

Balancing human and artificial intelligence in strategic decision-making: governance, authority and sustainable digital transformation in global technology consulting firms

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Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Digital Transformation; Governance; Human–AI Collaboration; Strategic Decision-Making; Sustainability

Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now firmly embedded within organisational decision-making processes, reshaping how firms analyse information, formulate strategy, and manage uncertainty. While AI offers significant opportunities for enhanced efficiency and data-driven insights, questions remain regarding the preservation of human judgement, accountability, and governance in strategic decision-making. This study examines how human and AI actors interact to shape strategic decision-making frameworks in global technology consulting firms undergoing digital transformation.

Using an interpretivist, inductive qualitative research design, the study adopts a multiple-case approach focusing on IBM, Accenture, Deloitte, and Capgemini. Documentary data published between 2018 and 2024, including corporate governance reports, AI strategy publications, responsible AI frameworks, and digital transformation reports, were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo. The study is grounded in Structuration Theory and Actor-Network Theory to explore how authority is both institutionally reproduced and socio-technically enacted within AI-mediated environments.

Four interrelated themes emerged: the specification of decision authority, the recasting of managerial roles, variations in oversight and override mechanisms, and the production of strategic outcomes through socio-technical interaction. Findings reveal that although all four firms maintain formal commitments to human accountability, the practical strength of human oversight varies considerably according to governance arrangements, workflow integration, assurance practices, and organisational scale. The study develops a Hybrid Human–AI Decision-Making (H2ADM) framework that distinguishes structural, operational, and symbolic authority and introduces the concept of an override threshold to explain when human intervention remains meaningful rather than procedural.

The paper advances emerging debates on responsible AI governance and sustainable digital transformation by showing that long-term organisational resilience depends not only on AI capability but also on preserving managerial discretion, critical judgement, and transparent accountability structures. The findings offer practical implications for organisations seeking to implement AI technologies while maintaining sustainable governance and effective strategic leadership.

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded in organisational decision-making, reshaping how firms analyse information, formulate strategy and respond to uncertainty. In strategic contexts, however, the issue is not only technical capability but authority. Once AI-generated recommendations enter strategic work, questions arise over how decision authority is organised, how responsibility is maintained and whether managers retain practical scope to question, modify or reject system output.

This problem is particularly significant in global technology consulting firms. IBM, Accenture, Deloitte and Capgemini advise clients on AI adoption and governance while operating within AI-supported environments. Their dual position makes the sector analytically important because they participate in AI-enabled transformation while shaping how responsible AI is presented to clients and

professional audiences. Strategic consulting work also raises questions of judgement and accountability because recommendations may affect client decisions, organisational reputation and professional responsibility.

Research commonly frames human–AI collaboration through complementarity or augmentation, with AI contributing computational capacity while humans retain contextual judgement and responsibility (Jarrahi, 2018; Shrestha, Ben-Menahem and von Krogh, 2019; Raisch and Krakowski, 2021). Digital transformation research likewise shows that technological change reshapes strategy, structures and work processes (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Yet the practical organisation of authority remains less clear. Managers may remain formally accountable while AI-supported systems shape which information becomes visible and which options appear credible. Human presence therefore does not itself establish meaningful control.

This study asks: How do human and AI actors interact to shape strategic decision-making frameworks in global technology consulting firms undergoing digital transformation?

An interpretivist, inductive qualitative multiple-case study examines IBM, Accenture, Deloitte and Capgemini using empirical documentary corpus published between 2018 and 2024 and analysed thematically with NVivo support. Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) and Actor-Network Theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005) interpret authority as institutionally reproduced and socio-technically enacted.

Four themes emerge: specification of decision authority, recasting of managerial roles, variation in oversight and override arrangements, and strategic outcomes as socio-technical products. Although human accountability remains formally visible, its practical strength varies across governance arrangements. The study develops H2ADM, distinguishing structural, operational and symbolic authority, and introduces the override threshold for assessing when human intervention remains substantive rather than procedural.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews literature on AI in strategic decision-making and digital transformation and sets out the theoretical framing and research gap. Section 3 details the methodology, including case selection, documentary evidence and analytical procedure. Section 4 reports the findings across four cross-case themes. Section 5 discusses these findings, develops the H2ADM framework and considers cross-case and practical implications. Section 6 concludes and sets out limitations and directions for future research.

