

Article

Digital humanists in the modern international business world—Bulgarian context

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Abstract: Digital humanists play a crucial role in the modern international business world by combining the principles of regular employees with the advancements of digital technologies to address a variety of challenges and opportunities. They are specific labour forces that are driving digital transformation and innovation in the modern international business world. This article presents some key impacts the digital humanists have on global business practices and strategies particularly in the area of international business. Using the advantages, the digital era in which we live provides, digital humanists are becoming part of the international workforce but in a different and non-standard way. The main purpose of this article is to highlight some of the main characteristics of this modern workforce, the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. It should be noted that the article is part of a scientific research dedicated to the changes in the international human resource management due to the technology developments and digitalization of the international business. The main research methods used are literature summary and analysis, comparative analysis, focus group interviews.

Keywords: international human resource management; international business; global management; digitalization; technology development

1. Introduction

Contemporary international business is strongly influenced by the rapid technology developments. Digitalisation has become an inseparable part of the international business operations both on global and regional levels. In general terms this could be determined as the process of integrating digital technologies into various aspects of business and society and it has become a critical driver of innovation and transformation in international business. Nowadays there is no company, national or international, that does not use the digitalization advantages. Inarguably digitalization facilitates global communication and collaboration, enabling businesses to operate easily across borders. The different digital platforms and tools allow for real-time communication, data sharing, and coordination among multinational teams, thus enhancing efficiency and reducing the barriers posed by geographical distances (The authors are aware of the various cultural differences, but they are not deeply explored in the article since they could be a subject of a separate research paper and exploring them as well could shift the focus of the article). According to Rachinger (2018) cloud computing and collaborative software tools enable businesses to manage global supply chains more effectively and respond swiftly to market changes (Rachinger et al., 2018). Digitalization also drives business model innovation. By implementing digital technologies in their business processes, companies can develop new business models

or transform existing ones to better meet the demands of the global market. E-commerce, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has given the retail business a great push by diminishing the necessity of physical stores. Moreover, the development and popularization of different digital platforms stimulated the rise of the shared economy, where businesses such as Airbnb and Uber connect users and service providers globally thus facilitating the internationalization of the companies (Plekhanov et al., 2023). Technology development also enhances data analytics and decision-making processes. Companies nowadays have access to large amounts of data generated by digital transactions, social media, and different smart devices. Advanced analytics and artificial intelligence tools allow for receiving better and deeper understanding of consumer behavior, market trends, and operational performance, thus facilitating more targeted and strategic decision-making. This data-driven approach is crucial for becoming competitive on the international markets and for better tailoring companies' international strategies (Gradillas et al., 2023). While all these and other benefits of technology (not mentioned here) are undeniably beneficial to businesses, they also conceal some drawbacks. Among the most commonly cited disadvantages are cybersecurity risks (the most recent example is with the CrowdStrike software malfunction in July 2024 which caused chaos in the airplane industry worldwide), high implementation costs for software updates, system maintenance, and technological upgrades, high dependency on technology, different regulatory and compliance challenges as different countries have varying legal frameworks and standards, making it difficult for companies to ensure compliance across all regions they operate in. On the other hand, non-compliance can result in legal penalties, fines, and operational disruptions (Luo, 2022). Furthermore, the digitalization brings also a great deal of uncertainty to the most important asset of a company—the employees. The digitalization of business processes often involves the automation of tasks that usually are performed by humans. As a result, this process could lead to job displacement and reduced employment opportunities. This is particularly concerning in developing countries where labor-intensive industries are prevalent. The shift towards automated and digital processes can lead to significant job losses, exacerbating unemployment and social inequality. Additionally, the demand for new skills requires workers to be retrained and upskilled which can be a challenging and resource-intensive process for international businesses.

Highlighting the main advantages and disadvantages of digitalization rise the following research question—what could be done in order mitigate somehow the process of becoming over-dependent on technologies and losing the human face of business and life in general? One possible answer could be to try to use the advantage of technology innovations and to avoid their disadvantages by combining different technical and soft behavioural skills in the companies' most important resource—their work force. On one hand for the business, it is essential to have technically educated employees who know how to write codes and use the different software tools but it is also crucial these employees to possess skills for “translating” the technical language to their colleagues, to the different stakeholders and the clients, to try to “humanize” the digitalization. Looking for a solution of this major problem a new scientific concept appears called digital humanism.

