multiple theoretical perspectives—AI and digital transformation, bounded rationality, adaptive performance, technostress, and socio-technical systems—into a unified explanation of human behavior in contemporary organizations.

By positioning the Human Adaptation Gap as the core construct, this model provides a parsimonious yet comprehensive framework for understanding why individuals struggle to adapt in AI-driven environments and how organizations can address this challenge.

## 4. Conceptual Model

To synthesize the proposed arguments, this study advances an integrative conceptual model that positions the HAG as the central mechanism linking system-level transformation to individual behavioral outcomes in AI-driven organizations. The model builds upon prior literature on system acceleration, bounded rationality, adaptive performance, technostress, and socio-technical systems, while addressing their fragmentation through a unified explanatory structure (Malik et al., 2023; Tarafdar et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2011).

At its core, the model conceptualizes organizational transformation as a system-driven process, where AI and digital technologies continuously increase the speed, complexity, and interdependence of work environments (Jarrahi, 2018; Faraj et al., 2018). This acceleration generates escalating demands on human cognition, emotion, and behavior, which are inherently limited by bounded rationality and adaptive constraints (Bala & Venkatesh, 2016; Griffin et al., 2007). The resulting mismatch gives rise to the Human Adaptation Gap, which functions as a structural condition rather than a temporary or individual-level issue.

Before presenting the model, it is important to emphasize that this framework does not treat adaptation failure as an individual deficiency. Instead, it conceptualizes behavioral breakdown as an emergent outcome of systemic misalignment between technological

demands and human adaptive capacity. This distinction shifts the analytical focus from correcting individuals to redesigning organizational systems under conditions of continuous acceleration.

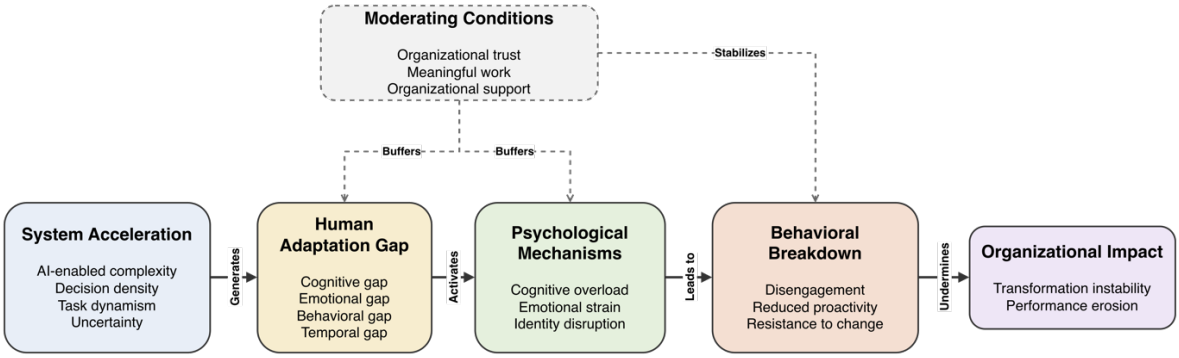


**Figure 3.** Conceptual Model of the Human Adaptation Gap
*Source: Developed by the author*

The framework in Figure 3 integrates the model into a single causal structure. System acceleration generates a Human Adaptation Gap, which activates cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption. These mechanisms jointly produce behavioral breakdown and, in turn, reduce organizational performance. The moderating conditions indicate that these effects depend on organizational context and support.

First, system acceleration is positioned as the exogenous driver of the model. AI-enabled systems increase task dynamism, decision density, and environmental uncertainty, thereby intensifying performance expectations (Autor, 2015; Acemoglu et al., 2022). This acceleration is not linear but exponential, continuously reshaping work structures and reducing the stability required for human adaptation.

Second, the Human Adaptation Gap emerges as the central mediating construct. It captures the multidimensional misalignment between system demands and human adaptive capacity across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and temporal dimensions. By integrating these dimensions, the model moves beyond fragmented explanations of stress or resistance, offering a systemic perspective on adaptation failure.

