

# Document Digitization for Reducing Paper Consumption in Small Family Businesses

By Florina Atanase (Murar)<sup>1</sup>, Mihaela Gologan<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT:

The growing importance of sustainability has influenced the country's legislators to establish new environmental rules. Romania started this lane by supervising the recycling, yet with limited interest in reducing consumption. Without having any external constraints, several small businesses, especially family businesses, understand the need to contribute to environment maintenance from a competitiveness point of view. The research completed and published until 2025 are concentrating on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) general impact on business. Despite the low volume contribution of small businesses to global paper consumption, they are no less important. This paper initiates the analysis of factors contributing to a family business's decision to start document digitisation and the obstacles they face during the process. The data acquired from directors' interviews establish the ground for future empirical studies that could confirm the elements contributing to organisational readiness to change. The findings can be replicated in similar family businesses to achieve economic and environmental objectives.

*Keywords: documents digitization, family business, paper consumption, small business, organizational readiness for change, ORC*

## 1. Introduction

Despite the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) environment, governments and society continue to be concerned about sustainability. The yearly report on The Sustainable Development Goals Report, including 2024, shows the engagement towards 2030 goals still exists, having higher priority in the countries with better economic development compared to the ones less developed (Bose & Khan, 2022).

In the European Union (EU) profile, Romania is considered a developed country. She (Romania) declared its priority regarding SDG goals to be: 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and 12 (responsible consumption and production). Regarding goal 12, Romania made substantial steps linked to the public sector (Puiu, 2024) but with inconsistent progress. The adopted local legislation is concentrated on recycling and waste reporting and on reduction of worthless consumption according to the normative projects developed by the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forest. Scanning the activity done by the Ministry of Investments and European Projects (MIPE) was found no programme dedicated to digitalization or sustainability for small and medium businesses was planned for 2014-

<sup>1</sup> Florina Atanase (Murar): Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Mihaela Gologan: Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

2027. Fortunately, the Authority for Romanian Digitalization (ADR) is now implementing a programme to increase digital competencies for small and medium businesses.

With reference to the private sector, at EU level the European Family Businesses, the EU federation of national associations, estimates existing 65%-80% family businesses. Lacking clear information about the percentage in Romania across industries, taking into consideration just the estimation of 90% of farming businesses being family business, we can approximate a similar percentage also in Romania.

For goal 12 SDG, the axis we researched in this paper is paper consumption. As reported by Statista, between 2013 and 2023 was registered world wide a stagnation in paper consumption. Considering the number of family businesses existing in Romania and the average consumption of paper, a detailed analysis on how family business can contribute to paper consumption is relevant. This study investigates how document digitization can be adopted by small family businesses for them to be able to contribute to paper consumption reduction.

The main questions that we address during the study are:

*Q1. What were the elements that influenced small family businesses to transform documents into digital forms?*

*Q2. What are the elements that stop small family businesses from transforming documents into digital forms?*

## 2. Theoretical Background

Digital transformation is at full speed, and the transformation of documents into digital format represents a concern for small family businesses. The precursor of digitalization, the digitization, improves business performance (Gutiérrez Navas et al. 2024). Nowadays, for many organisations, it represents normality, but for others, it is a desiderate in order for them to increase operational efficiency and secondly to protect the environment or just to respect the legislative requirements.

The digital process of converting physical documents into electronic formats, digitization, is done using various technologies, such as document management software or cloud storage solutions (Fitzgerald, 2019) or just by using scanning techniques (Catarino & Lopes, 2019). Some companies use these digital processes to achieve their objective on sustainability and general management efficiency. (Chin, 2020).

Sustainability has three main targets: economic performance, minimizing negative environmental impacts and improving social conditions; for all of them dedicated best practices are necessary to be implemented (Smith & James, 2021). In the context of digitalization, this means reducing paper consumption and the volume of resources required for document management.

The main benefit of transitioning to digital documents lies in the positive effect on sustainability coming from small family businesses. Reducing paper consumption has a direct contribution to conserving natural resources and protecting the environment. Recent studies show that small firms that adopt digital solutions have an important role in achieving sustainability goals by reducing carbon emissions and other nocive substances (Shah, Amjed & Alkathiri, 2019)

Furthermore, document digitization brings other advantages to small family businesses, such as: it eliminates the need to print and physically store documents, it generates cost reduction, and it saves physical space in offices (Fitzgerald, 2019). Something else that is appreciated by all employees, the digital documents can be accessed instantly and from anywhere. This facilitates daily work and it increases efficiency (Jones et al., 2019). The use of digital documents contributes to environmental protection by significantly reducing paper consumption and resource requirements (Lee et al., 2022). These benefits are also sustained by other research in the field, which observed cost savings and improvements in internal efficiency of small businesses who adopted digital solutions (Bunn & Singh, 2022).

Small family businesses face many obstacles in implementing digital processes, although it offers numerous advantages. The first barrier that they encounter is the initial investment for appropriate equipment and software, which usually small businesses can not afford. (Wang & Li, 2018). Secondly, is the lack of entrepreneurs' and employees' digital skills. (Jovanovic et al., 2020). In addition, resistance to change can block the adoption of new technologies; employees and managers can refuse to adapt and give time for learning (Harrison et al., 2020). To prevent or combat the resistance to change some tools are available for all companies no matter their dimension like mentoring, supporting behaviour, continuous learning, transparent communication (Valtonen & Holopainen, 2025)

Additionally, family businesses have specific characteristics regarding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) compared to non-family businesses. They prioritize legitimacy and reputation, especially as they mature, applying more "explicit" CSR reporting, such as dedicated website sections to enhance visibility for the community. It is likely to engage on environmental issues, driven by family members' altruism. Simultaneously, they disclose less information to employees (Campopiano & de Massis, 2015) regarding their intention being afraid to lose company control.