It is a modern, interdisciplinary field that integrates digital technologies and

humanities in order to be able to answer different societal challenges and to try to preserve some human values. This newly emerging interdisciplinary scientific branch explores the integration of digital technologies into humanities research, education, and practice, and addresses the cultural, ethical, and social implications of this integration. In the context of international business, digital humanism offers a framework for understanding and appropriately applying the digital tools to enhance business practices, foster innovation, and address different ethical issues. This paper attempts to highlight some of the main features of digital humanism and to discuss the role of digital humanists in international business. Furthermore, the paper aims to explore the role of digital humanists in international business by investigating how their combination of technical proficiency and human-centered soft skills can address the ethical and cultural challenges of digital transformation. It is based on the tasks and results obtained under an EU Erasmus project No. ERASMUS+ Program KA 203 DIGITAL HUMANIST N. 2018-1-IT02-KA203-048291.

2. Digital humanism concept

Digital Humanism is rooted in the broader field of Digital Humanities, which emerged as a response to the increasing digitization of texts, archives, and cultural artefacts. The concept of digital humanities dates back to the mid-20th century under the domain of “humanities computing” (Dalbello, 2011; Kirschenbaum, 2010; Svensson, 2009, 2010, 2012), but its origin is typically referred to the Roberto Busa’s plans for a massive attempt to perform an automated linguistic analysis of written texts for an IBM project in 1946 (Busa, 2004). The development of the field continued with structured electronic text and multimedia archives in 1970s, followed by web-enabled hypertexts, digital libraries, collaborative editing and reached to everything from digital archives and databases to Geographic Information Systems (GIS), network analysis, new publishing formats, metadata, HML and HTML, data visualization and modelling, interface design, QR, AR, 3D elements, holograms etc. (Pannapaker, 2011a, 2011b; Svensson, 2009). Today, the humanities computing is shifting towards digital humanities with the goal to provide practical technical skills within the framework of arts, humanities and social sciences. Technology is used as a tool to shape visual design elements, aesthetics, beauty and the whole interface through which thoughts and intangibles can be materialized (Kirschenbaum, 2004; McGann, 2006; Svensson, 2009). The other major area within the digital humanities is new (digital) media where media scholars focus on objects such as websites, blogs, computer games, email lists, interactive maps, videos, podcasts text messages, user-generated content, social spaces, wikis and virtual worlds (Svensson, 2009). This rapid digitalization of our lives rises more and more concerns about the dehumanization of the world and specifically of the business processes, about the total replacement of people by machines. And here comes the role of Digital humanism. Lindgren (2023) defines the digital humanism as one that demands human shape for digitalization. Therefore, the digital humanism should act as a collective cultural enterprise that involves various stakeholders, including designers, engineers, ethicists, and marginalized communities (Serrano et al., 2024) in order to guarantee preserving the human values in the digital reality. According to Coeckelbergh (2023) there is a

difference between digital humanism and digital humanities. He stated that the latter includes application of digital technologies to humanities research. The theoretical framework of Digital Humanism asks for a human-centered approach to technology (Werthner et al., 2022). This issue is becoming even more relevant today with the official introduction and application of the Artificial Intelligence softwares, which rises even greater need for ensuring connectedness of technological developments and applications with human values and ethical considerations (Werthner et al., 2022).

One of the primary concerns addressed in digital humanism concept is the ethical implications of technology, particularly in business and labor markets. The ethical dimensions of Digital Humanism are a leading aspect in the concept. Issues related to data privacy and, intellectual property should be more carefully considered as digital tools become more integrated into daily business life. There is a more and more growing need for personal data protection therefore a more responsible approach to the use of digital technologies should be applied. In this sense, digital humanism seeks to soften the aggressive business practices where the companies' management seeks to decrease the costs as much as possible by automizing as much business processes as possible in some cases violating basic human values and relations. Another important aspect of Digital Humanism is its focus on accessibility and inclusivity and its opportunity to make cultural heritage more accessible to diverse audiences, including people with disabilities because of the different technology developments (Pirrone et al., 2022).