Literature review

AI in strategic decision-making

Research on AI in strategic decision-making has shifted from technical capability towards the organisation of human–AI decision processes. Early studies emphasised analytical scale, efficiency and competitive opportunity, positioning AI as a strategic capability rather than narrow automation (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2017; Davenport and Ronanki, 2018) but gave limited attention to authority when AI-supported analysis conflicts with professional judgement.

Later research frames human and artificial intelligence as complementary, with AI contributing computational capacity while humans retain contextual judgement under uncertainty (Jarrahi, 2018). AI can also alter organisational decision structures and decision rights (Shrestha, Ben-Menahem and von Krogh, 2019), while automation and augmentation may develop simultaneously (Raisch and Krakowski, 2021). These studies challenge replacement narratives but leave unresolved whether continued human involvement guarantees meaningful authority. Managers may remain formally accountable while AI-supported analysis shapes which information is prioritised, which options appear credible and which recommendations become difficult to resist. The unresolved issue is therefore the practical scope to question, modify or reject AI-supported recommendations.

Digital transformation and socio-technical change

Digital transformation reshapes strategy, organisational structures, processes and value creation rather than constituting technology adoption alone (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). As AI becomes

embedded in workflows, managers increasingly operate through system-generated classifications, forecasts and recommendations, so formal decision rights may remain unchanged while the practical conditions of judgement shift.

A socio-technical perspective treats AI-mediated decisions as outcomes of relations among managers, technical systems, data, workflows, governance procedures and organisational norms. Human presence does not establish whether intervention is practically possible; meaningful oversight also depends on access to relevant information, interpretive capability and recognised discretion to challenge system output. Authority may therefore shift without explicit transfer of formal decision rights. Recent research similarly shows that responsible AI governance depends on organisational practices translating principles into structures, relationships and procedures, while questions remain over accountability and implementation across the AI lifecycle (Papagiannidis, Mikalef and Conboy, 2025; Batool, Zowghi and Bano, 2025).

Theoretical framing

The study combines Structuration Theory and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) because AI-mediated authority involves institutional structure and socio-technical interaction. Structuration Theory explains how action is shaped and reproduced through rules and resources (Giddens, 1984). Its dimensions of signification, domination and legitimation are relevant because AI outputs can shape what appears persuasive, access to data and infrastructure can affect practical influence, and organisational rules can legitimise or restrict review and override.

ANT directs attention to relations among heterogeneous human and non-human actors, including managers, algorithms, datasets, interfaces, workflows and governance procedures (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). AI systems need not possess formal decision rights to influence outcomes; their effects arise through their positions within organisational arrangements. The theories are complementary but distinct: Structuration Theory explains institutional order and the reproduction of authority but gives less attention to technological artefacts, while ANT makes socio-technical relations visible but can understate persistent asymmetries of hierarchy and power (Whittle and Spicer, 2008). Combining them enables authority to be examined as both institutionally reproduced and socio-technically enacted.

Research gap

Three interconnected gaps remain in current research. Technology consulting firms are underexamined as settings of AI-mediated strategic authority despite their dual position as users and advisers; research on augmentation does not adequately distinguish formal human participation from practically exercisable authority; and structural and socio-technical explanations are rarely combined to examine how authority develops through organisational rules and relations among people, systems and workflows. This study addresses these gaps across four global technology consulting firms, focusing on how decision authority is structured, enacted and sustained as AI becomes embedded in strategic work.

Research methodology

Research design and case selection

The study adopts an interpretivist, inductive qualitative design to examine how human-AI interaction is represented within strategic decision-making frameworks. Interpretivism is appropriate because the research concerns how organisations frame responsibility, managerial judgement and legitimate oversight rather than measuring AI performance or behavioural outcomes directly (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Corporate strategy and governance documents are therefore treated as institutional texts through which firms represent and justify arrangements of authority.

A qualitative multiple-case design compares IBM, Accenture, Deloitte and Capgemini (Yin, 2018). The firms were selected purposively as information-rich global technology consulting cases involved in AI development or implementation and advisory work on AI-enabled transformation and governance. Their dual position as advisers and organisational users makes them relevant to AI-mediated decision authority. The empirical documentary corpus covers material published between 2018 and 2024.

Documentary evidence and screening

The study relies on secondary qualitative documentary data, including corporate strategy documents, AI governance and responsible AI publications, white papers, relevant annual and sustainability reports, and organisational material on digital transformation. Academic literature provided contextual and interpretive support.

