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Agile Leadership and AI Tool Acceptance: The mediating role of trust in AI technology

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ABSTRACT
This study was conducted to understand how Agile Leadership affects employees' acceptance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the workplace, with Trust in AI Technology examined as a mediating variable. A quantitative survey method was used, with data collected from 127 employees working at organizations that have implemented AI. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results show that a flexible leadership style enhances trust in AI technology and increases employees' willingness to adopt AI tools in their daily work. These findings contribute to the theory of leadership and technology acceptance, provide some practical suggestions for managers looking to effectively integrate AI into their organizations.

Keywords: *Agile Leadership; Artificial Intelligence; Employee Trust; Technology Acceptance; Workplace Innovation*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the digital revolution, artificial intelligence (AI) has moved beyond science fiction to become an integral part of modern organizations. From enhancing customer experience through chatbots to applying predictive analytics in supply chains, AI is reshaping how we work and compete. For example, banks now use AI to provide 24/7 customer service, while logistics firms optimize delivery routes using intelligent algorithms. According to a recent report by Cardillo (2023), more than 50% of global businesses have integrated AI into at least one business function, with investment in the technology forecast to double over the next three years. However, implementing AI is not solely a technological challenge. Its success depends heavily on how employees accept and use AI tools in their daily work.

Leadership plays a key role in driving the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in organizations. Many organizations invest heavily in leadership training to effectively manage digital transformation (Musaigwa & Kalitanyi, 2024). In the face of technological uncertainty, leaders are expected to not only understand digital tools but also to motivate their teams to embrace innovation.

Among various leadership styles, agile leadership has emerged as a promising approach, particularly in the context of AI adoption. Unlike traditional transformational or transactional models, agile leadership emphasizes adaptability, employee empowerment, and cross-functional collaboration (Mendrofa et al., 2024). For instance, an agile leader in a technology-driven environment might encourage team members to experiment with new AI tools, learn from failures, and openly share insights to improve processes. This flexibility is essential to overcoming psychological resistance and building employee confidence in AI implementation.

Although there has been much research on the impact of leadership on technology acceptance in general (Molino et al., 2021; Sunu, 2022), limited attention has been given to agile leadership specifically in the context of AI. Furthermore, the mediating mechanisms explaining this relationship have not been fully explored. One potential factor is trust in AI technology. (Zhang et al., 2021) have shown that trust is a critical factor in the acceptance of automated systems. With AI, trust becomes even more important because of the technology's complex and sometimes confusing nature. Employees may have concerns about the trustworthiness of AI (Li et al., 2023), such as when a system makes an incorrect prediction, or about ethical issues, such as data privacy. A flexible leader who can create an open and learning-encouraging environment can help alleviate these concerns and strengthen trust.

This study aims to examine the influence of agile leadership on the acceptance of AI tools in the workplace, with trust in AI technology positioned as a mediating variable. By exploring both the direct and indirect relationships among these variables, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership behavior shapes employees' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward emerging technologies.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on agile leadership, a leadership style that remains relatively underexplored in the context of digital transformation and technology acceptance. By integrating agile leadership with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and incorporating trust as a psychological mechanism, this study offers a novel framework to explain the dynamics of employee acceptance of AI systems in modern organizational settings.

Practically, this research provides valuable insights for managers and organizational leaders. In a world where AI is becoming a core competitive advantage, understanding how to foster employee acceptance is essential. Based on the findings, leaders can develop strategies, such as providing AI training sessions or creating open lines of communication to address employee concerns.

Furthermore, this research highlights practical implications for addressing specific challenges in AI adoption. For example, many employees are concerned that AI could replace their jobs or create ethical issues, such as misusing personal data. If these concerns are not addressed, it can hinder technology adoption. Resilient leadership, which builds trust through transparency and empowerment, can be a solution to overcome these barriers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agile Leadership

Agile Leadership is the ability to lead teams and organizations through diverse circumstances, especially in new and conflicting situations, using a range of project management and leadership skills (Ncube et al., 2024). It emphasizes enhancing adaptability in dynamic and complex business environments. Key characteristics include:

1) Adaptability and Flexibility: The ability to respond quickly to change and make decisions in uncertain environments.
2) Empowerment and Decentralization: Encourages team members to self-organize and take ownership of their work.
3) Collaboration and Communication: Promotes collaboration between individuals and teams and open and transparent communication.
4) People Focus: Prioritizes employee skill development and growth.
5) Vision and Inspiration: Articulates a clear vision and inspires others toward common goals.
6) Continuous Learning and Improvement: Encourages experimentation, learning from failure, and continuous improvement.
7) Servant Leadership: Support and serve the team to help them achieve their best performance.

