The Impact of Agile Leadership on Innovation within SMEs: A Scoping Review

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Abstract:- Nowadays organizations operate in a volatile and ambiguous environment, which is why innovation becomes an important factor to consider to ensure competitiveness and economic growth. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are the most affected by the changes in the market; therefore, a thorough understanding of the actions points available for these companies is crucial. In this sense, it becomes imperative for companies to depict the way to implement innovation within their operations and practices. Innovation is generally encouraged through digital transformation and agile leadership. This paper aims to analyze the impact of agile leadership on innovation and propose recommendations for future research to determine the interrelationship between agile management and firm performance. For the purpose of this paper, we have employed a scoping review to depict the main factors that influence the enactment of agile leadership within SMEs. Findings reveal that agile leadership is a strong indicator for the adoption of innovation within organizations and contributes to economic growth.

Keywords:- Agile leadership; innovation; small and medium enterprises (SMEs); entrepreneurship; scoping study.

I. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) represent a majority in terms of the overall businesses at a global level [6]. Nowadays, innovation and agility represent the backbone of the overall business performance in the current market [14]. Due to the ambiguous and complex environment in which SMEs operate, agile leadership comes as a solution that empowers managers to make use of the best practices and implement new technologies and approaches to face uncertainty. By adopting an agile approach, small and medium enterprises can become more flexible and adapt rapidly to handle challenges. This leads to an overall improved performance and as research shows, leads to larger revenues for the companies that adopted an agile mindset compared to companies that are more traditional [4]. Many authors agree that hierarchical organizational structures can no longer fulfil the needs and support a company in remaining competitive. By adopting an agile mindset, companies have more opportunities in creating competitive advantage particularly because of their rapid response when faced with market adversities. This also applies for small companies that are usually more flexible and more prone to respond quickly to changes in the market. Leadership plays a crucial role in this type of enterprises and aligned with a proper governance, it contributes to supporting the organization to face the barriers encountered in the market [14].

Some authors argue that both for small companies, as well as for larger ones, the adoption of an agile mindset has many benefits. However, there are also several barriers faced by both types of companies. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that, for both types of enterprises, the human factor is the connector between agile implementation and organizational success [14]. Emerging technologies have powered digitalization and innovation within enterprises and thus, managed to create numerous opportunities for development and economic growth. Regardless of organization size or type, the development of internal technological capabilities can improve overall performance and guide companies in their journey towards digital transformation. Digital innovations also contribute to the establishment of competitiveness on the market and development of performance capabilities [5].

However, for small and medium enterprises, digital transformation faces several barriers including the limited number of resources and the available financial support. Especially in this type of enterprises, the crucial role of agile leadership becomes even more dominant and vital for the overall organization success. Within the transformation strategy, leadership teams should ensure strategic flexibility and engage the entire workforce in the change process. Hence, it becomes indisputable the role of agile leadership in the entire transformation process [5]. Being able to recognize opportunities is of the utmost importance. The leaders within the company, who can then foster and direct the knowledge towards the internal workforce, should seize such opportunities. Therefore, for small companies, leadership, networking and commitment represent three compelling factors that can transform organizations [4].

For the purposes of this paper, we aim to provide a profound understanding on the implications of agile leadership and digital transformation on innovation in small and medium enterprises. The remaining of this paper is structured as follows: chapter II presents the methodology selected to provide an answer to the research question: What is known from the existing literature about the impact of agile leadership on innovation in small and medium enterprises?. Chapter III describes the results of our analysis and further discusses implications of the researched concepts. Finally, chapter IV concludes the findings and provides recommendations for managers and practitioners operating in SMEs, as well as directions for future research.

II. METHODOLOGY

Scoping reviews are generally used to clarify concepts and map findings on a particular topic. These reviews represent a useful method to identify future research approaches and provide theoretical and practical recommendations for management and decision makers [9].

Some researchers believe that scoping reviews are a useful tool for synthetizing research evidence and map the current state of the art existent within the literature. "Reconnaissance" is the term associated with scoping reviews, in the sense that these reviews help to establish working definitions of key concepts as well as conceptual barriers [11]. It is generally believed that scoping studies address the research topic in depth and the amount of information obtained depends on the theme selected for inquiry. There are several outcomes for a scoping study and some authors have identified the following: firstly, one potential outcome can describe the extent and nature of the research activity performed during the scoping review. This usually involved a type of rapid review, where findings are not detailed, but rather mapped and available information is outlined. Another outcome can provide an answer to the question of whether or not a systematic review is required, depending on the research topic. These scoping reviews generally focus on the feasibility and relevance of undergoing for a systematic literature review. The third outcome focuses on describing in depth research findings, along with summarizing and disseminating potential policies for consumers and practitioners. The fourth outcomes focuses on identifying gaps in the literature and identify future research directions [2].