Another important aspect of digital humanism is related to labour market and its influence on the social and economic inequality worldwide. Countries are different in terms of technological developments. Moreover, some developing countries strongly rely on their cheap labour as an instrument for rapid economic development. As automation and labor-saving technologies become more widespread, the demand for low-wage labor decreases, potentially exacerbating global inequalities. Developing countries, whose comparative advantage has been their abundance of low-cost labor, face significant risks as firms in advanced economies increasingly use robots and automated systems to substitute for unskilled workers. This shift reduces the reliance on labor from poorer nations, leading to potential job losses and slower economic growth in these regions (Korinek et al., 2021). In addition, there is another aspect of the technology developments subject and the labour market, namely the demand of skills more different from the ones that have been popular in the past. Nowadays, some of the most important requirements are related to skills for complex problem-solving skills, critical thinking, creativity, people management, cooperation with others, emotional intelligence, decision making. Most of these skills have no direct relation to digitalization and yet these skills are leading for the companies and employers dismiss people mainly because of a lack of soft skills (Cicha et al., 2022). Here comes the role of the digital humanism concept which addresses concerns about the potential dehumanization of processes in an increasingly digital world. From this concept a new type of persona emerges—the digital humanist—who plays a crucial role in implementing this vision, combining technical knowledge with soft skills like emotional intelligence and ethical decision-making to ensure technology benefits society while preserving human dignity (Serrano et al., 2024). These individuals contribute to fostering more inclusive, responsible, and sustainable digital practices.

3. Digital humanists and international business

Digital humanism is increasingly relevant in modern international business and can be implemented through various mechanisms. Companies can integrate humanistic skills into digital technology development to create value and develop effective business models (Franco et al., 2023). In the digital age, businesses develop digital strategies interdependent with their internationalization strategies, considering national differences in institutions and resources. Key digital strategies include owning or participating in digital platforms and transforming traditional businesses for the digital world (Meyer et al., 2023). These approaches enable companies to create responsible, sustainable, and inclusive solutions that prioritize human values while navigating the challenges of global digital transformation. These developments logically raised the need for new type of employees that could combine the knowledge work in the technological area with the human and clients-oriented side of business. This newly emerged type of employees are the digital humanists.

Digital humanists, with their unique combination of technological knowledge and soft skills, bring a specific perspective to the international business operations by integrating human-centric approaches with digital innovation. Their expertise in analyzing digital data and at the same time taking in consideration the cultural context of the business allows companies to develop strategies that are both technologically advanced and culturally sensitive. By using digital tools such as data analytics and artificial intelligence, digital humanists help businesses better understand global market trends, consumer behavior and competition (Prem, 2024). One of the major obstacles in international business is related to the cultural differences. Despite the fact that there are many supporters of the cultural convergence theory stating that the cultural differences in the contemporary business world are irrelevant, the practice still proves that the cultural factor is one of the most important elements of the international business. In this context, one of the major advantages of the digital humanists is their ability to contextualize data within cultural and ethical frameworks. They have crucial role in enhancing cultural intelligence by using digital tools to analyze and interpret cultural data. This includes studying social media trends, linguistic patterns, and digital interactions to gain insights into the cultural dynamics of different countries (Scuotto, 2023). This ensures that business strategies are not only data-driven but also take into account the cultural characteristics and ethical standards of the international environment. Digital humanists can also stimulate the virtual collaboration of the companies' subsidiaries worldwide by creating digital platforms that enable cross-cultural interactions and knowledge sharing (Li et al., 2017). These platforms can include online forums, shared workspace, and virtual reality that bring together employees from different cultural backgrounds to work on joint projects. By fostering a favourable digital environment, digital humanists support businesses harness the collective intelligence and creativity of multicultural teams, which results in more innovative solutions and improved international business positions (Presbitero, 2021).