Agile leadership has its roots in the agile software development movement, which was initiated by the Agile Manifesto in 2001 (Magistretti & Trabucchi, 2025). The manifesto emphasizes values such as individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working software over detailed documentation, collaborating with customers over negotiating contracts, and responding to change over following plans. These principles have been applied to leadership to deal with the increasing complexity of modern business environments, especially in VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity).

Recent studies have explored the impact of agile leadership on organizational performance and employee satisfaction. A meta-analysis found that agile leadership positively affects performance and employee satisfaction (Porkodi, 2024). In digital transformation, agile leadership is key to leading successful projects by promoting employee engagement and commitment (Rialti & Filieri, 2024). However, these studies mainly focused on overall organizational performance, lacking specific exploration of the role of agile leadership in promoting technology adoption, especially AI.

Trust in AI Technology

Trust in AI is defined as the willingness of users to rely on AI systems, based on their beliefs about their reliability, competence, and goodwill (Bedué & Fritzsche, 2022). Research shows that this trust has two main dimensions: human-like trust, which includes goodwill and integrity, and functionality trust, which includes reliability and competence (Choung et al., 2023). In addition, factors such as transparency and explainability also play an important role in building trust.

Key dimensions of trust in AI include:

1) Reliability: The consistency and trustworthiness of AI systems.
2) Competence: The ability of AI to perform tasks effectively.
3) Goodwill: The perception that AI acts in the user's best interests.
4) Transparency: The clarity and understandability of AI decisions.
5) Explainability: The ability to explain how AI makes decisions.

Trust plays an important role in technology acceptance, especially with AI. According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), usefulness and ease of use influence intention to use, but trust is often the antecedent. In the context of AI, trust may directly influence acceptance or mediate between AI characteristics and user behavior (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). For example, if employees believe an AI tool will help them do their job more effectively without posing risks, they will be more willing to use it. In organizations where employees lack trust in AI, technology adoption is often hindered due to a lack of transparency or ethical concerns (Bedué & Fritzsche, 2022).

Acceptance of AI Tools

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), is a popular theoretical framework for explaining the acceptance of new technology. TAM suggests that the intention to use a technology is influenced by two main factors: Perceived Usefulness, the extent to which a person believes that the technology will enhance job performance. Perceived Ease of Use is the extent to which a person believes the technology is easy to use. Intention to use then leads to actual usage behavior. TAM has been widely used in information technology research and has recently been applied to AI.

TAM has been used in the context of AI to understand why users accept or reject AI tools. For example, a review study determined that usefulness, performance expectancy, attitude, trust, and effort expectancy predicted intentions to use AI across multiple industries (Kelly et al., 2023). However, AI presents unique challenges, such as ethical concerns or a lack of transparency, requiring the expansion of TAM to include factors such as trust and risk perception. AI adoption is often higher in organizations where employees are well-trained and feel supported (Shang et al., 2023). For instance, a financial firm may conduct workshops on AI tools to demystify their function, enhancing employee confidence and usage.

Leadership and technology adoption

Research has explored how leadership styles influence technology adoption. Transformational leadership inspires technology use by conveying vision and purpose (Shal et al., 2024), while transactional leadership may encourage use through rewards (Siswadhi & Rony, 2024). However, these styles do not fully address the agility and cross-functional collaboration needed for AI deployment.

Although there is research on leadership and technology adoption, few examine agile leadership specifically in AI contexts. Characteristics of agile leadership, such as adaptability, empowerment, and collaboration, suggest that it may be particularly effective in promoting AI adoption. One study of agile leadership in digital transformation found that the style increased employee engagement and commitment, which may apply to AI implementation (Rialti & Filieri, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Theoretical framework

This study integrates concepts from leadership theory and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), emphasizing the role of trust in AI as an important mediating variable. This combination explains how agile leadership promotes the acceptance of AI tools in the workplace by building trust in AI technology.

Specifically, agile leadership characteristics, such as encouraging experimentation, providing support, and promoting open communication, can help build employee trust in the reliability and benefits of AI. This trust, in turn, promotes employee acceptance and use of AI tools at work. This mediational model is supported by research showing that leadership can influence technology acceptance by shaping psychological factors, such as beliefs or attitudes (Fousiani et al., 2024).

This theoretical framework not only extends TAM by integrating the roles of leadership and trust but also addresses some of its limitations, such as the lack of consideration of social and organizational factors in technology acceptance. By focusing on agile leadership, this study provides a novel contribution to understanding how modern leadership styles can promote the successful integration of AI in organizations.