Scholars agree that scoping reviews are also used for disseminating the existent body of knowledge, identify research gaps and make recommendations for future research. The main purpose of a scoping review is to gather the existing theory and knowledge about the researched concepts, identify gaps and support the development of a report that comprises all findings and contributes to future research [11].

There are several purposes for why selecting a scoping review and these include the identification of the types of available evidence regarding the research topic, the clarification of the concepts existing in the literature, determining the key factors or characteristics related to the research theme and depicting potential gaps in the available knowledge [10].

Considering the research objective for this paper, namely to depict and understand the existing knowledge regarding the impact of agile leadership on innovation in small and medium enterprises, we have employed a scoping review and the findings are detailed in the following chapter of this paper.

Various scholars agree that the framework generally used for displaying the studies, knowledge and materials that have been included in the scoping review is the PRISMA framework. This is a suitable framework for systematic literature reviews as well, but considering that scoping reviews are frequently perceived as precursors for systematic reviews, the PRISMA framework represents the perfect flow diagram for the scoping review process. This framework comprises four main categories for the information identified in the literature. These include the identification, screening, eligibility and included sections that help to differentiate between the various sources of information [2].

Therefore, we have used the PRISMA framework to narrow down and categorize the different sources of information. The following figure illustrates the total number of records identified, screened and included in the review.
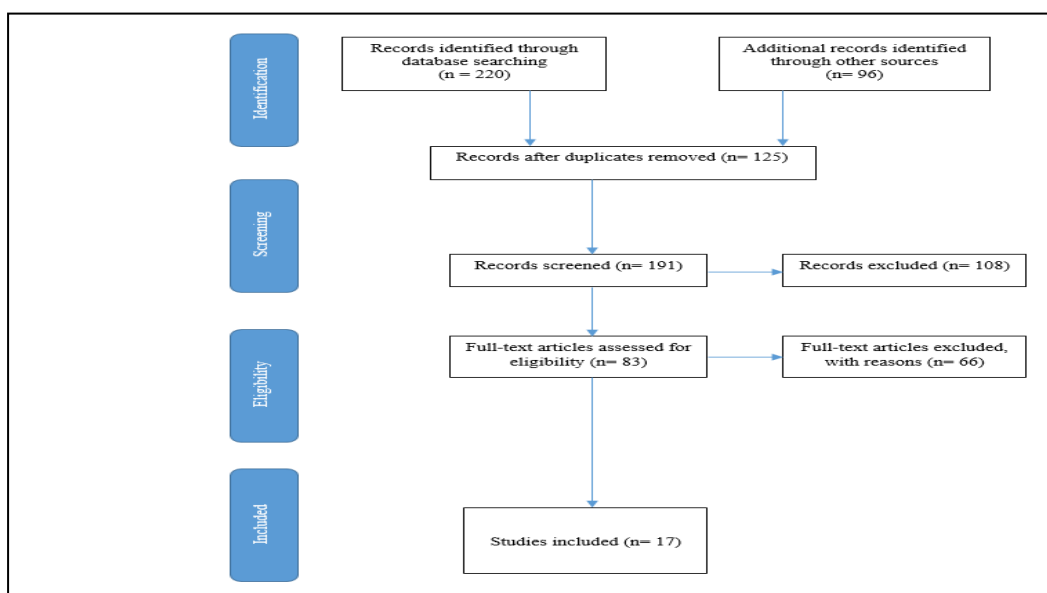

Fig. 1: Reporting flow diagram for scoping review (using PRISMA framework)

Records have been identified using several databases, including EBSCO database, ProQuest Education and Taylor & Francis Online and have used the following key words: digital transformation, entrepreneurship, small and medium enterprises, innovation, agile leadership, agility, management. An additional search has been performed using Google Scholar. In terms of criteria used for including the records, we have selected peer-reviewed records, written in English language only. Records excluded included posters or dissertation papers. For the remaining records, we have obtained the articles in full-text format and have eliminated the articles that were part of conferences, opinion type or guest editor's introductions. A total of 19 articles have been included in the analysis. An overview of these articles is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Records Overview

