

Effect of Digital Leadership on Career Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy in Padang Startups

Hani Amelia Rizqi^{1*}, Syahrizal²

Management, State University of Padang
Email: haniameliarizqi13@gmail.com*

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* Correspondence Writer

Abstract

This study aims to examine the effect of digital leadership on career satisfaction among independent employees in startup companies in Padang City, with self-efficacy as a mediating variable. Digital leadership plays a vital role in shaping employee experiences by providing support, guidance, and motivation through the use of digital tools and leadership strategies. Grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), this research emphasizes self-efficacy as a key psychological factor influencing career development and satisfaction. Using purposive sampling, 190 independent employees aged 19 to 50 years from various startups in Padang participated in the study. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that digital leadership has a direct positive impact on career satisfaction. Additionally, self-efficacy significantly mediates the relationship between digital leadership and career satisfaction. Employees who perceive strong digital leadership are more likely to develop higher self-efficacy, which subsequently enhances their satisfaction with their career progress. This study provides guidelines on leaders in managing independent employee careers. Our findings offer important insight of digital leadership in enhancing career satisfaction and key mechanism through self-efficacy.

Keywords: Digital Leadership; Self-Efficacy; Career Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in information and communication technology have transformed the business environment, especially in startups that rely on digital integration and innovation Ferdiansyah and Permana (2022). In this changing situation, career satisfaction has become a crucial factor that affects employee well-being and work effectiveness. Career satisfaction reflects employees perceptions of their career success and impacts their performance and contributions to the organization Türe and Akkoç (2020). Previously, we conducted a preliminary survey of 25 independent employees of a startup company in Padang City, which revealed that employee career satisfaction was low, with 68% dissatisfied with their achievements and 80% stating limited promotion opportunities.

One of the key factors influencing career satisfaction is digital leadership, which combines leadership abilities with technology to support decision making and organizational performance Leonardus W, et.al (2019). Effective digital leadership can enhance employees confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy regarding their ability to perform tasks and overcome challenges Bandura (1987). Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to be more capable and have a greater chance of achieving their goals to take responsibility and adapt to the dynamics in the work environment, which ultimately enhances their career satisfaction Gun et al. (2024). On the contrary, individuals with low self-efficacy may face difficulties in coping with work pressure and advancing their careers Kristianto (2019).

This research aims to examine the correlation in a startup environment, taking into account the work structure and the unique dynamics within it. Startups in Padang City are showing significant growth across various industrial sectors. This diversity is reflected in the respondents of this study, who

come from various types of industries.

Table 1. Type of Industry

Industry	Amount
Animation	63
Education	71
Logistics/Ekspedition	13
F&B	18
IT	25

Source: Data respondent (2025)

To strengthen the urgency of this research, the researchers also conducted an initial survey of independent employees in several startup companies in Padang City regarding the level of career satisfaction they feel. The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents are not fully satisfied with their career progression, particularly in terms of income and promotion opportunities.

Table 2. Initial Survey

No	Question	Answer	
		Yes Presentation (%)	No Presentation (%)
1	I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career	8 32%	17 68%
2	I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards achieving my overall career goals	5 20%	20 80%
3	I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards achieving my income goals	7 28%	18 72%
4	I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards achieving my promotion goals	3 12%	22 88%
5	I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards achieving my goal of developing new skills	20 80%	5 20%

Source : Primary data initial survey conducted by the researcher (2025)

Previous research has shown various findings related to the connection between digital leadership, self-efficacy, and career satisfaction. Some studies show that self-efficacy mediates this relationship Chughtai (2019). This research is novel because it specifically examines the influence of digital leadership on career satisfaction with self-efficacy as a mediating variable. Moreover, the research focuses on independent employees in startup companies, which have rarely been the subject of previous studies.

Career Satisfaction

Career satisfaction can be defined as an individual's perception of the success achieved during their professional journey Türe and Akkoç (2020). This concept encompasses a broader dimension than just material achievements, such as promotions or salary increases. Career satisfaction also encompasses non-material aspects such as a sense of achievement, recognition of contribution, skill development, fulfillment of personal goals, and the feeling that the work done provides meaning and emotional satisfaction.