Third, the model specifies a set of psychological mechanisms through which the gap translates into observable outcomes. These mechanisms include cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption. Cognitive overload arises from excessive information processing demands (Tarafdar et al., 2019), emotional strain reflects sustained stress and burnout (Srivastava et al., 2015), and identity disruption stems from changes in roles and perceived relevance in AI-mediated environments (Kellogg et al., 2020; Braganza et al., 2021). These mechanisms operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, amplifying the effects of the adaptation gap.

Fourth, the model identifies behavioral outcomes as the ultimate manifestation of these mechanisms. These outcomes include disengagement, reduced proactivity, and resistance to change—phenomena widely documented in organizational behavior literature (Oreg et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2010). Within this framework, such behaviors are not viewed as isolated reactions but as systemic consequences of unresolved misalignment between human and technological systems.

Importantly, the model incorporates three key moderating conditions that influence the strength of these relationships. Organizational trust reduces uncertainty and enhances individuals' willingness to engage with change (Braganza et al., 2021). Meaningful work provides psychological grounding, enabling individuals to maintain engagement despite environmental volatility (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Organizational support, including resources and psychological safety, strengthens adaptive capacity and mitigates stress

responses (Edmondson, 1999; Nicolás-Agustín et al., 2022). These moderators highlight that while the Human Adaptation Gap is structurally driven, its effects can be managed through deliberate organizational interventions.

Following the presentation of the model, it is essential to highlight its integrative nature. Unlike prior frameworks that examine AI adoption, human adaptation, or organizational behavior in isolation, this model connects these elements into a coherent system of relationships. By doing so, it provides a more comprehensive explanation of why technological transformation often fails at the human level, despite its technical success.

In summary, the conceptual model offers a structured representation of how system acceleration generates a Human Adaptation Gap, which in turn activates psychological mechanisms leading to behavioral breakdown. The inclusion of moderating conditions further emphasizes the role of organizational design in shaping these dynamics. This framework not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides a foundation for empirical testing and practical intervention in the context of AI-driven organizational transformation.

## 5. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the literature on AI-driven organizational transformation and human capital by offering a mechanism-based, integrative, and multi-level theoretical contribution centered on the concept of the HAG. While prior research has generated substantial insights into artificial intelligence adoption, digital transformation, and employee behavior, these streams remain fragmented and insufficiently equipped to explain the systemic nature of human adaptation challenges in contemporary organizations (Malik et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023; Chowdhury et al., 2023). By addressing this limitation, the present study contributes to theory in three fundamental ways.

### 5.1 Introducing the Human Adaptation Gap as a Core Construct

The first and most fundamental contribution of this study is the introduction of the Human Adaptation Gap as a novel theoretical construct. Existing literature has extensively examined related phenomena such as technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2015, 2019), adaptive performance (Pulakos et al., 2000), and resistance to change (Oreg et al., 2011). However, these constructs are typically treated as isolated outcomes rather than as manifestations of a broader systemic condition.

Recent studies in AI and digital transformation have begun to acknowledge the increasing complexity and pressure associated with technological adoption (Malik et al., 2023). Nevertheless, they largely focus on organizational capabilities or performance outcomes, without explicitly theorizing the structural misalignment between system dynamics and human capacity. By conceptualizing this misalignment as the Human Adaptation Gap, this study shifts the analytical lens from outcome-based explanations to structural causality.

This reconceptualization offers a more parsimonious and theoretically coherent explanation of diverse organizational phenomena. For instance, technostress, burnout, and disengagement can be understood not as independent issues but as different expressions of the same underlying gap. In doing so, the HAG construct provides a unifying framework that integrates previously disconnected concepts into a single explanatory structure.

### 5.2 Advancing a Mechanism-Based Explanation of Human Behavior

The second contribution lies in the development of a mechanism-based explanation that links system-level transformation to individual-level behavioral outcomes. Prior research has often relied on either macro-level perspectives, focusing on technological systems (Jarrahi, 2018; Acemoglu et al., 2022), or micro-level perspectives, emphasizing individual attitudes

and behaviors (Parker et al., 2010; Oreg, 2006). However, the mechanisms that connect these levels remain underdeveloped.