Author (year)	Article title	Contribution
Topic: Agile Leadership		
Busse, R. & Weidner, G. (2020)	A qualitative investigation on combined effects of distant leadership, organizational agility and digital collaboration on perceived employee engagement	Theoretical contribution for managers as the findings suggest that digital collaboration tools and agile leadership positively influence performance indicators
Greineder, M. & Leicht, N. (2020)	Agile Leadership - A Comparison of Agile Leadership Styles	Theoretical contributions regarding different types of leadership (visionary, transformational & emergent) that are comprised within the larger type of agile leadership
Kahl, J., de Klerk, S. & Ogulin, R. (2021)	Agile strategies for middle managers	Theoretical and practical contributions to the dynamic capabilities theory; focusing on middle management, this study acknowledges the importance of a flexible approach to achieve business success
Kumar, R., Singh, K. & Jain, S. K. (2019)	Development of a framework for agile manufacturing	Theoretical contribution in regards to agile implementation within enterprises through the development of a framework comprised by 8 pillars; the pillars focus on human resources, organizational culture, as well as suppliers and customers
Wilson, A. (2021)	Emotionally Agile Leadership Amid COVID-19	Theoretical contributions regarding the importance of emotional intelligence when enforcing an agile mindset especially when dealing with turbulent times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic
Piwowar-Sulej, K., Sołtysik, M. & Rozycka-Antkowiak, J. L. (2022)	Implementation of Management 3.0: its consistency and conditional factors	Practical contributions regarding the competencies that managers should develop for ensuring an effortless adoption of agile (empowering teams and individuals, adopt a continuous improvement mindset, align constraints and foster growth)
Holbeche, L. S. (2018)	Organisational effectiveness and agility	Theoretical contributions regarding how to foster innovation within companies and adopt agility as part of internal change
Singla, M. & Kaushal, R. (2022)	Organization leadership and culture during crisis: lessons and applications learned from COVID-19 pandemic	Theoretical and practical implications on how to engage the workforce and develop cultural change within the enterprise through adapting the leadership style and increase employees' commitment
Peeters, T., Van de Voorde, K. & Paauwe, J. (2021)	The effects of working agile on team performance and engagement	Theoretical contributions regarding the positive correlation between team performance and engagement and implementation of agile ways of working
Carvalho, A. M., Sampaio, P., Rebentisch, E., Carvalho, J. A. & Saraiva, P. (2020)	The influence of operational excellence on the culture and agility of organizations: evidence from industry	Theoretical contributions regarding the importance of continuous improvement and operational excellence when dealing with change; results show that focus on operations optimization develops dynamic capabilities and cultural alignment within enterprises
Topic: Digital transformation entrepreneurship		
Kraus, S., Palmer, C., Kailer, N., Kallinger, F. L. & Spitzer, J. (2018)	Digital entrepreneurship	Theoretical contributions regarding the main aspects that influence digital transformation in firms; the authors discuss business models adjustment to retrieve highest digital potential
Khin, S. & Ho, T. C. (2018)	Digital technology, digital capability and organizational	Theoretical contributions to deepen the understanding of the influence of digital orientation and digital

Author (year)	Article title	Contribution
	performance	capability on digital innovation and entrepreneurship; results show a positive mediation effect of digital capability on overall digital efforts within an organization
Chatterjee, S., Chaudhuri, R., Vrontis, D. & Basile, G. (2021)	Digital transformation and entrepreneurship process in SMEs of India: a moderating role of adoption of AI-CRM capability and strategic planning	Theoretical and practical contributions that apply in the case of SMEs in emerging economies; results show that companies in developing economies should enforce digital transformation to improve existing traditional practices and processes
Beliaeva, T., Ferasso, M., Kraus, S. & Damke, E. J. (2019)	Dynamics of digital entrepreneurship and the innovation ecosystem	Practical contributions regarding the importance of developing networks during the digital transformation process
Gavrila, S. G. & de Lucas Ancillo, A. (2021)	Entrepreneurship, innovation, digitization and digital transformation toward a sustainable growth within the pandemic environment	Practical contributions regarding the positive effects of digitalization when faced to unstable environments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic
Walter, Y. (2022)	The centrality of a digital strategy for societal and business innovations	Practical contributions regarding the implementation of digital innovation by portraying examples of a business case (Netflix) as well as a country (San Salvador) that applied innovation
Schiuma, G., Schettini, E., Santarsiero, F. & Carlucci, D. (2021)	The transformative leadership compass: six competencies for digital transformation entrepreneurship	Theoretical contributions on the importance of leaders in driving forward digital transformation entrepreneurship, identifying as crucial characteristics for leaders the ability of being wise, transformative and digital