Korankye (2020) states that career satisfaction is the feeling of contentment that arises when someone feels that their career has achieved success. This reflects the individual's work experience obtained through achievements related to their job, both in the form of measurable results and recognition for the efforts made in their career path.

Digital Leadership

According to Hambrick and Mason (1984) the presence of competent managers plays a crucial role in determining and implementing strategic decisions within an organization. This theory emphasizes that managerial characteristics, including experience, values, and leadership style, have a significant influence on the strategic direction of the organization. In the current digital environment, this concept can be used to understand the important role of digital leadership in driving the success of an organization. Wahyu et al. (2020) explain that digital leadership combines aspects of digital culture with expertise in using technology to streamline the leadership process.

Referring to the concept of leadership and digital development, digital-based leadership can be

viewed as a new approach in the world of leadership that embraces a different leadership style and high flexibility in adapting to changes in the digital era Engesmo and Panteli (2021). A leader is required to have a responsive attitude in making decisions, managing teams, and utilizing technology to achieve organizational goals. This aims to support employees in facing digital changes, so they can adapt and adopt new technologies more effectively Magesa and Joan Joanthan (2020)

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1986) proposed that the theory of self-efficacy originates from social cognitive theory. The social dimension of self-efficacy describes that human thoughts and actions are influenced by what they learn from their social environment. Meanwhile, the cognitive aspect emphasize that the thinking process influences a person's motivation, attitude, and behavior. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief and confidence in their ability to generate motivation, cognitive resources, and take the necessary actions to effectively complete a task in a specific situation Kyaw and Soe (2024). People who have high confidence in their abilities tend to be more persistent and determined in facing challenges.

Digital Leadership, self-efficacy, and career satisfaction

The relationship between digital leadership and career satisfaction has not been extensively researched. However, some previous studies have contributed to addressing the limitations of understanding in this topic. In a study conducted by Ali and Ahamat (2022) on career success through leadership in the UAE. Digital leadership is one of the variables said to have a positive correlation with job satisfaction. Digital leadership is the ability of individuals, whether supervisors or managers, who possess a digital attitude and leadership skill to guide their employees in achieving the company's goals Saputra et al. (2022). The research conducted by Raza and Yousufi (2023) provides clear implications for managers that to improve employee satisfaction, they must adopt better leadership styles. In a study conducted by Ali and Ahamat (2022), it was demonstrated that leadership directly and positively affects employee career satisfaction.

The correlation between digital leadership and self-efficacy has not been extensively researched. However, several previous studies have contributed to addressing the knowledge gaps on this topic. According to Yulianto, et al. (2021), transformational leadership can enhance employee self-efficacy through intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation. In a study conducted by (Bryan and Vitello-Cicciu 2022), it was shown that leadership has a positive influence on self-efficacy.

Based on the research conducted by Kristianto (2019), the result of his study indicate that individuals who believe in their ability to control and manage emotions tend to have a more positive perception of their work capacity, which can ultimately enhance career satisfaction. In the research conducted by Kristianto (2019) on self-efficacy and career satisfaction, it was found that self-efficacy positively affects career satisfaction.

In the research conducted by Chughtai (2019) on leadership, career satisfaction, and self-efficacy the results show that leadership has a positive impact on career satisfaction and the hierarchical status of employees within the organization, especially with self-efficacy that serves as a link between those variables. This research proves that self-efficacy directly influences employee success, both subjectively (career satisfaction) and objectively (hierarchical status) in the workplace. In the study Chughtai (2019), it was shown that self-efficacy acts as a link between the influence of digital leadership and career satisfaction. Based on these discussions and research findings, we develop the following hypotheses :