This study addresses this gap by identifying a set of interrelated psychological mechanisms—cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption—that mediate the relationship between system acceleration and behavioral outcomes. These mechanisms are grounded in established theories of bounded rationality, stress, and identity, yet they are integrated in a novel way to explain adaptation failure in AI-driven environments.

Recent empirical findings reinforce the relevance of these mechanisms. For example, studies have shown that AI adoption can increase decision density and cognitive burden (Chowdhury et al., 2023), while also contributing to emotional exhaustion and well-being challenges (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015). Similarly, research on algorithmic management highlights how technological systems can reshape roles and undermine perceived autonomy, leading to identity-related tensions (Kellogg et al., 2020). By synthesizing these insights, the present framework offers a causal chain that explains how system-level changes translate into human-level consequences.

Importantly, this mechanism-based approach moves beyond descriptive accounts of organizational phenomena and provides a process-oriented explanation. It clarifies not only what happens (e.g., burnout or resistance) but also why and how these outcomes emerge, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of existing theories.

### 5.3 Integrating Fragmented Research Streams into a Unified Framework

The third contribution is the integration of multiple research streams into a coherent theoretical framework. The literature on AI and work transformation has evolved along parallel trajectories, including AI and digital transformation (Malik et al., 2023), human resource management (Nicolás-Agustín et al., 2022), organizational behavior (Parker et al., 2010), technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2019), and socio-technical systems (Leonardi, 2011; Faraj et al., 2018). While each stream provides valuable insights, their lack of integration limits their ability to explain complex organizational realities.

This study bridges these streams by positioning the Human Adaptation Gap as a central linking mechanism. AI and system acceleration provide the structural context; bounded rationality and adaptive performance define human constraints; technostress literature explains psychological symptoms; and socio-technical systems theory captures the interaction between human and technological elements. By combining these perspectives, the proposed framework offers a holistic and multi-level explanation of human behavior in digital work environments.

Such integration is particularly important in light of recent calls for interdisciplinary research on AI and work (Malik et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). As organizations become increasingly complex and technology-driven, single-theory explanations are no longer sufficient. The present study responds to this need by developing a framework that not only integrates diverse perspectives but also aligns them within a coherent causal structure.

### 5.4 Reframing Human Adaptation as a Structural, Not Individual, Challenge

A further contribution of this study is the reframing of human adaptation as a structural challenge rather than an individual deficiency. Much of the existing literature implicitly assumes that individuals can and should adapt to technological change, emphasizing skills development, training, and readiness (Holt et al., 2007). While these factors are important, they do not fully account for the systemic pressures created by accelerating technologies.

Recent evidence suggests that even highly skilled employees experience stress, fatigue, and disengagement in digital environments (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015). This indicates that the problem is not merely a lack of competence but a mismatch between

system demands and human capacity. By highlighting this mismatch, the Human Adaptation Gap framework challenges dominant assumptions in HRM and organizational theory, encouraging a shift toward human-centered system design.

This perspective also aligns with emerging discussions on ethical and sustainable AI, which emphasize the importance of aligning technological development with human well-being (Braganza et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). By situating human adaptation within a broader structural context, this study contributes to a more balanced and realistic understanding of digital transformation.

### 5.5 Extending Socio-Technical Systems Theory on Dynamic Misalignment

Finally, this study extends socio-technical systems theory by introducing the concept of dynamic misalignment. Traditional socio-technical frameworks emphasize the need for alignment between social and technical subsystems (Leonardi, 2011). However, they often assume that such alignment is achievable through appropriate design and management.

In contrast, the present study argues that in AI-driven environments characterized by continuous change, alignment is not a stable state but a moving target. The rapid evolution of technological systems can outpace human adaptation, leading to persistent misalignment. This dynamic perspective adds a temporal dimension to socio-technical theory, highlighting the importance of adaptation speed and capacity.

