

**RESEARCH PAPER****Beyond Boundaries: Nurturing Diversity in Higher Education  
Leadership-Insights from Women's Journeys in Pakistan****Dr. Bushra Inayat Raja**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study challenges the notion of gender-specific leadership, contributing to the global discourse on women's advancement in higher education management within the context of Pakistani universities. Using qualitative methods, the research engages in in-depth interviews and focused group discussions with 48 women in junior and senior management roles, offering a nuanced understanding of factors influencing their career progression. It emphasizes that gender should not dictate capabilities or leadership aptitude, advocating for a more inclusive approach to career development in higher education. The findings underscore that women's success in senior leadership involves a blend of personal and professional qualities, adding depth to existing literature on women in academic leadership. Addressing the need for societal attitude and cultural prejudice change, the study highlights the necessity for legislative measures and societal shifts to attain equity in top managerial positions for women. The study's implications extend to future research, providing insights into potential directions for examining factors influencing women's advancement to top management roles.

**Keywords:** Career Advancement, Leadership and Management, Personal and Professional Attributes, Women

**Introduction**

In the evolving landscape of higher education, the role of women in leadership positions has become an essential facet of academic institutions worldwide. This research embarks on a journey to contribute to the global discourse on the progression of women in higher education management, with a specific focus on the intricate dynamics within the universities of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. By adopting a qualitative research approach, this study seeks to illuminate the nuanced factors influencing women's career advancement in both junior and senior management roles.

Contrary to the prevailing notion that leadership is inherently gender-specific, this research challenges such stereotypes through an in-depth analysis of qualitative data gathered from 48 women actively engaged in academic leadership. The study utilizes semi-structured interviews and a focused group discussion to unravel the complexities surrounding women's experiences, shedding light on the factors that positively impact their career trajectories.

The central argument posited by this research is that gender should not be a determinant of one's capabilities, intelligence, proficiency, or leadership aptitude. Through a meticulous analysis of personal and professional attributes, the study aims to debunk stereotypes and foster a deeper understanding of the diverse skill set required for successful leadership in higher education.

This research not only enriches the existing literature on women in academic leadership but also advocates for a more equitable and inclusive approach to career development. The findings emphasize that women's success in senior leadership positions

stems from a combination of personal and professional qualities. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of leadership, the study highlights the unique perspectives and skills that women bring to the table.

In the pages that follow, the research unfolds various thematic insights into women's leadership journeys, exploring dimensions such as adaptability, resilience, confidence, goal orientation, multitasking prowess, and the ethical foundations of integrity in leadership. By examining these critical aspects, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue surrounding women in leadership, ultimately fostering a more diverse and inclusive landscape in higher education management.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research aligns with feminist theories, challenging traditional gender norms and advocating for gender equality. It rejects essentialist notions that link leadership qualities exclusively to gender, emphasizing that women, like men, possess the capabilities, intelligence, proficiency, and leadership aptitude necessary for senior roles in academia.

### **Literature Review**

Gender diversity in senior management has come under significant scrutiny, acknowledging that, despite the increased enrollment of women in higher education, their presence in top leadership roles remains disproportionately low. This global concern extends beyond regional boundaries and is evident in various countries, including Pakistan.

Persistent gender gaps in top management positions are consistently highlighted by research, such as that conducted by UNESCO IESALC (2022). Notable organizations like the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2022), American Council on Education (2021) and Boston College Center for International Higher Education (2021) have documented the global underrepresentation of women in executive roles. The WEF's annual Global Gender Gap Report consistently points to barriers hindering women's progression to leadership positions, evident not only in developed nations but also in emerging economies like Pakistan. This annual report systematically assesses gender-based gaps across sectors, revealing the challenges women face in ascending to leadership positions despite educational advancements.

Research by institutions such as the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE, 2022) also underscores the gender disparity in top management within Pakistan. Despite advancements in women's education and workforce participation, deeply ingrained cultural and institutional barriers impede their ascent to key leadership positions.

While women have made significant strides in higher education enrollment (Tamrat, W. 2021), the translation of these educational achievements into leadership roles has not kept pace. This disparity is evident in the representation of women in top management positions (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). Despite an increasing number of women pursuing higher education, the trajectory of women leaders at the highest organizational levels does not align with this positive trend.