H1 : Digital leadership positively influences career satisfaction

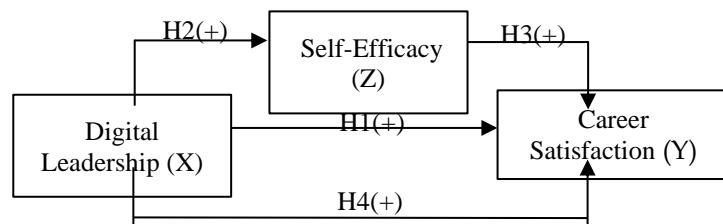
H2 : Digital leadership positively impact self-efficacy

H3 : Self-efficacy positively affects career satisfaction

H4 : Self-efficacy mediates the correlation between digital leadership and career satisfaction

RESEARCH METHODS

A quantitative approach with causal methods is used in this research to analyze the relationships between the variables studied. The model and hypothesis in this study are explained as follows:

**Figure 1. Research Model**

To obtain the data results, each indicator is measured by assigning a scale to the questionnaire responses. The provided answer values use a likert-scale, which is a scale used to measure the extent to which respondents provide assessments of various characteristics in each statement. A respondents are asked to provide their feedback using a 1-5 likert scale, which includes categories ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, to strongly agree. We developed measurement items for each construct based on existing literature. The number of indicator items used in this study is 19. With this number items, a sample size of 190 meets the minimum sample criteria as outlined by Hair et al (2010).

Table 3. Variable Operationalization

Construct	Indicators	Source
Career satisfaction	5 items	Fletcher and Hansson (1992)
Digital Leadership	5 items	Mollah et al. (2023)
Self-efficacy	9 items	Greenhaus et al. (1990)

Career Satisfaction

The behavior was measured by a scale a developed by Fletcher and Hansson (1992). Sample item for PIS are “I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career”, “I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards meeting overall my career goals.” The scale was found reliable with Cronbach alpha 0.926

Digital Leadership

A five items scale was developed by Mollah et al. (2023) to measure employee performance used in the study. The sample items of the scale are “My supervisor can raise employees awareness of information technology risks”, “My supervisor can raise employee awareness about technology that can be used to improve organizational processes.” The scale was reliable with Cronbach alpha 0.885

Self-Efficacy

A five items scale was developed by Greenhaus et al.(1990) to measure employee performance used in the study. The sample items of the scale are “ I am confident in my ability to handle the complexities in my career”, “ I am confident that I can adapt to changes in the workgroup.” The scale was reliable with Cronbach alpha 0.828

RESULT and DISCUSSION

Result

The result of the study indicate that the majority of respondents are male (53%) and fall within the age range 25-30 years (48.4%). Furthermore, the majority of respondents possess a bachelor's degree (60.4%), have work experience between one and three years (71.8%), and 32% of the total respondents are employed in startup companies within the education sector. The positive effect of digital leadership on career satisfaction suggests that when employees perceive their leaders as digitally competent and supportive, they feel more motivated and confident about their career growth. Digital leaders create clarity and direction amidst startup uncertainties, which enhances employees' sense of stability and satisfaction.

Measurement model

The initial testing phase was conducted by examining the measurement model to assess the reliability and validity of the proposed model, as presented in table 2.

Table 4. The Quality Criterion

Variables	Items	Loading	AVE	Cronbach Alpha	CR
Career Satisfaction	CS1	0.795	0.628	0.926	0.938
	CS2	0.722			
	CS3	0.797			
	CS4	0.811			
	CS5	0.713			
Digital Leadership	DL1	0.847	0.687	0.885	0.916
	DL2	0.852			
	DL3	0.878			
Self-Efficacy	DL4	0.819	0.591	0.828	0.878
	DL5	0.743			
	SE1	0.775			
	SE2	0.786			
	SE3	0.848			
	SE4	0.744			
	SE5	0.779			
	SE6	0.862			
	SE7	0.809			
	SE8	0.811			
	SE9	0.710			

Source: SmartPLS4 output (2025)