By conceptualizing misalignment as an ongoing and systemic condition, the Human Adaptation Gap framework provides a more realistic account of contemporary organizational dynamics. It also opens new avenues for research on how organizations can continuously recalibrate the relationship between humans and technology in rapidly changing environments.

### 5.6 Summary of Contributions

Taken together, this study makes five key theoretical contributions:

Introducing the Human Adaptation Gap as a novel construct

1. Developing a mechanism-based explanation linking system acceleration to behavior
2. Integrating fragmented research streams into a unified framework
3. Reframing adaptation as a structural challenge
4. Extending socio-technical theory through dynamic misalignment

These contributions collectively advance the understanding of human behavior in AI-driven organizations and provide a foundation for future theoretical and empirical research.

## 6. Practical Implications

The proposed HAG framework offers important practical implications for organizations navigating AI-driven transformation. Rather than treating employee-related challenges as isolated issues—such as burnout, resistance, or disengagement—this study suggests that these outcomes are rooted in a deeper structural misalignment between system demands and human adaptive capacity. Accordingly, effective organizational responses require a shift from reactive interventions to system-level redesign and human-centered strategies.

### 6.1 Redesigning Work Systems: From Efficiency to Adaptive Alignment

A key implication of this study is the need to redesign work systems to align technological capabilities with human limitations. Traditional approaches to digital transformation emphasize efficiency, automation, and performance optimization (Malik et al., 2023;

Chowdhury et al., 2023). However, these approaches often overlook the cognitive and emotional costs imposed on employees.

The Human Adaptation Gap framework suggests that organizations should move beyond efficiency-driven design toward adaptive alignment, where system complexity and speed are calibrated to human processing capacity. This involves several strategic actions. First, organizations should manage decision density by reducing unnecessary information overload and allowing sufficient time for reflection, thereby mitigating cognitive strain (Tarafdar et al., 2019). Second, task structures should be designed to balance automation with human judgment, ensuring that employees remain meaningfully engaged rather than passively executing algorithmic outputs (Jarrahi, 2018).

Moreover, organizations should consider the temporal dimension of work design, recognizing that continuous acceleration can undermine learning and adaptation processes. Introducing rhythms of stability—such as structured pauses, iterative learning cycles, and phased implementation—can help reduce the temporal gap between system change and human adaptation (Autor, 2015). In this sense, redesigning work systems is not about slowing down innovation but about synchronizing system dynamics with human capacity.

### 6.2 Human-Centered Transformation: Rebalancing Technology and Meaning

The second implication concerns the adoption of human-centered transformation strategies. While digital transformation initiatives often prioritize technological infrastructure and data capabilities, this study highlights the importance of addressing the human experience within these systems.

Human-centered transformation requires organizations to explicitly consider cognitive, emotional, and identity-related dimensions of work. For instance, reducing cognitive overload through better interface design and decision support systems can enhance employees' ability to process information effectively (Bala & Venkatesh, 2016). Similarly, addressing emotional strain through supportive leadership, workload management, and well-being initiatives can mitigate the negative effects of sustained pressure (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015).

Equally important is the reconstruction of meaning and identity in digital work environments. As AI systems reshape roles and responsibilities, employees may experience uncertainty regarding their relevance and contribution (Kellogg et al., 2020; Braganza et al., 2021). Organizations must therefore actively communicate the purpose of transformation and redefine human roles in ways that emphasize value creation, creativity, and judgment. Providing clarity on how human and AI capabilities complement each other can reduce identity disruption and foster a sense of meaningful engagement.

This perspective aligns with emerging discussions on ethical and sustainable AI, which emphasize the need to balance technological advancement with human well-being (Braganza et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). By embedding human-centered principles into transformation strategies, organizations can reduce the Human Adaptation Gap and enhance long-term performance.