Documents were identified through searches of firm websites, academic databases and governance sources using terms associated with AI, governance, responsible AI, strategic decision-making, digital transformation, human oversight and managerial decision-making. Of 143 documents initially identified, 57 were retained after screening for relevance, duplication, publication period and substantive fit: 13 IBM, 12 Accenture, 12 Deloitte, 11 Capgemini and nine cross-firm sources.

Documents were retained where they informed AI use, governance arrangements, managerial responsibility, human oversight or strategic framing; promotional, weakly connected or substantively irrelevant material was excluded. The corpus was analysed not as direct evidence of internal behaviour but as institutional texts showing how firms publicly represent and justify AI-supported recommendation, managerial judgement and oversight.

Data analysis

The corpus was analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), supported by NVivo. Analysis proceeded through six iterative phases. First, retained documents were read repeatedly and initial analytic memos recorded. Second, material was coded inductively without imposing Structuration Theory or ANT as predetermined categories, focusing on recurring representations of authority, accountability, review, oversight, override, managerial roles and AI integration. Third, related codes were compared across documents and cases and mapped into candidate themes. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed for internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness and evidential sufficiency, with overlapping categories merged or refined. Fifth, themes were defined and named according to the cross-case patterns they captured. Sixth, the four themes were reported and subsequently interpreted through the two theoretical lenses.

This sequence preserved the inductive character of the analysis. NVivo supported corpus management, code retrieval and cross-case comparison but did not determine theme formation; interpretive judgement remained central throughout.

Illustrative code clusters	Analytical focus	Final cross-case theme
Human sign-off; decision rights; accountability boundaries; approval	Location and specification of authority	Specification of decision authority
Interpretation; contextualisation; validation; changing managerial responsibility	Reorganisation of managerial work	Recasting of managerial roles
Review; challenge; escalation; override; explainability	Practical conditions of intervention	Variation in oversight and override arrangements
AI outputs; data; workflows; governance procedures; managerial action	Relational production of decisions	Strategic outcomes as socio-technical products

Table 1: Illustrative progression from inductive coding to cross-case themes

Trustworthiness, ethics and reflexivity

The study involved no human participants, primary data collection or sensitive personal information and relied on publicly available documentary material. Ethical responsibility nevertheless remained relevant to accurate representation, interpretation and academic integrity.

Trustworthiness was supported through systematic screening, documented coding, cross-source comparison and a clear separation of inductive findings from later theoretical interpretation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Corporate publications were recognised as institutionally endorsed accounts that may present governance arrangements coherently and favourably while giving less visibility to internal disagreement or uneven implementation. The study therefore does not claim to verify internal decision-making practice but examines how authority, accountability and human-AI interaction are publicly

represented and justified. Reflexivity was maintained by recognising researcher judgement in document selection, coding and interpretation (Patton, 2015).

Findings/results

The analysis produced four cross-case themes: specification of decision authority, recasting of managerial roles, variation in oversight and override arrangements, and strategic outcomes as socio-technical products. Developed inductively across the documentary corpus, the findings concern public representations of governance rather than direct observation of internal decision behaviour.

Specification of decision authority

Across all four cases, AI output is not presented as self-authorising; human approval, review or accountability remains formally visible, but its basis differs. Deloitte provides the clearest procedural account through explainability, assurance and sign-off, while IBM makes oversight visible through governance tooling, monitoring and workflow control. Accenture relies more on responsible AI principles embedded within integrated workflows, whereas Capgemini gives stronger visibility to senior responsibility than distributed operational oversight (Accenture, 2019; Accenture, 2020; Capgemini Research Institute, 2020a; Capgemini Research Institute, 2020b; Capgemini Research Institute, 2021; Deloitte, 2018; Deloitte, 2020; IBM Institute for Business Value, 2019; IBM Institute for Business Value, 2023). The common pattern across all four firms is formal human accountability, paired with differing visible support for review and challenge.

Recasting of managerial roles

Managers are represented less as sole producers of strategic analysis and more as interpreters, contextualisers, validators and governors of AI-supported output. Across the cases, the dominant pattern is role adjustment rather than displacement, although its organisational basis differs. Managerial authority increasingly depends on the capacity to interpret AI-supported analysis, assess its relevance and defend alternative judgement where necessary.