In the context of Pakistan, women's challenges in attaining senior management positions mirror global trends. Despite progress in various domains, persistent barriers exist, particularly in sectors where historical gender norms and traditional roles create obstacles. Legal, political, economic, administrative, and decision-making roles are notably affected.

Referencing studies by reputable organizations and institutions in Pakistan, such as those by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE, 2022), sheds light on

specific challenges women face in advancing to senior management positions. Reports from international organizations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP,2023) offers a comparative perspective on gender inequalities in different sectors within Pakistan. Citing such references strengthens the argument that the underrepresentation of women in senior management is a systemic issue with broader implications. Recognizing sector-specific challenges is crucial for devising targeted interventions and policies aimed at dismantling barriers impeding women's advancement to leadership roles in Pakistan.

The multifaceted issue of gender disparity in professional advancement is deeply rooted in societal norms, cultural expectations, and institutional barriers hindering women's progress. Numerous studies and research articles have explored the complexities of this problem, shedding light on various factors contributing to the persistent gender gap. (Azizuddin ,2020)

Societal norms shaping perceptions of gender roles play a fundamental role, as highlighted in Eagly and Karau's study (2002), emphasizing stereotypes associating leadership qualities with traditionally masculine attributes. Cultural expectations further shape women's professional trajectories, with conflicts between familial responsibilities and demands of leadership roles, as explored in Hofstede's study (2001).

Institutional barriers within organizations significantly contribute to gender disparity, as seen in the glass ceiling phenomenon preventing women from reaching top leadership positions, as demonstrated by Powell and Butterfield's research (2015).

Addressing gender disparity requires going beyond increasing women's representation in leadership roles. Dismantling systemic barriers at multiple levels is imperative. Educational interventions challenging and reshaping societal norms, such as those outlined by UNICEF (2016), can contribute to changing perceptions and preparing women for leadership roles.

Organizational changes, including policies ensuring equal opportunities for career advancement and addressing biases in recruitment and promotion processes, are vital. This aligns with Field et al., (2023) recommendations in the Women in the Workplace report (2020), emphasizing organizational commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Societal initiatives challenging cultural norms and expectations, such as public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts, can contribute to shifting attitudes towards gender roles, fostering an environment where women can pursue leadership roles without facing undue obstacles.

In conclusion, addressing the complex issue of gender disparity in professional advancement requires a comprehensive approach involving educational, organizational, and societal dimensions. Dismantling systemic barriers and fostering an inclusive environment are crucial steps toward creating conditions where women can thrive in diverse professional fields and contribute meaningfully to leadership roles.

## **Material and Methods**

To effectively address the research questions, a qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study due to its appropriateness in delving into the intricate nature of the phenomenon being investigated. Qualitative research proves advantageous in obtaining comprehensive data directly from participants, facilitating a deep understanding of the subject matter (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this study, qualitative techniques such as individual interviews and focus groups were utilized to gather important data from the study participants. These methods allowed participants to openly share their personal experiences and perspectives, addressing the challenges they faced while leveraging their

personal and professional attributes in university settings and examining how this influenced their career progression.

### **Population and Sampling**

The study focused on a sample derived from eight public sector universities in Pakistan, strategically chosen for their consistent frameworks in promotion, selection, seniority, and salary structures compared to the private sector. These universities, located in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Gujrat, and Lahore, were selected for accessibility for both respondents and organizations. The sample encompassed diverse institutions, including well-established and newer ones, coeducational and women-only colleges, situated in urban centers and smaller towns, with or without specific area specializations. The aim was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of potential factors influencing women's career progression by exploring various perspectives within the context of these universities.

### **Study Participants**

The study comprised a total of 48 female participants. Among them, 30 were senior women occupying positions in university management, such as Deans, Directors, Heads of Departments, Registrars, Treasurers, and other representatives from various management units. All these senior participants held positions in cadre/basic pay scale (BPS) 18 or above. The remaining 18 participants were younger women in roles corresponding to cadre/BPS 17, such as Assistant Controllers, Assistant Registrars, Assistant Treasurers, and Assistant Directors. These younger participants shared similar demographic characteristics with the senior women, offering a well-rounded perspective on the study's subject matter.