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that organizational agility refers to the capability of enterprises to be flexible and adapt to the turbulence in the market by renovating internal structures or formats that no longer are beneficial for the company [5]. Some authors define agility as a dynamic capability "built over time", a concept that requires strong decision making skills and a sense of comfort with ambiguity, coupled with awareness for new trends in the market. Therefore, in depth knowledge and expertise are key competences for leaders when engaging in agile transformation [8]. Thus, becomes evident that the leadership team has a crucial role in the enterprise transformation through the development of the organizational setup and of the context for such transformation.

Agile leadership is a compelling structure that brings together the workforce within the organization and contributes to creating the structure that would ensure the performance and the positive outcomes of the digital conversion [5]. Additionally, entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial mindset represent elements that can positively influence businesses, especially when such enterprises are operating in a circular economy. Research shows that companies can successfully develop and face challenging times when making use of operational, strategic and leadership agility [13].

In the case of SMEs, innovation is generally considered the main factor that can contribute to ensure economic and social development across countries and regions. Organizational agility is perceived as useful for small and medium enterprises, especially when considering a volatile and uncertain environment. There are several types of agility identified, namely proactive, reactive, and innovative. The reactive and proactive types are focusing on two opposed scenarios, namely reacting when faced with adversities or proactively identifying opportunities ahead of times. Innovative agility is a key element for SMEs in terms of developing new products and services and it is considered a "fundamental pillar" in the innovation context. Therefore, it is generally considered that agility positively influences innovation performance. There is however another type of agility that can positively affect the internal environment within an organization. This refers to intellectual agility, which is generally associated with intellectual capital. This is very useful for small and medium companies, where the knowledge associated with intellectual capital can provide multiple benefits and foster growth in such companies. Following this line of thought, it is useful to understand what type of agility impacts overall performance in SMEs and what are the differences when compared to larger companies [6].

Organizational change should begin with the development of a "mature strategy at internal and external levels". The achievement of long-lasting transformation can occur when there is a thorough understanding of the market dynamics and the extent of agility existent within the workplace environment [13]. Small and medium enterprises should enforce strategies that would allow for the development of smart workforce, resolving challenges by fostering a culture of innovation and ultimately "ensure the sustainability of resources and services". It is generally accepted the small and medium companies are a major

pillar for economic growth and have a direct impact on the gross domestic product and industrial activity. In a world of uncertainty, strategic agility can support companies to create more business opportunities and enhance competitiveness [12].

During a transformation process, "the culture, attitude and mindset of the workers" can significantly change. Therefore, the leadership group plays a crucial role in the process along with information and the training required for instructing the workforce. Following this line of thought, leaders should make use of their dynamic capabilities. This concept refers to the ability of dealing with changes and contributing effectively towards modelling the organization's competency. Reversely, the lack of dynamic capabilities is usually correlated to "unsustainable performance levels". The essence of dynamic capability is represented by the management team, who should prove the ability to motivate the workforce to develop entrepreneurial skills and incorporate technology as the main factor for transformation in the organizational context. Moreover, the ability to "identify new business opportunities and capitalize on them" is what makes leaders a powerful resource in the transformation process [13].

For the particular case of SMEs, the human resource is of the utmost importance. The expectations from employees include capability to adapt to change, readiness to face ambiguity, be creative and open to new discoveries. SMEs require a mature strategy in order to be capable to build dynamic capability and respond to changes in the market. Digital transformation, which is usually associated with innovation within enterprises, comprises a major part that encompasses strategy and another one, which refers to the technological processes that are to be implemented [7].

An important assessment that should be performed when it comes to implementing change within small and medium enterprises refers to the determination of change readiness. This is a concept that refers to the collective appetite for accepting change and consists of two main components, namely change commitment and change efficacy. The latter refers to the leaders' success in conveying the necessary messages that motivate the internal workforce and engage it in the transformation process. Some authors argue that change readiness is an important measurement in the case of SMEs when aiming to increase their dynamic capability. Therefore, focusing on the development of new skills and on motivating human resources is key for small companies [1].