Ethical behaviour, not only towards the employees, but also throughout the whole production process and supply chain of the companies, is another important element of the contemporary international business. This element is covert to great extent by the sustainability concept which pays attention to the way the employees in the

company are treated, whether the company uses child labour and works in environment-friendly way. But the technological aspect and its consequences on the company's human capital are not covered. As already discussed, the human side of digitalization and technology development is an issue nowadays. The strive of the companies for cost reductions from one side and the demand for more soft skills in combination with technological education creates difficulties for the employees. In this sense, digital humanists play a significant role. They assist in ethical decision-making by applying human-centric approaches to the use of digital technologies by stimulating responsible use of data, thus ensuring that business practices comply with ethical standards and respect individual privacy and rights (Prem, 2024). Nowadays the artificial intelligence (AI) is a very hot topic in all areas of life including business activities. Most people have mixed reactions about the use of these type of technologies, exactly because of the numerous ethical challenges associated with the development and deployment of AI. Du and Xie (2021) identify several ethical issues related to AI use include AI biases, ethical design, consumer privacy, cybersecurity, individual autonomy and well-being, and unemployment. According to the authors, companies have to engage in their corporate social responsibility the application of AI by highlighting the product-, company-, and institutional environment-specific factors that influence firms' socially responsible actions in the domain of AI. In this field, the skills of the digital humanist again are quite useful both for the companies and for their clients. With the combination of technological knowledge about the algorithms of the AI and emotional intelligence, the digital humanists ensure that the human approach and creativity in the companies are preserved (Fisher, 2023). As simple as it might sound, but digital humanists could partly be a solution of this situation. With their combination of technological and soft skills they could act as a guarantee that despite the constant intention of companies to decrease the costs by automating as much processes as possible and violating all human principals the ethical and moral standards are applied accordingly.

From what has been said so far, it could be concluded that digital humanism and the digital humanists play really crucial role in international business by "translating" the digital technologies into more human-centred principles. Their contributions to international business activities, cultural intelligence, and ethical attitude increases the ability of businesses to be more competitive on the global markets and foster sustainable growth. As digital technologies continue to develop and to enter every sphere of our lives, digital humanists will have even greater role in ensuring that these technologies are used responsibly and inclusively (Bertolaso et al., 2022).

Next section presents some of the results in Bulgaria from a focus group study carried out under an EU funded project dedicated to the digital humanists and their role in business.

4. Digital humanists through the lens of Bulgarian entrepreneurs

Digital humanism concept is quite new for the Bulgarian business and academic field. There are almost no analysis and researches made on the subject. Under an EU funded project ERASMUS+ Program KA 203 DIGITAL HUMANIST N. 2018-1-IT02-KA203-048291 some academic activities were carried out in order to shed light

on the subject. Although the focus of the project was not on the business side of the digital humanism some interesting feedback was received by the Bulgarian entrepreneurs. The results from the research are presented and discussed below.

4.1. Methodology

The research method used for revealing the understanding of the digital humanism concept by the Bulgarian entrepreneurs was focus group interviews. The applied methods for data analysis are top two boxes frequency analysis for the Likert scale questions and qualitative content analysis for the open-ended questions.

The focus group consists of 11 participants with different background and occupation. It should be noted that the field is quite new especially for Bulgaria. This made the selection of focus group participants a challenging task. The selection procedure included a long list of potential participants, with whom advanced communication and meetings were held but most of the people were not acquainted with the subject. Therefore, a focus group of only 11 participants was formed. Although the sample size of 11 participants may appear limited, the use of a focus group is particularly appropriate for exploratory research in emerging fields like digital humanism. According to Morgan (1996), focus groups are valuable for generating rich qualitative data when investigating new or complex topics. In this context, qualitative insights from experts with varied professional backgrounds provide a foundational understanding of how digital humanism is perceived in Bulgarian businesses. While a larger sample may yield more generalizable results, the depth of discussion achieved through the focus group methodology offers valuable preliminary findings.

4.2. Main results

First part of the focus group discussions was dedicated to the overall digital transformation of the working processes. According to the participants the first things that need to be considered when involving the organization in a digital transformation process are:

- Acquisition of specific competencies depending on the level of involvement in digital transformation;
- Goals setting;
- Software to be used to facilitate the digitization process;
- Specific digital technologies needed for a digital transformation which is in line with a clear vision of the development of the respective company;
- Competitive analysis in terms of digital transformation;
- Making economic operations and activities relevant to modern requirements for high standards of management and planning;
- Database design;
- To understand the possibilities of digital transformation and to assess what, how and how much it can be transformed according to the resources of time, competencies and people who would be needed.
- The next questions during the discussions were dedicated to the digital transformation challenges. Here the focus group participants highlighted the following potential obstacles:

- Employees' resistance to switching towards digital transformation of their activities;
- Changing established habits and adaptation to changes;
- Setting up a team with the expertise/knowledge/skills (personal and collective) needed to carry out the digitization process;
- Lack of sufficient competence in the use of technological products;
- Doubts that the transformation will lead to quick results;
- Social need and social anxiety because of rapid changes of environment;
- Difference between needs and reality in communication with partners;
- Lack of successful practices from which to learn, specifically in the application of the methods of digitization of products and services;
- Security issues.