### **Data Collection**

The qualitative study employed diverse data collection techniques, including in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The methods were adapted to participant preferences, considering geographical distances for enhanced diversity. Interviews were conducted through face-to-face interactions, phone calls, video calls, and conference calls for focus group sessions. Rigorous recording using audio and video methods, along with detailed note-taking, ensured thorough analysis and the prevention of crucial detail oversight. This approach aimed to generate a comprehensive dataset for profound insights into the investigated subject. The integration of varied interview formats facilitated a robust exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative study employed thematic analysis to analyze data from semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. The process began with transcription and organization of the data to efficiently prepare it for analysis. Researchers then repeatedly read and re-read the data, immersing themselves in the narratives to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories. This iterative approach aimed to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the content, ultimately providing valuable insights from the collected data. (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

### **Results and Discussion**

After a thorough examination of the collected data using thematic analysis, several prominent themes have emerged. These themes bring to light the intricate dynamics and challenges that women encounter in the workplace, specifically highlighting their personal and professional attributes as they navigate challenges in managing senior management positions:

## **Empowering Leadership: The Role of Adaptability and Resilience in Women's Professional Journeys"**

Women have shown resilience in the face of challenges and the ability to, and these qualities are crucial for steering organizations through various situations adapt to changing circumstances. Senior leadership often involves navigating uncertainties. The majority of the participants reported having confidence in themselves to undertake management positions, particularly, in the presence of the diverse constraints that they had faced. With high self-confidence they appeared to work with passion and interest and believed in their abilities to get things done effectively. For example, the beliefs in their personal abilities supported participants to overcome difficult circumstances during their education and professional development. One of the participants shared the difficult experiences that she had had when she was abroad for her higher education studies and how she was able to overcome her problems:

"[...] When I was abroad for my higher education studies, my supervisor said to me that you don't have enough money, you don't know English, you don't know how to use a computer, you have language problems, you cannot arrange a baby sitter for your son, and your husband is unable to get a visa to join you. Therefore, you had better leave and go back to your country. I said "No way, this can only be over my dead body [...]. I explained to my supervisor that the only problem I had was "I am completely alien to this environment. But I strongly believe in myself. I am confident I can do it all. Just give me some time to make it". So I worked hard and finally proved myself. I met all requirements successfully [...] at the end, I even taught a few courses at the university".

### **The Triumph of Confidence and Resilience in Women's Leadership Journeys**

The study participants demonstrated a high level of confidence, approaching management tasks as challenges rather than deterrents. A senior participant in a coeducational university emphasized the crucial role her courage and confidence played in her career advancement. Despite initial resistance and skepticism based on her gender, she successfully competed with established male candidates. Throughout her executive role, she faced and overcame doubts about her suitability for a predominantly male environment, relying on self-assurance and determination. Her unwavering confidence, evident in her response to challenges, allowed her to thrive, challenge stereotypes, and showcase that women can lead and excel in mixed-gender environments. Over time, she became an influential decision-maker in the organization, emphasizing the transformative power of self-confidence, resilience, and strategic communication in breaking down barriers for women in traditionally male-dominated settings.

### **Empowered Voices: The Role of Self-Confidence in Women's Leadership Success"**

The remaining participants also emphasized the significance of personal self-assurance and confidence as pivotal strengths. They consistently held a steadfast belief in their capabilities, expressing a conviction that public speaking posed no challenges for them. Their confidence extended to engaging in debates and providing valid opinions during official meetings, skills that significantly bolstered their suitability for senior positions. Reflecting on her own abilities, one participant articulated, "The only thing that gives me strength is that I believe in my abilities. I never doubt myself. I work hard and keep going [...]. I am never afraid of dealing with different people. I never hesitate to give my point of view."

Moreover, participants highlighted the indispensability of self-confidence when navigating male-dominated organizational environments, especially when competing with male colleagues entrenched in these institutions. One participant recounted the initial challenges she faced in her current role, noting that while she was not initially accepted, her

unwavering confidence propelled her toward success. In her words, "I think self-confidence is very important for women to successfully manage in a male-dominated organizational environment. If you have confidence and ability, I think you can do anything you want to do. The question of men or women doesn't come into it."