Variation in oversight and override arrangements

Oversight differs substantially in formalisation and visibility. Deloitte emphasises explainability, assurance, review and sign-off; IBM monitoring tools and workflow controls; Accenture responsible AI principles within integrated workflows; and Capgemini the challenge of maintaining oversight across organisational scale. Human override cannot, therefore, be inferred from human presence alone. Its practical significance depends on whether challenge is supported, routine and organisationally legitimate. Where review is connected to visible procedures or governance infrastructure, intervention is more clearly recognised; where governance is expressed mainly through broad principles or senior accountability, the operational basis for challenge is less visible.

Strategic outcomes as socio-technical products

Across the cases, strategic outcomes are represented as emerging through interaction among managers, AI systems, data, workflows and governance arrangements rather than belonging wholly to humans or machines. AI systems can shape outcomes without formal decision rights because recommendations acquire influence through their position within organisational workflows, while managerial authority depends on practical capacity to interpret, question and act on judgement. Strategic outcomes are therefore socio-technically produced.

Discussions and conclusions

The findings show that AI changes the conditions under which managerial judgement is exercised rather than simply replacing human decision-makers. Across the cases, human accountability remains formally visible, but its practical strength varies with governance tools, workflow design, assurance practices and organisational scale. Human presence therefore does not establish meaningful authority where managers lack credible scope to question, modify or reject AI-supported recommendations.

Theoretical interpretation

Structuration Theory explains how AI-mediated authority is reproduced through signification, domination and legitimation (Giddens, 1984). AI outputs contribute to signification when forecasts, classifications and recommendations shape what appears analytically relevant or strategically persuasive. Domination arises where access to AI infrastructure, model outputs, permissions and interpretive resources affects who can influence or challenge decisions. Legitimation operates through explainability requirements, review procedures, approval pathways and escalation arrangements that define acceptable managerial intervention.

The cases show that formal hierarchy alone does not determine practical authority. Oversight is represented through different configurations of governance tooling, assurance procedures, integrated workflows and responses to enterprise scale. Structuration Theory therefore explains how authority is sustained or weakened through repeated organisational practices rather than formal accountability alone (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 1992).

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) extends this interpretation by showing how strategic outcomes are produced through relations among managers, AI systems, data, documents, workflows and governance procedures (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). AI systems need not possess formal decision rights to shape outcomes; they acquire influence by structuring visibility, ranking options, producing recommendations or becoming embedded in routine workflows.

Together, the theories show that AI-mediated authority is both institutionally reproduced and socio-technically assembled. Structuration Theory explains the rules, resources and legitimacy through which authority is stabilised; ANT explains how authority becomes workable through relations among human and non-human actors. Formal human accountability and practical managerial authority are therefore not necessarily equivalent. Governance mechanisms are also not functionally interchangeable: technical monitoring can increase visibility without legitimising managerial challenge; procedural assurance can formalise review while increasing organisational demands; workflow integration can preserve professional judgement while making AI influence less discrete; and senior accountability can remain visible despite uneven operational capacity to intervene. Cross-case variation therefore reflects different ways of converting formal responsibility into, or failing to convert it into, practically exercisable authority.

The H2ADM framework and override threshold

The Hybrid Human-AI Decision-Making (H2ADM) framework is the study's principal conceptual contribution. It distinguishes structural authority, concerning formal decision rights, review obligations and human sign-off; operational authority, concerning managers' practical capacity to interpret, question, modify or reject AI-supported recommendations; and symbolic authority, where visible human oversight has limited practical effect. H2ADM also introduces the override threshold: the point at which human intervention remains credible, defensible and workable rather than merely permitted in theory. The framework therefore shifts attention from whether humans remain involved to whether the conditions for substantive intervention are preserved.