After these introductory themes the focus was directed to the digital's humanist and the potential skills that should possess this specific type of employee. The top two boxes method was used to identify how much a digital humanist professional needs to know about digital humanist promotional and entrepreneurial skills. The findings indicate that the focus group participants fully agree that the professionals need to have narrative and communicative skills. Overall, they find most competences important or very important for the development of a digital humanist. Less representatives think that primarily technical functions should be assigned to a digital humanist. Such technical competences are very specific and require special education to be acquired. These competences include:

- Project Management/ Manage the methods and tools according to a cross media and transmedia projects;
- Technological/ Develop video products with Quick Response QR Code, Augmented Reality (AR), three dimensional (3D) elements, Holograms, to increase experiential factors in real life;
- Project Management/ Design the digital communication;
- Project Management/ Design narrative communications structures.

As seen from **Figure 1** below the majority of the focus group participants (86%) agree that professionals should work on their relational and management skills in order to develop their entrepreneurial skills of advanced digital humanists. Two thirds of them (71%) find the cognitive skills important and about 57% of them consider developing emotional skills as an important factor in shaping the profile of a digital humanist.

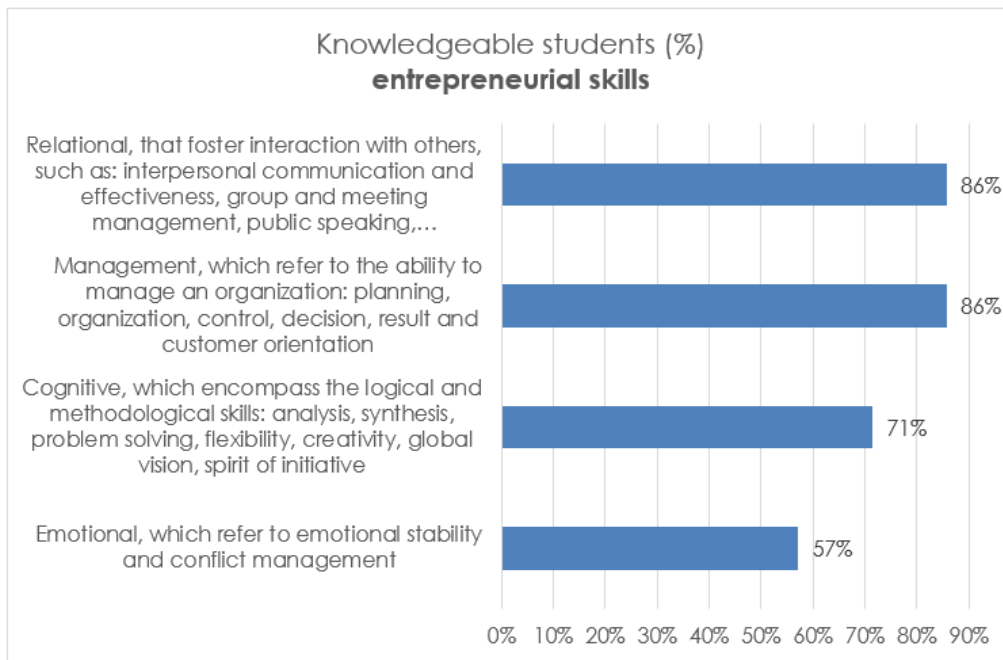


Figure 1. Required knowledge about entrepreneurial skills.

Source: focus group research (authors' calculations).

At the end of the focus group discussion some attention was paid to the different internal and external factors that could affect company operations in digital transformation. Some of these factors that were mentioned include:

- Implementation of new technological solutions;
- Human resources and innovations;
- Analysis and planning;
- Good governance and strategic planning;
- Trained staff;
- The quality of the external services on which the digital transformation will depend.