The women faced specific challenges in universities dominated by males. Participants shared instances where they confronted issues, relying on their self-beliefs to navigate and endure these male-dominated environments. A participant expressed this resilience, stating, "The position I hold had a history of never being filled by a woman. Despite knowing that any woman appointed would encounter significant opposition and lack appreciation from male colleagues, I proceeded with confidence. As the leader, I possess the ability to ensure equal treatment for everyone and establish normal personal relationships with colleagues and subordinates."

### **Empowered by Insight: The Role of University Awareness in Women's Career Confidence**

The findings indicated that a thorough understanding of university systems played a crucial role in boosting confidence among the participants. They firmly believed that their organizational acumen and familiarity with university policies not only bolstered their confidence to compete for senior positions but also equipped them to navigate challenging situations, safeguarding their careers. One participant shared how her awareness of university rules proved instrumental in securing her career despite attempts to manipulate her promotion: "I knew all the terms and conditions for promotion to the next highest grade. My qualifications and experience met the standard promotion criteria. Therefore, I was quite confident that I was applying for my due rights. This gave me courage and confidence to overcome all hurdles."

The data unveiled a significant factor influencing the participants' career advancement—self-confidence. They articulated that their assurance stemmed from a recognition of their expertise and capabilities. Demonstrating self-confidence, they maintained dominance and resilience in the face of organizational challenges. The data strongly suggested that women who harbor confidence in their abilities are better positioned to ascend to top leadership roles.

### **Resolute Paths: Determination, Dedication, and Triumph in Career Advancement**

The determination to achieve career success emerged as a prominent catalyst among the participants. Rooted in their unwavering self-confidence, these individuals exhibited a resolute commitment to realizing their career aspirations, steadfastly navigating challenges without entertaining the thought of giving up. The majority of participants underscored their high dedication to their professional paths, emphasizing that the educational and competency levels requisite for senior management positions demanded unwavering career commitment. Consequently, despite encountering initial difficulties in accessing necessary education, their dedication propelled them to exert significant effort and overcome hurdles.

Within the narratives shared, one participant's experience exemplified this determination. Despite facing hardships, including the early loss of her father and financial constraints, she remained resolute in her pursuit of education and a successful career. Undertaking tuition and private jobs to fund her education, she overcame adversities and enhanced her qualifications, eventually securing a senior management position. Her story highlights the resilience and commitment essential for overcoming challenges and attaining career milestones, especially in mixed-gender environments.

### **Navigating Professional Aspirations with Determination and Passion**

The study's extracted data shed light on a crucial aspect of the participants' professional journeys—their profound aspirations and fervor for success, serving as guiding forces in their climb up the management hierarchy. These aspirations were not mere ambitions but intrinsic goals, deeply rooted in the participants' desire to achieve something meaningful in their lives, acting as a driving force that propelled them forward. This passion became the bedrock of their resilience, enabling them to persist through challenges and persistently strive until their aspirations materialized.

One participant's narrative vividly captured this essence, where the determination to succeed in a management position became the prerequisite of her success story. Despite facing obstacles from various quarters—whether from in-laws, colleagues, or personal circumstances—she resolutely pursued her career goals, refusing to succumb to challenges. Fueled by an unwavering determination to prosper in her career, her perseverance led her to a senior position. Expressing gratitude for the journey, she stated, "I was determined to prosper in my career. So, I kept on struggling against all difficulties. Thanks to Allah Almighty, finally, I was able to make it so far."

The data further indicated that the journey to acquire the necessary education for top management positions was anything but effortless. However, armed with passion, diligent effort, an unwavering aspiration for success, and a readiness to confront challenges head-on, the participants overcame the hurdles in their path. Their collective narratives underscored the transformative power of determination and an unyielding commitment to their professional aspirations.