The readiness for the adoption of digitalization and innovativeness within enterprises differs from large to small and medium enterprises. Especially in the case of small companies, the level of preparedness for the application of transformation is less compared to that of larger organizations. A first step in the implementation process is the general acknowledgement of the internal company need for transformation. The in-house awareness can be a catalyst for organizations to quickly assess their needs and adopt more digitalized operating models. The

backbone of any digital transformation is generally represented by the human resource. The internal workforce and their level of readiness in terms of existing skills, knowledge and abilities represent the elements that would pave the path towards internal change [8]. Workforce transformation is a holistic process that influences all levels of the organization. It encompasses changes in culture, behavior and mindset. Measuring the workforce transformation includes an assessment of information management governance, data capture and customer support. Additionally, workforce transformation within small and medium enterprises includes the development of new skills for employees such as problem solving, innovation and creativity. Agile leadership plays a moderating role in the internal transformations that occur within enterprises [7].

Along with dynamic capabilities, strategic flexibility is another competence required for leaders in the change process. When faced with uncertainty, companies should be able to respond with agility and swiftness and adjust their "knowledge base and essential capabilities". Studies show a positive correlation between strategic flexibility and organizational transformation in the sense of helping companies achieve advantages in a competitive market. Agile leaders can wield a positive influence on the organizational environment and contribute to influencing the workforce in embracing adaptability and an orientation towards problem solving and technology [8].

In their journey to transforming the business, leaders should identify agility enablers for daily operations. According to some authors, innovation and creativity are important factors that have the potential to influence the firm's ability to become agile. Teams that operate in human resources should improve the internal communications systems in order to positively influence operational performance. Moreover, the effectiveness of operational processes is another element that affects the competitive capabilities of the firm. Additionally, the human capital base expressed through employees' skills, competences and experiences are crucial factors that contribute to building the strategic agility in the organization [12].

Researchers have addressed the barriers faced by several companies operating in different countries when it comes to agile implementation. The studies have shown that agile skills represent one of the main barriers in the path of instrumenting transformation. This refers to a lack of a characteristic state of mind, or a lack of a required governance model, and finally the lack of an internal culture that would foster the adoption of new methodologies. Additionally, resistance to change is another factor that influences agile adoption, which leads to the notion that human competencies are the most valuable for organizations when implementing the agile mindset and when directing changes within the enterprise [14].

Scholars have investigated the factors that contribute to the implementation of a successful transformation and the adoption of agility within the organization. In this sense, several factors have been identified, such as the shared organizational vision, the development of a strong connection between employees and management, and finally, the internal learning process that fosters advancement in acquiring new skills and competencies and contribute to the firm's dynamic capabilities. An innovative mindset is another characteristic that contributes to the overall organization's transformation. Moreover, research shows that continuous transformation efforts also contribute to the successful implementation of agile transformation [8]. For a firm to become aware of the market realities, it is imperative for leaders to understand the "power of buyers and suppliers, the competition between rivals and the threats of new entrants". Studies show that a positive impact on the overall firm performance can be achieved through a thorough understanding of the alignment between internal and external organizational factors and agility in depicting the context faced by the company especially in times of turbulence [12].

The dynamic capability theory refers to the leaders' ability to "control and deploy competencies" of the existent workforce and to the constant alignment of the firm's operating capabilities to the market realities. The ability to change internal ways of operating proves that leaders are capable to adopt strategic agility and be expeditious in responding to unexpected changes [12].

The agile leadership concept comprises four competencies, namely context-setting agility, stakeholder agility, creative agility and self-leadership agility. Context-setting agility refers to the leader's ability to predict significant changes the company might face and identify the necessary initiatives to respond to such challenges. Stakeholder agility refers to the leader's capability to identify the core individuals who influence the decision-making process and leverage their contributions in order to improve the overall firm effectiveness. Creative agility encompasses the leader's ability to identify opportunities and come up with solutions to difficult problems. Finally, self-leadership agility entails the capability of leaders to engage others in their vision and motivate teams to seek organizational development [3].

The dynamic capabilities required for managing agile transformation include on one side, strategic management competencies in building and developing internal culture and on the other, flexibility in governing external circumstances. The ability to adapt to different environments lies in the leaders' expertise in terms of developing relationships with several stakeholders and clients and establish partnerships that would benefit the firm's strategic objectives. The development of accelerators or corporate incubators is a common technique, especially in the case of small and medium enterprises. A leader's dynamic thinking is also perceived through seizing, namely allocating the resources to the corresponding tasks and assignments, thus managing to capture value from the implementation of a good strategy and from any potential opportunities that could arise for the firm. This is valid especially for small and medium enterprises where resources are scarce and motivation plays an important role in accelerating organizational agility [8].