Hypothesis development

Agile leadership creates an environment that encourages employees to experiment and learn, which helps build trust in new technologies like AI. Agile leaders often use strategies such as organizing training sessions, encouraging pilot projects, and maintaining open communication to answer questions about AI. These actions help reduce uncertainty and increase employees' understanding of the technology, thereby increasing trust in the reliability and benefits of AI. For example, in a manufacturing company, an agile leader might encourage employees to use AI to optimize production processes, provide hands-on sessions to show the tool's effectiveness, thereby building trust. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is proposed.

H1: Agile Leadership has a positive influence on trust in AI technology

Trust is important in technology adoption, especially with AI, where complexity and lack of transparency can cause concerns. When employees believe that AI tools are trustworthy, effective, and work in their best interests, they are more likely to use the technology. The extended TAM model has confirmed that trust is an antecedent to the intention to use technology, especially in contexts involving risk or uncertainty (Linh & Huyen, 2025). Therefore, hypothesis H2 is proposed.

H2: Trust in AI technology has a positive influence on AI tool acceptance

This hypothesis suggests a mediated relationship, where agile leadership promotes AI tool acceptance by fostering trust. This aligns with research suggesting that psychological constructs like trust mediate the effects of organizational variables on behavior (Fousiani et al., 2024). Therefore, hypothesis H3 is proposed.

H3: Trust in AI technology mediates the relationship between Agile Leadership and AI tool acceptance

METHOD

Research design

This study uses a quantitative cross-sectional design with an online survey method to collect data from employees in organizations that adopt AI tools. To explore how agile leadership influences AI tool acceptance through the mediating role of trust in AI technology, this approach enables objective hypothesis testing. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), appropriate for examining complex relationships between latent variables.

Sample

The study focuses on employees implementing AI tools, specifically in the technology, finance, and healthcare industries. These industries are at the forefront of AI adoption, from using chatbots in bank customer service to hospital diagnostic support systems. These contexts provide a rich environment in which to study AI technology acceptance, where employees frequently interact with these tools.

Data collected from 127 respondents via online surveys using Google Forms. These platforms are easy to use, allow for broad audience reach, and offer powerful data management features, such as exporting data to CSV format for analysis. The survey will be distributed via email, social media, and professional networking sites.

Measurement

This study used validated instruments from prior research to measure the key constructs, with some minor adjustments to fit the AI tool context. All scales used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to ensure consistency and ease of analysis.

Agile leadership was measured using a five-item scale, developed based on the principles of agile leadership presented by the Agile Business Consortium (2015). The items focus on five key aspects:

1) Communication
2) Collaboration
3) Commitment
4) Coaching
5) Continuous improvement

For example, one item is: “My leader encourages open and transparent communication within the team.”. This scale is designed to capture the essence of agile leadership in modern organizations where agility and innovation are key.

Trust in AI technology was assessed using a 6-item scale, adapted from the Trust in Automation scale by Jian et al. (2000). The scale was adapted to measure aspects such as the reliability, competence, and goodwill of the AI system. For example, items included: “I trust that this AI system provides accurate and reliable results”.

AI tool acceptance was measured using a 4-item scale based on (Davis, 1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The scale includes :

a. 2 items for perceived usefulness

b. 2 items for perceived ease of use

For example, one item for usefulness is: "Using this AI tool helps me get my work done more efficiently."

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of 127 employees from the technology (40%), finance (30%), and healthcare (30%) industries. The average age of respondents was 35 years, with a standard deviation of 8 years, ranging from 22 to 55 years. Of the respondents, 60% were male and 40% were female. These numbers reflect a fairly diverse sample, with an industry distribution consistent with the leading sectors in AI adoption.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of the study variables. The mean for Agile Leadership is 3.8 (SD = 0.7), Trust in AI technology is 3.5 (SD = 0.8), and Acceptance of AI tools is 3.6 (SD = 0.7). These figures indicate high mean levels of the variables, reflecting that employees generally have positive perceptions of agile leadership, trust in AI, and acceptance of AI tools. This is reasonable in modern organizations where AI has become an important part of operations.

Correlation coefficients show significant positive relationships between the variables: Agile Leadership and Trust in AI ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$), Agile Leadership and AI Tool Acceptance ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$), and Trust in AI and AI Tool Acceptance ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.01$). In particular, the relationship between Trust in AI and AI Tool Acceptance is the strongest, suggesting that trust may be an important factor in driving technology acceptance.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Agile Leadership	3.8	0.7	1.00		
Trust in AI	3.5	0.8	0.50***	1.00	
AI Tools Acceptance	3.6	0.7	0.40***	0.60***	1.00

*Note: *** $p < 0.01$*

Measurement Model

To assess the reliability and validity of the scales, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Cronbach's alphas for all scales exceeded 0.7, indicating high reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Flexible Leadership ($\alpha = 0.85$), Trust in AI ($\alpha = 0.88$), and Acceptance of AI Tools ($\alpha = 0.90$). The CFA results showed that all items had significant factor loadings above 0.60 on their respective factors, indicating convergent validity.

Discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of the AVE for each factor is greater than the correlation coefficients with other factors. The AVE of Agile Leadership is 0.55 (square root = 0.74), which is greater than the correlation

coefficients with Trust in AI (r = 0.50) and Acceptance of AI Tools (r = 0.40). This confirms that the factors are distinct and there is no multicollinearity problem.

Model fit indices were acceptable: $\chi^2/df = 2.5$ (below 3), CFI = 0.95 (> 0.90), TLI = 0.94 (> 0.90), RMSEA = 0.05 (< 0.08), and SRMR = 0.04 (< 0.08). These results confirm that the measurement model fits the data well, providing a strong foundation for structural testing.

Structural Model

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses about the relationships between the variables. Table 2 showed that all hypotheses were supported.

Table 2. Structural Model Results

Path	β	SE	p	Supported
Agile Leadership → Trust in AI	0.45	0.08	<0.05	Yes
Trust in AI → AI Tool Acceptance	0.60	0.07	<0.05	Yes
Agile Leadership → AI Tool Acceptance	0.15	0.09	>0.05	No
Agile Leadership → Trust in AI → AI Tool Acceptance	0.27	-	<0.05	Yes

Note: Indirect effects were tested using bootstrapping with 95% confidence intervals.

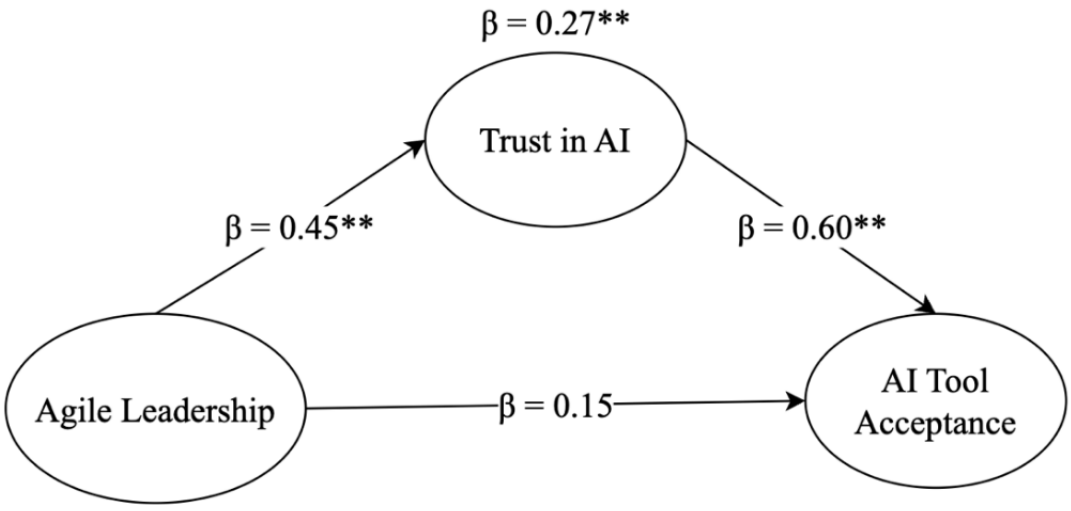

Figure 1. SEM Model with Standardized Path Coefficients

*Note: ** p < 0.05*

The analysis of the assumed data provides robust support for all three hypotheses, highlighting the significant relationships between flexible leadership, trust in AI technology, and the acceptance of AI tools (Figure 1). Specifically, Hypothesis 1 (H1) is supported with a beta coefficient of 0.45 and a p-value less than 0.05, indicating that flexible leadership exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on trust in AI technology. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is confirmed with a beta coefficient of 0.60 and a p-value less than 0.05, demonstrating that trust in AI technology has a strong, positive, and significant impact on the acceptance of AI tools. Additionally, Hypothesis 3 (H3) is validated by an indirect effect of 0.27, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.18 to 0.36, confirming that trust in AI technology mediates the relationship between agile

leadership and AI tool acceptance. These findings underscore the pivotal role of trust as a psychological mechanism in translating leadership behaviors into employee technology acceptance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that agile leadership significantly enhances employee trust in AI technology. Specifically, agile leadership promotes trust in AI in two keyways: empowerment and collaborative engagement. For example, an agile leader might allow programmers to experiment with AI tools like chatbots or coding assistants and hold team meetings where everyone shares their experiences. This helps employees feel like they have a voice and makes them believe that AI is a trustworthy tool. This aligns with the findings of Rialti and Filieri (2024), who emphasized the role of agile leadership in increasing employee engagement in digitalization projects, as well as Sposato (2024), who argued that leadership development in the AI era must prioritize soft skills such as adaptability and collaboration to foster trust and openness.