### **Guided Ambitions: The Impact of Goal Focus on Women's Career Advancement**

Additional narratives within the dataset underscored the pivotal role of a well-defined career path and robust career planning in elucidating the trajectories of career progression. One participant, in particular, articulated a commitment to excellence in her life, aligning her educational and career choices with this overarching goal. The clarity of her career targets served as a powerful shield against external impediments, allowing her to successfully reach her career objectives. She also emphasized the inevitability of challenges and the imperative of perseverance for success: "I had planned my education and career with the help of my parents' guidance. I selected subjects according to my areas of interest. Once when my father was transferred to another city, I realized that I could not continue with my subject areas. I stayed with my mother and continued with my studies... I remember one of my friends, due to her father's posting, had discontinued her studies. She could not find a program as the date had passed. Consequently, she lost interest. During this period, she got married and shut the career door forever."

The expedited career progression observed in some individuals stemmed from having clear and well-defined goals. This clarity played a crucial role in enabling individuals to surmount barriers in their career journeys. The data indicated a subset of participants characterized by a particularly strong career orientation, with those in more senior roles exhibiting notably higher levels of goal orientation compared to the majority of their counterparts.

### **The Multitasking Prowess of Women: Insights from Senior Interviewees**

The participants unanimously conveyed that encountering challenges was a universal aspect of life. However, they emphasized that the key lies in the approach taken to address these issues. They firmly asserted that their proficient multitasking skills empowered them to efficiently manage a diverse array of household responsibilities. One

participant shared her personal experience, illustrating her involvement in numerous professional and personal tasks simultaneously:

"I firmly believe in the strength of women to tackle anything. They excel as organizers and managers, efficiently running their homes, essentially treating them like institutions. For instance, in my own life, when I am at home, I take on various roles—I cook, clean, and manage everything single-handedly. I care for four elderly individuals in my household, ensuring their well-being. Simultaneously, at the university, I find myself capable of concentrating on different matters concurrently."

This exploration into the perspectives of senior participants sheds light on the remarkable multitasking abilities of women and underscores their capacity to excel in various domains of life.

### **Embracing Challenges: The Link between Personal Aptitude and Career Advancement**

Upon scrutinizing the data, a compelling association emerged between the participants' personal aptitude and the trajectory of their career advancement. These individuals undertook challenging roles with unwavering commitment, attributing their success to their inherent proclivity for demanding responsibilities. Rather than shying away, they embraced the excitement of taking on managerial challenges. Various opportunities were identified by the participants as instrumental in shaping their career development.

As one participant articulated, "While many women express a preference for teaching over management roles, I find challenging and difficult jobs more attractive. I view management as both exciting and challenging." This sentiment resonated across the participants, emphasizing their enthusiasm for roles that tested their abilities.

Moreover, some participants deliberately chose career paths traditionally dominated by men. A notable example was a participant who transitioned from the medical profession to a university role, specifically handling financial matters—an often male-perceived domain. She recounted the skepticism surrounding her career shift: "People were surprised by my choice and the change in my career. They doubted my ability to manage financial matters, given its demanding nature. However, I thrive on challenging tasks; it's in my nature. I enjoy proving myself in such situations."

This exploration underscores the participants' resilience in pursuing challenging roles, challenging societal norms, and breaking gender stereotypes, demonstrating that personal aptitude plays a pivotal role in navigating and succeeding in diverse and demanding career paths.

### **Integrity in Leadership: The Ethical Foundations of Women in Senior Management**

The majority of participants consistently emphasized their commitment to honesty, sincerity, and competence in their professional engagements, characteristics that formed the bedrock of their integrity in senior management roles. This commitment, they believed, positioned women as less susceptible to dishonesty and corruption. A key informant underscored the prevailing perception that women, in general, exhibited honesty and dedication, leading many organizations to prefer having women in their workforce:

"In general, women are dedicated workers. They avoid wasting time wandering aimlessly, as is sometimes observed in men. Their commitment to staying in their offices translates into higher output. While acknowledging variations among individual women, it is widely believed that, as a group, they are straightforward and reliable."