Based on the SmartPLS output in Table 2, the test result show that all outer loadings for each variable are declared valid because they have values greater than 0.6, ranging from 0.710 to 0.878. Therefore, convergent validity is met. The total variance explained for a single common factor must be less than 50% to indicate that there is no problem. The result of construct validity and reliability show that the Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.828 to 0.926, higher than the threshold of 0.6 (Malhotra et al., 2020), indicating that all variables have achieved high internal consistency. The Composite Reliability (CR) values range from 0.878 to 0.938, also above the threshold of 0.6, indicating a good level of reliability Fornell, et.al (1981). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values range from 0.591 to 0.687, all of which are above the threshold of 0.5, indicating that these variables have also achieved a good level of reliability (Fornell, et.al (1981). Thus all the variables used in this model have achieved high validity and reliability. Table 3 provides the Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model) for the inferential results.

Table 5. R Square (R^2)

Variables	R Square
Career satisfaction (Y)	0.046
Self-efficacy (Z)	0.270

Source: SmartPLS4 output (2025)

Table 3 shows that the adjusted R-Square value for the self-efficacy variable is 0.046, indicating that the independent variables in the model can only explain 4.6% of the variation in self-efficacy. Based on the R-Square interpretation criteria, this model is categorized as a weak model (Ghozali & Latan, 2015:74). Meanwhile, the adjusted R-Square value for the career satisfaction variable is 0.270, which means the independent variables in the model can explain 27% of the variation in career satisfaction. The interpretation of R-Square in this model can be categorized as a model with moderate strength (Ghozali & Latan, 2015:74).

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Results of Direct and Indirect Influence

Hypothesis	Path	Effect Size	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	X \rightarrow Y	0.360	5.815	0.000	Supported
H2	X \rightarrow Z	0.227	2.838	0.005	Supported
H3	Z \rightarrow Y	0.312	5.524	0.000	Supported
H4	X \rightarrow Z \rightarrow Y	0.071	2.489	0.013	Supported

Source: SmartPLS4 output (2025)

Based on the model fit index, the direct connection between the variables in this study were further analyzed the result from the SEM analyze were also used to evaluate the impact of digital leadership on career satisfaction. Table 4 provides a summary of the result. The findings The findings reveal that digital leadership is a significant predictor of career satisfaction, showing a coefficient of 0.360 and a t-value of 5.815 ($p = 0.000$), thus confirming H1. In addition, digital leadership has a notable

effect on self-efficacy, with a coefficient of 0.277 and a t-value of 2.833 ($p = 0.005$), which supports H2. Furthermore, self-efficacy positively impacts career satisfaction, with a coefficient of 0.312 and a t-value of 5.524 ($p = 0.000$), confirming H3. Finally, the indirect effect of digital leadership on career satisfaction through self-efficacy is also statistically significant, with a coefficient of 0.071 and a t-value of 2.489. ($p = 0.013$), supporting H4. The result of this study confirm that digital leadership and self-efficacy are important factors in enhancing employee career satisfaction.

In this study, we applied partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0 software. This technique is widely applied as an alternative to covariance-based SEM because it has the capability to covariance-based SEM, as it is able to achieve high levels of statistical power and does not require normality of data distribution Hair et al. (2011); Reinartz et al. (2009). This approach is very appropriate considering the study's objective to examine the complex relationship between digital leadership, self-efficacy, and career satisfaction. The dynamic and evolving nature of the startup environment requires a flexible analytical method such as PLS-SEM, which supports theory development and mediation analysis in this research.

Discussion

The influence of Digital Leadership on Career Satisfaction

The findings indicate that digital leadership has a significant positive effect on career satisfaction, with a T-Statistic value of 5.815. This suggests that strong digital leadership contributes positively to employees' career satisfaction by providing clear guidance, motivation, and a supportive work environment. This result aligns with previous studies by Ali and Ahamat (2022) and Raza and Yousufi (2023), which found that effective leadership enhances employee satisfaction and career success. Furthermore, digital leadership enables employees to develop a sense of purpose and confidence in their career progression, leading to increased motivation and job satisfaction.