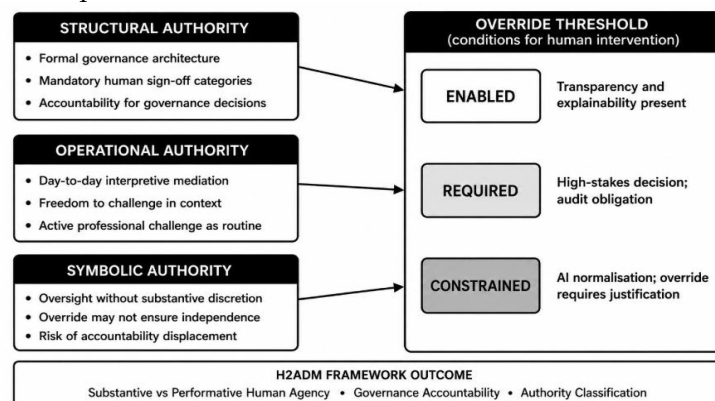


Figure 1: H2ADM framework showing structural, operational and symbolic authority, with override as a practical threshold

Cross-case discussion and practical implications

The cross-case comparison shows a common commitment to human accountability but different organisational routes for sustaining it. These differences reflect the interaction of governance formalisation, professional heritage, workflow integration and organisational scale rather than simple variation in commitment to responsible AI. IBM's tooling-centred configuration embeds governance within technical infrastructure and monitored workflows; Deloitte's assurance-oriented model makes accountability visible through review, documentation and sign-off; Accenture places greater weight on professional judgement within integrated AI-enabled workflows; and Capgemini illustrates coordination difficulty where enterprise-wide AI expansion is not matched by equally visible distributed oversight. Authority is therefore institutionalised through different combinations of technical control, professional procedure, workflow design and organisational scale.

The firms consequently do not occupy stronger or weaker positions on a single governance scale; they rely on different mechanisms for making human authority workable. Recent research similarly emphasises structural, relational and procedural governance practices and connecting accountability with implementable mechanisms (Papagiannidis, Mikalef and Conboy, 2025; Batool, Zowghi and Bano, 2025). Responsible AI governance should therefore protect meaningful challenge by specifying where review is required, ensuring access to relevant outputs and making escalation and override workable. Strong senior accountability may otherwise coexist with weaker operational capacity to challenge embedded systems.

Conclusion

This study shows that strategic decision-making in global technology consulting firms is shaped through interaction among managerial judgement, AI-generated recommendations, governance arrangements and organisational routines.

It contributes empirically by examining IBM, Accenture, Deloitte and Capgemini, theoretically by combining Structuration Theory and ANT, and conceptually by developing H2ADM and the override threshold.

The central conclusion is that responsible AI governance depends not simply on keeping humans involved, but on preserving the practical conditions that allow managers to question AI outputs and defend alternative judgements.

Limitations and direction for future research

This study has limitations arising from its documentary design and case boundaries. First, the analysis relies on publicly available secondary sources. This enabled comparison across IBM, Accenture, Deloitte and Capgemini but does not provide direct access to how managers experience AI-supported strategic decisions in practice. Corporate governance reports, responsible AI frameworks and strategy publications are also curated institutional texts. They indicate how firms articulate and legitimise governance arrangements but cannot establish whether those arrangements are enacted consistently across internal decision settings. The findings should therefore be read as an interpretation of documented governance structures and publicly visible organisational positions rather than direct observation of managerial practice.

Future research could examine this distinction through interviews with managers, consultants, AI specialists and governance professionals. Process-based case studies could also follow specific strategic decisions over time to identify when AI-supported recommendations become influential, how disagreement is handled and whether formal rights of intervention remain practically exercisable.

Second, the study focuses on four global technology consulting firms. Their dual position as organisational users of AI and advisers on AI-enabled transformation makes them analytically valuable, but their scale, technical expertise and professional-service setting limit transferability to other organisational contexts. Comparative research across sectors such as financial services, healthcare, manufacturing and public administration could examine whether different regulatory demands and professional norms alter the relationship between formal accountability and practical authority. Smaller organisations may also reveal how resource constraints affect oversight and challenge capacity.

Third, the 2018–2024 timeframe captures a period of rapid development in AI adoption and governance, but organisational arrangements continue to evolve. Longitudinal research could examine whether deeper integration of generative and increasingly autonomous AI systems changes managerial discretion, particularly where AI-supported analysis becomes embedded in routine workflow.

Finally, H2ADM and the override threshold require further empirical examination. Future studies could investigate how structural, operational and symbolic authority appear across different organisational settings and whether movement between these forms can be identified over time. The override threshold could be examined through the conditions identified in this study, including access to information, interpretive capability, recognised discretion, procedural support and organisational legitimacy. Such work would test whether the distinction between formal human involvement and substantively exercisable authority extends beyond global technology consulting firms.

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