### 6.3 Adaptive HR Strategies: From Skill Development to Capacity Management

The third implication relates to the role of human resource management (HRM) in addressing the Human Adaptation Gap. Traditional HR strategies in digital transformation contexts have focused primarily on skill development and training, under the assumption that increasing competencies will enable employees to adapt (Holt et al., 2007; Nicolás-Agustín et al., 2022). While important, this approach is insufficient in the face of accelerating system demands.

The HAG framework suggests that HRM should adopt a broader perspective centered on adaptive capacity management. This involves not only enhancing skills but also managing

the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources required for sustained adaptation. For example, organizations can implement policies that limit excessive digital demands, encourage recovery periods, and promote psychological safety, thereby reducing the risk of overload and burnout (Edmondson, 1999; Tarafdar et al., 2015).

Furthermore, HRM can play a critical role in strengthening organizational trust and support systems, which act as buffers against the negative effects of the adaptation gap (Braganza et al., 2021). Transparent communication about technological changes, participatory decision-making, and inclusive design processes can increase employees' sense of control and reduce resistance (Oreg et al., 2011).

Finally, adaptive HR strategies should incorporate continuous feedback and monitoring mechanisms to assess the evolving relationship between system demands and human capacity. By tracking indicators such as workload, well-being, and engagement, organizations can proactively identify emerging gaps and adjust their strategies accordingly.

### 6.4 Summary of Practical Implications

Taken together, the practical implications of this study emphasize a shift from technology-centric transformation to human-centered system design. Specifically, organizations are encouraged to:

1. Redesign work systems to align with human cognitive and temporal limits
2. Implement human-centered transformation strategies that address meaning and well-being
3. Develop adaptive HR practices that manage capacity, not just competencies

By adopting these approaches, organizations can reduce the Human Adaptation Gap and create more sustainable, resilient, and effective work environments in the era of AI-driven transformation.

## 7. Future Research Directions

While this study advances a novel conceptual framework to explain the HAG, it also opens multiple avenues for future research. Given the emergent nature of AI-driven work systems and the complexity of human adaptation processes, further investigation is required to refine, validate, and extend the proposed framework across contexts and levels of analysis.

### 7.1 Construct Operationalization and Scale Development

A primary direction for future research lies in the operationalization and measurement of the Human Adaptation Gap. As a newly introduced construct, HAG requires the development of reliable and valid measurement instruments that capture its multidimensional nature—cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and temporal.

Building on prior scale development approaches in organizational research (Holt et al., 2007), future studies can design and validate a Human Adaptation Gap Scale using mixed-method techniques. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and thematic analysis, can be used to refine the dimensions of the construct, while quantitative approaches—such as structural equation modeling—can test its validity and relationships with established variables, including technostress, engagement, and adaptive performance (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2007).

Such efforts would not only strengthen the empirical grounding of the HAG framework but also enable comparative analysis across industries and organizational settings.

### 7.2 Empirical Testing of the Mechanism-Based Model

A second important research direction involves the empirical testing of the proposed mechanism-based relationships. While this study theoretically establishes the links between system acceleration, the Human Adaptation Gap, psychological mechanisms, and behavioral outcomes, these relationships require validation through rigorous empirical designs.

Future research can employ multi-level and longitudinal methodologies to examine how system-level changes influence individual-level adaptation over time. For instance, longitudinal studies can capture how sustained exposure to AI-driven environments affects cognitive load, emotional well-being, and behavioral responses (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2015). Multi-level modeling can further explore how organizational factors interact with individual experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of adaptation dynamics.

Additionally, experimental designs could be used to isolate specific mechanisms—such as cognitive overload or identity disruption—and assess their causal effects on behavior, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the framework.

### 7.3 Contextual Variations and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

The Human Adaptation Gap is likely to manifest differently across organizational and cultural contexts. Therefore, future research should examine contextual variations in the emergence and impact of the gap.

For example, organizations with high levels of digital maturity may experience more pronounced system acceleration, while those with strong support systems may better mitigate its effects (Malik et al., 2023; Nicolás-Agustín et al., 2022). Similarly, cultural factors—such as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and attitudes toward technology—may influence how individuals perceive and respond to technological change.