The influence of Digital Leadership on Self-Efficacy

The study results demonstrate that digital leadership significantly influences self-efficacy, with a T-Statistic value of 2.838. Leaders who integrate digital strategies encourage employees to take initiative, develop problem-solving skills, and embrace innovation, which enhances their self-belief. Therefore, H2, which states that digital leadership positively impacts self-efficacy, is accepted. This is in line with research by Yulianto et al. (2021), which emphasize the role of leadership in strengthening employee confidence and competence. Employees who perceive strong leadership in the digital realm tend to develop a higher sense of control over their work, leading to better career outcomes.

The influence of Self Efficacy on Career Satisfaction

The statistical analysis shows that self-efficacy significantly affects career satisfaction, with a T-Statistic value of 5.524. Employees with high self-efficacy tend to have a more positive perception of their career growth, making them more resilient and adaptable in achieving their professional goals. Therefore, H3, which states that self-efficacy positively affects career satisfaction, is accepted. These findings are consistent with studies by Chughtai (2019), which found that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping employees' career satisfaction. Employees with strong self-efficacy are more likely to overcome workplace challenges, leading to greater job fulfillment and engagement.

The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy in the Relationship between Digital Leadership and Career satisfaction

The results also confirm that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between digital leadership and career satisfaction, with a T-Statistic value of 2.489. This suggests that digital leadership strengthens career satisfaction not only directly but also through its positive impact on self-efficacy. Therefore, H4, which states that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between digital leadership and career satisfaction, is accepted. These findings align with Chughtai (2019), who highlighted that self-efficacy acts as a bridge between leadership strategies and career-related outcomes. The presence of digital leadership fosters an environment where employees feel empowered, leading to increased confidence and career satisfaction.

The results of this study support the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), showing that digital leadership significantly affects career satisfaction, both directly and through the mediating role of self-efficacy. These findings are consistent with previous research by Chughtai (2019); Ali and

Ahamat (2022), which emphasize the role of leadership in enhancing employee outcomes. The mediating role of self-efficacy confirms that employee confidence plays a key role in shaping career satisfaction, especially in the dynamic and less structured environment of startups. The relatively low R^2 value for self-efficacy may reflect the variability of roles and support systems in startups. From a managerial perspective, startups should strengthen digital leadership through targeted training, encourage a culture of feedback and recognition, and implement mentoring programs to build self-efficacy. Although providing valuable insights, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data. Future research is advised to adopt a longitudinal or mixed-methods approach and explore different organizational contexts to enhance generalizability.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights and practical applications in employee career management. Using the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), this research analyzes the influence of perceived digital leadership and self-efficacy on career satisfaction among independent employees in startup companies. The result of the analysis shows that digital leadership has a positive impact on career satisfaction, both directly and indirectly through self-efficacy. Self-efficacy functions as a mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between digital leadership and career satisfaction. Effective digital leadership not only enhances employees' self-efficacy but also creates a more conducive work environment for professional development, which ultimately contributes to greater career satisfaction. These findings affirm that adaptive and supportive digital leadership enables employees to develop their competencies, face challenges with greater confidence, and feel more satisfied with their career journeys in startup companies. According to SCCT, self-efficacy is directly related to outcome expectations. However, this research reveals that self-efficacy alone is not the main predictor of career satisfaction, but rather interacts with leadership factors to shape and enhance self-efficacy, which ultimately contributes to greater career satisfaction. From a managerial perspective, startups can utilize digital tools such as project management platforms or feedback systems to enhance communication and leadership visibility. Providing recognition and growth opportunities can further strengthen employees' belief in their abilities, resulting in higher satisfaction and retention.

This study has several limitations. One of the main limitations is the use of a cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to draw definitive conclusions about cause and effect relationships. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of causality, future research could consider testing the established model using a longitudinal approach. Second, because the data for all research variables were obtained solely through self-reports from employees, the conclusion of this study may be influenced by common method bias. To reduce potential bias, future research should combine data from various sources. Third, since the sample in this study comes from startup companies, future research should explore various organizational contexts so that the research findings can be more generalized. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches and explore different organizational contexts to enhance generalizability.

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