Furthermore, a participant openly acknowledged her human weaknesses but emphasized the transparency and honesty in her professional dealings throughout her career. She asserted that, despite occasional bouts of short temper, she remained committed to ethical practices. In her view, acting professionally as a woman set her apart, garnering significant respect and cooperation from her male colleagues:

"Despite occasional lapses in my temper, my interactions with others are consistently transparent and professional. Throughout my career, I, as a woman, have refrained from exploiting situations for personal gain. This ethical stance has earned me the respect and cooperation of my male colleagues. The vice-chancellor frequently seeks my involvement in leading various committees and meetings."

This exploration delves into the ethical foundations of women in senior management, shedding light on how their commitment to integrity and professionalism not only distinguishes them but also earns them the respect and trust of their colleagues and superiors.

### **Driving Progress: The Impact of Innovation and Self-Motivation Advancement on Career**

Several participants stood out for their dynamic and self-motivated approach, actively seeking involvement in diverse and innovative projects. They carried a belief that senior authorities in the university held high expectations for them, driving them to deliver tangible results:

"I thrive on innovation, always eager to contribute something novel to my university. Colleagues often jest that I'm a bit 'crazy' about my work. The vice-chancellor recognizes and appreciates this aspect of my nature, consistently entrusting me with leadership roles."

The participants' career advancement was notably propelled by their competence and capability in the workplace, marking one of their greatest strengths. Their ability to work diligently and honestly not only demonstrated their dedication but also positioned them as vital and influential figures within their respective organizations. This exploration underscores how a proactive and innovative mindset, coupled with a strong work ethic, can significantly impact career progression.

### **Conclusion**

The narratives shared by the women participants in this study illuminate the remarkable journey of resilience, confidence, and determination in their pursuit of senior management positions. The overarching theme that emerges is the profound impact of adaptability and resilience in navigating the complexities of organizational leadership. These women faced multifaceted challenges, ranging from gender biases to skepticism about their abilities, and yet, they triumphed with unwavering confidence and a commitment to excellence.

The stories of these women underscore the triumph of confidence and resilience in their leadership journeys. One participant's defiance in the face of discouragement during her higher education studies abroad exemplifies the power of self-belief. The senior participant, labeled the "iron lady," confronted skepticism and opposition with unyielding determination, challenging stereotypes and eventually becoming an indispensable decision-maker in her organization. Their narratives collectively highlight the transformative potential of self-confidence, resilience, and strategic communication in breaking down barriers and excelling in traditionally male-dominated environments.

Moreover, the participants emphasized the significance of personal self-assurance and confidence as pivotal strengths. Their belief in their capabilities extended to public speaking, engaging in debates, and providing valid opinions during official meetings, showcasing their suitability for senior positions. The findings strongly suggest that women who harbor confidence in their abilities are better positioned to ascend to top leadership roles.

Resilience emerged as a key factor, especially in male-dominated academic environments. The participants faced specific challenges but relied on their self-beliefs to navigate and endure these environments, ultimately establishing themselves as leaders. A deep understanding of university systems was identified as a crucial element in boosting confidence, enabling participants to compete for senior positions and navigate challenging situations.

The study also revealed the intersection of personal and professional resilience. Those who demonstrated resilient coping mechanisms in both domains reported noteworthy success in their careers. The ability to thrive amidst challenges, coupled with an unwavering commitment to career goals, showcased the transformative power of determination in achieving career milestones.

The participants' career success was further attributed to goal focus, multitasking abilities, and a proclivity for challenging roles. Clear and well-defined career goals played a crucial role in efficient career progression, while multitasking emerged as a strength that empowered women to manage diverse responsibilities simultaneously. The participants' personal aptitude, demonstrated through a passion for challenging roles, and early experiences in leadership roles, played a formative role in their career trajectories.

Ethical foundations, diligence, competency, and innovation were identified as essential elements driving career advancement. The commitment to honesty and sincerity formed the bedrock of integrity in senior management roles. Diligence was not just a personal preference but a best practice that contributed to recognition and support in pursuing managerial positions. Competency was a catalyst, with participants recognizing their skills as key contributors to promotions and career success.

In essence, the narratives of these women paint a comprehensive picture of leadership journeys marked by resilience, confidence, determination, and a commitment to excellence. Their stories serve as a source of inspiration, challenging prevailing norms and demonstrating that women can not only navigate but excel in challenging leadership roles, contributing significantly to the transformation of organizational landscapes.

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