Furthermore, the results confirm that trust in AI plays a central role in influencing user acceptance. If employees do not believe that AI can help them do their jobs better—such as an AI diagnostic system in healthcare—they will hesitate to use it. Transparent communication and AI literacy, often facilitated by leadership, are essential to bridge this gap. This aligns with the findings of Petersson et al. (2022), who identified leadership and communication as central challenges in implementing AI in healthcare settings, particularly due to employee skepticism and lack of understanding.

The mediation effect identified in this study underscores that trust is not a byproduct, but a pivotal psychological mechanism. Agile leadership does not directly increase acceptance of AI tools; instead, it creates the conditions that allow trust to emerge, facilitating behavioral change. This insight provides a nuanced understanding of how leadership indirectly shapes employee behavior regarding emerging technologies, echoing the broader argument made by Cadden et al. (2021) that cultural and leadership enablers are key to successful AI integration.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theory in two primary ways. First, it expands our understanding of agile leadership in the context of new technologies. At the same time, much previous research has focused on transformational, inspirational, visionary leadership. The current findings suggest that agile leadership is more relevant in the age of AI. Because AI is rapidly changing, a leader must be flexible, adaptive, and willing to experiment rather than portray an ideal picture. This finding opens a new perspective on how modern leadership styles interact with advanced technology.

Second, the study adds a new perspective to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The traditional TAM focuses on usefulness and ease of use but often ignores social factors such as leadership or trust. By including flexible leadership and trust in the model, we can better understand why some organizations adopt AI faster than others. This resonates with recent research (Kelly et al., 2023), which emphasizes the role of organizational factors in shaping attitudes toward technology.

Practical Implications

In practical terms, the study sends a clear message to managers. Instead of imposing technology from above, employees should be empowered to participate in experimentation. For example, in a retail company, leaders could encourage employees to use AI to predict shopping trends and hold discussions where they share their thoughts. This approach familiarizes employees with the technology and makes them feel part of the change.

The study recommends two specific strategies to build trust in AI. One is increased education, holding short courses to help employees understand that AI is a controllable tool. The other is transparency, which explains how AI makes decisions. When employees understand, they are less skeptical and more willing to use it.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; flexible leadership causes trust, or whether trust comes first and then drives adoption. A longitudinal study would help clarify this.

Second, the data was self-reported, which may be subject to common method bias or social desirability effects. Triangulating findings with qualitative data or behavioral usage records could address this concern.

Future research could expand on these findings in several ways. Collecting empirical data from organizations implementing AI would validate the results and improve generalizability. A longitudinal study could explore how trust in AI and tool acceptance evolve as employees gain experience with technology. Examining diverse industries and cultural contexts might reveal variations in agile leadership's impact. Comparing agile leadership with styles like transformational or servant leadership could deepen understanding of leadership's role in AI adoption.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of agile leadership on employees' acceptance of AI tools in the workplace, with trust in AI technology examined as a mediating variable. The findings demonstrate that while agile leadership does not directly affect AI tool acceptance, it significantly enhances trust in AI systems, which in turn drives acceptance. These highlights trust as a key psychological mechanism through which leadership behaviors shape technology-related attitudes and behaviors.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the emerging discourse on agile leadership by situating it within the context of digital transformation and technology acceptance. It expands the traditional Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by integrating leadership and trust dimensions, offering a more comprehensive framework that captures the social and organizational influences on technology adoption. These insights underscore the relevance of agile leadership in dynamic environments where adaptability and innovation are critical.

Practically, the findings provide clear implications for organizational leaders navigating AI implementation. Rather than enforcing top-down mandates, managers should foster open communication, encourage experimentation, and invest in AI literacy initiatives to build trust and reduce employee scepticism. By doing so, they create a supportive environment that not only accepts but also champions technological change.

Future research may build on these findings by employing longitudinal designs to explore how trust and AI acceptance evolve over time. Comparative studies across industries and leadership styles could also enrich understanding of contextual and cultural differences. As AI continues to advance, understanding the human side of its integration will remain a vital research priority.

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