The focus group discussions proved that the Bulgarian entrepreneurs are aware of the digital humanism concept and the digital humanists as new type of companies' employees and emphasized the importance of specific competencies that further have to be developed in order these new trends to be successfully implemented in the Bulgarian companies. Challenges include employee resistance, adaptation to change, and technological competence. The entrepreneurs state that the emerging profile of the digital humanist requires development and possession of relational and management skills, complemented by cognitive and emotional intelligence. Technical competences are also crucial, such as project management and technological development. In this respect, a proactive approach to cultivating these competencies is required in order the companies to achieve sustained innovation and to get competitive advantage in the modern digital conditions.

5. Discussion

In times where the business interests and the strive of companies to be more and more profitable by integrating digital technologies in the production processes, the

digital humanism concept comes as a “drop of hope” that not everything is subordinated to pure money interest and is dehumanized. Digital humanism emphasizes the value of human experience and ethical considerations in the widening digital world. On other hand, international business still is quite dependent on the complexities of operating across borders, including cultural, economic, and legal variances and these challenges could not be easily overcome just by applying digital tools. As businesses expand internationally, the need to adopt a more human-based approach becomes of great importance. The companies are forced to use and introduce technologies in order to be competitive but they should also ensure that these technologies are applied in a manner that respects human dignity and promotes inclusivity. Here comes the role of the digital humanists who, combining technological and social skills in their work, could contribute to this important issue. The emergence of this new concept—digital humanism—completely corresponds to another important aspect of the contemporary economic development namely the sustainable development issues with its economic, environmental and social pillars. If in the past more attention was paid to the economic and environmental sustainability, nowadays the social aspect is as important as the other two sustainability elements. Companies must adopt ethical standards that govern data privacy, workforce treatment, and sustainability practices. By applying the technological advancements in their daily activities and at the same time prioritizing human values, organizations can foster stronger relationships with their international stakeholders, including customers, employees, and local communities. Therefore, the digital humanism concept could perfectly fit into the world’s sustainable development efforts and help companies achieve profitability based on technological innovations and artificial intelligence and at the same time preserve their human face in an increasingly dehumanized world.

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of digital humanists in international business, there are several limitations. The focus group sample, though insightful, was relatively small and limited to the Bulgarian context. Future research should expand the sample size and explore how digital humanism is perceived and applied in different cultural and economic contexts. Additionally, as digital humanism is still an emerging field, more longitudinal studies are needed to examine its long-term impacts on business practices and ethics.

6. Conclusion

Modern trends in innovation and technology have created the need for a new way of looking at international business practices and companies. Digitalization is inevitable part of our lives nowadays. More and more companies rely on technological innovations, large databases and artificial intelligence in order to optimize their processes, to reduce costs and to retain competitive in national and international environment. In this context, on one hand companies need well-prepared employees but on other hand they try to reduce labour costs as much as possible by digitalizing their activities thus step by step losing their human side. This aspect of the business practices is the focus of the digital humanism concept, which seeks to introduce more human-centric approach in the digital era. Digital humanists, with their technical proficiency and sensitive skills could bridge the gap between technological

advancements and ethical considerations. As digital transformation continues to reshape global business, the role of digital humanists in “educating” different digital tools such as AI and maintaining a balance between technological efficiency and human values, thereby promoting sustainable growth and responsible business practices will become more and more important.

What is more, the role of digital humanists in international business is becoming increasingly vital as companies navigate the complexities of digital transformation. By integrating technical knowledge with human-centered values, digital humanists ensure that businesses do not lose sight of ethical considerations in their pursuit of efficiency. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the contributions of digital humanists will be critical to fostering responsible, inclusive, and sustainable business practices. Future research should focus on how digital humanists can further influence AI development and global business ethics to create a more equitable and human-centered global economy.

The Bulgarian context, as discussed above, highlights a growing awareness of digital humanism concept. Local entrepreneurs begin to recognize the importance of integrating digital skills and soft competencies in their operations in order to gain competitive advantage. Nevertheless, in Bulgarian situation, yet a lot has to be done on this issue.

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