When it comes to agile leadership, several types of leaders have been identified. These include the expert, the achiever, the catalyst, the co-creator and the synergist. The first type, namely the expert is usually oriented towards solving problems in an analytical manner and is always focused on continuous improvement. These leaders are valued for their expertise in a specific field and their ability to develop team members. The second type, namely the achiever, has strong competencies in strategic thinking. These leaders are capable to motivate large teams and instill their vision to different layers within the company. The next type, the catalysts, are leaders that have strong communication skills and are able to improve effectiveness within teams. Catalyst leaders are the main stakeholders involved in the decision making process when a volatile business situation is involved. The co-creator leaders can develop collaborative teams and are highly dedicated to enforce the company vision. Finally, the last type, the synergist leader, is a type of leader who can switch between different leadership types and are the enablers that can guide teams to "succeed amid challenging and chaotic conditions" [3].

Some authors argue that the strategic agility concept has multiple facets and variables that pose great importance on the overall transformation process. In this sense, there have been identified the following: strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity and leadership unity. Strategic sensitivity refers to a "higher awareness" developed within the organization that allows leaders to identify market opportunities and depict possible threats. Perception plays a key role in the process, for which it allows companies to gain insights into "emerging realities as they occur". Strategic agility also grants firms the possibility to adapt to new innovative ideas due to recognizing organizational trends. This is especially important for small and medium enterprises because it helps these companies to predict the challenges they might be facing in their current operating environment. Becoming familiar with ambiguity is an important characteristic that managers and leaders involved in the transformation process should embrace for ensuring business sustainability. Therefore, it can be accepted that small and medium enterprises can obtain important competitive advantage by employing strategic agility. This is true primarily because of these companies' size and maturity. This constitutes a clear differentiator when compared to larger companies that have a tendency to value predictability and reward routine [12].

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings show that agile leadership has a positive impact on innovation. Our research provides useful insights for managers and practitioners within small and medium enterprises, by highlighting the importance of the internal workforce as well as the proactivity and entrepreneurial mindset of the organization's human resources. This findings is also supported in the literature, as internal entrepreneurship within a company is proven to direct the internal resources and activities towards organizational and economic development [13]. Moreover, scholars agree that firm culture has an important role in the overall organizational performance in the sense that it fosters innovation and proactive behavior. Leaders' vision is another element that can positively affect the organization performance. In this sense, the focus on self-development and on achieving the proposed results is part of the leadership agility concept. Empowering leaders to apply their vision and develop an environment that fosters creativity and innovation should represent the strategy adopted that is aligned with the dynamics of the firm. Therefore, collaboration is a principle that inspire team members to work together and adopt collective brainstorming, thus delivering results [13].

The analysis in this paper shows that agile leadership is a multifaceted concept that comprises numerous aspects; however, the focus is placed on the adaptability of managers and receptivity in making rapid decisions when faced with adversities. This finding is highlighted in the literature, several authors affirming that flexibility and responsiveness to the challenges posed by a competitive environment can define the agile concept. Consequently, "innovation culture, empowerment, tolerance of ambiguity, strategic direction and vision" represent core elements of agile application in the transformation process. Along with the adoption of new practices and internal processes, agile transformation comes with a shift in "behaviors and norms across the organization". Moreover, there is a common perception that the agile concept lays as the foundation for innovation and qualitative outcomes within a company. By encouraging an entrepreneurial mindset and increasing autonomy, enterprises can ensure a more fluid internal environment and foster agility. The agile workforce is a dynamic workforce, more flexible and more expeditious in achieving business objectives [14]. Resource fluidity is another concept based on leaders' understanding of the capabilities of their internal resources. Knowledge management plays a crucial role in this sense, as it allows organizations to circulate the necessary information among employees. A major setback for companies when attempting to circulate knowledge is resource rigidity. Most companies usually plan in advance and do not allow for "shifting resource commitment in real time". In this case, resource fluidity, if correctly implemented, can become "a vital tool for the performance and success of the organization" [12].

All in all, this research can be further enhanced with a review of the literature using a systematic methodology and a qualitative research based framework. This would provide a more in depth understanding of the particularities of the agile leadership concept and its application in the innovative practices employed by small and medium enterprises.

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