Cross-cultural studies can provide valuable insights into these variations, contributing to a more nuanced and globally relevant understanding of the Human Adaptation Gap. Such research would also align with recent calls for more context-sensitive approaches in AI and organizational studies (Pereira et al., 2023).

### 7.4 Integration with Emerging Theoretical Perspectives

Another promising direction involves integrating the HAG framework with emerging theoretical perspectives in organizational research. For instance, the growing literature on meaningful work and identity (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) can be further connected to the identity mechanisms proposed in this study. Similarly, research on trust and ethical AI (Braganza et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023) can enrich the understanding of moderating conditions that influence adaptation outcomes.

Moreover, the concept of dynamic capabilities may offer a useful lens for examining how organizations develop the ability to continuously align human and technological systems under conditions of rapid change. Integrating these perspectives can enhance the theoretical richness of the HAG framework and expand its applicability across research domains.

### 7.5 Exploring Human–AI Co-Adaptation and System Design

Finally, future research should move beyond the analysis of human adaptation alone and explore the concept of human–AI co-adaptation. While this study focuses on the gap between system demands and human capacity, it is equally important to examine how technological systems themselves can be designed to adapt to human needs.

Socio-technical systems theory suggests that optimal outcomes emerge from the alignment between human and technological components (Leonardi, 2011; Faraj et al., 2018). Building

on this perspective, future studies can investigate how AI systems can be designed to reduce cognitive load, enhance transparency, and support human decision-making.

Such research would shift the focus from reactive adaptation to proactive system design, where technology is developed not only for efficiency but also for compatibility with human capabilities and limitations. This direction is particularly relevant in light of increasing concerns about the ethical and sustainable use of AI in organizations.

### 7.6 Summary of Future Research Directions

In summary, future research on the Human Adaptation Gap should focus on:

1. Developing and validating measurement instruments
2. Empirically testing the proposed mechanisms
3. Examining contextual and cultural variations
4. Integrating with emerging theoretical perspectives
5. Exploring human–AI co-adaptation and system design

These directions collectively provide a roadmap for advancing both theoretical and empirical understanding of human adaptation in AI-driven organizational contexts.

## 8. Conclusion

The accelerating integration of artificial intelligence and digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped the nature of work, creating environments characterized by increasing complexity, speed, and uncertainty. While prior research has extensively explored technological capabilities, organizational transformation, and individual responses, it has largely failed to provide a coherent explanation of why human adaptation frequently breaks down under these conditions. This study addresses this limitation by introducing the HAG as a unifying conceptual framework.

By conceptualizing the mismatch between system acceleration and human adaptive capacity, this study reframes a wide range of organizational challenges—including technostress, burnout, disengagement, and resistance—as manifestations of a deeper structural misalignment. The proposed framework advances understanding by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives and identifying key psychological mechanisms—cognitive overload, emotional strain, and identity disruption—that translate system-level dynamics into behavioral outcomes.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study also highlights the practical implications of this misalignment. It demonstrates that the success of digital transformation cannot be achieved solely through technological advancement or skill development, but requires a deliberate effort to redesign work systems, support human adaptation, and align organizational processes with human capabilities. In doing so, it shifts the focus from optimizing systems to rebalancing the relationship between humans and technology.

Importantly, this study underscores that the Human Adaptation Gap is not a temporary challenge but an enduring feature of AI-driven organizational environments. As technological systems continue to evolve at an accelerating pace, the risk of misalignment will persist unless organizations adopt more adaptive, human-centered approaches. This insight calls for a fundamental rethinking of how organizations design, implement, and manage technological change.

In conclusion, the future of organizations will not be determined solely by the sophistication of their technologies, but by their ability to understand, anticipate, and manage the limits of human adaptation within those systems. Addressing the Human Adaptation Gap is therefore

not only a theoretical imperative but also a practical necessity for building sustainable and resilient organizations in the digital era.

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