Many companies (Shah, Amjed & Alkathiri, 2019) are missing document printing policies. People do not just lack technological skills, but also clear responsibilities of paper consumption: email printing, paper printed and forgotten at the printer, paper used some hours and thrown at the garbage dispenser.

Organisations, including small family businesses, adopt new policies when they are ready to change - "explicit" - or when the external environment, mainly legislation, imposes new regulations - "implicit" (Campopiano & de Massis, 2015). Having no legislation linked to paper consumption, it remains for businesses to choose documents digitization. Organizational readiness to change (ORC) involves "change commitment" (shared interest to implement change), "change efficacy" (shared belief in the organization's ability to implement change) (Weiner, 2009), physical resources, and work environment (Lehman, Greener & Simpson, 2002). And still it is not enough, small family business may desire to adopt digitization, but due to people overload it is often postponed.

The literature offers models for managing change adoption (Khan, Rehman, & Ghayas, 2022) that could be adapted to digital transformation. These models can be split into 4 categories in function of influencing factors external, internal, technology, and others exceed not covered by the previous the three categories. In the context of this research, we refer mainly to the ones based on internal factors. The simplest one is Lewis's

unfreeze-change-freeze model, which suggests that people will adopt easier the new working method if they understand the negative consequences of not accepting it. The most known method is the 8 steps of Kotter, which is seeing the change as a process with dedicated steps: (1) establish a sense of urgency, (2) build a coalition, (3) create a vision, (4) communicate the vision, (5) empower others to act, (6) celebrate quick wins, (7) consolidate the change, (8) institutionalize new approaches (Khan, Rehman, & Ghayas, 2022). The balanced model for change is: (1) awareness, (2) desire, (3) knowledge, (4) ability, reinforcement (ADKAR) model was designed by Jeff Hiatt (2006) emphasizing the role of people in adopting change.

In the majority of change methodologies based on internal factors, the first step is the evaluation. This means to identify if a small family business is ready for document digitization. The scope of the check is to diagnose if the employees are ready to adopt the change (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder 1993). In our research, we extend beyond employees and analyse the readiness of family members in adopting document transformation.

Traditional agency theory suggests family firms would avoid high-risk financial decisions that will influence the willingness to adopt digital documents work, but socioemotional wealth theory argues otherwise. Small family business decision is influenced by their need to preserve their wealth. They are predisposed to risk when the action ensures the family protection, even if those choices could decrease the firm performance. (Gómez-Mejía, et al., 2007).

In family firms is more like to appear conflicts between members due to generation difference or openness to embraces change, supplemented by the conflicts between family members and non-family members, (Caputo, et al, 2018), This can harm daily work, company performance and can generate a toxic work environment. (Abul-Ela Mohamed Salem & Hashem, 2023). Solutions are already available if the members agree to a decision process in difficult situation like forum and family decision meetings (Alderson, K. 2015). Being so sensible to conflict, analysing the readiness to change in document digitisation is essential before starting. Different approaches are available to prevent a collision. One is analyzing family members' experience, their perceived value, and the entire organization's support for adopt new technologies (Hwang & Seo, 2024). Desplaces (2004) recommends to evaluate the employee's readiness to change by analysing 3 elements: cognitive, affective, and behavioural intentions. Special attention is necessary to identify biases such as subjective perceptions of individuals linked to technology changes in general. Another alternative is the holistic approach, which goes beyond simply assessing attitudes or resources. This requires to analysis the link between work settings, individual behaviour, and organizational outcomes. (Robertson, Roberts & Porras 1993).

While existing research highlights the general participation of small business families in SDG and CSR adoption, and other suggests what are the steps needed for change adoption, none match both. This study invests in analyzing this gap by bidding paper consumption, which can be considerably diminish environmental impact (Lee et al., 2022) to small family business decisions to manage documents digitally.

### 3. Methods

This research explores the process of digitization of documents in small family businesses, analyzing the drivers, challenges, benefits, and impact on economic activity. The study is motivated by society's need to protect the environment from unnecessary consumption, including paper.

The research is in the pre-test phase. The scope of the pre-test phase is to understand the current trend on paper consumption that will allow an enlarged analysis. The main method used to collect the data is a qualitative method, a structured questionnaire with open-ended questions (written interview). The open-ended questions are used to discover the perceptions and experiences of entrepreneurs regarding digitization. They have the freedom to express ideas, feelings, and concerns about document digitisation.

The research intends to answer the next specific questions regarding family small business, by detailing the ones indicated in the introduction chapter:

1. What are the perceived benefits of document digitization?
2. What are the main challenges in document management?
3. What are the factors that influence the readiness for document digitization?
4. What is the financial impact and other resources necessary to start document digitization?

Considering the previous paper published on related papers, following hypotheses are raised:

1. If small family businesses have already experienced technological changes in the past, they are more likely to adopt document digitalisation.
2. Employee resistance to adopt document digitization is higher in the small family business where family members do not communicate beforehand with employees which are non-family members.

The questionnaire was applied to family members that have a management or administrative role in the firm. These people have the legal authority to decide the future of the company, including investment in document digitalisation.

Deriving from the research questions next variables are identified:

1. Independent variables: family members' attitude towards digitalization, precedent adoption of new technologies, financial resources, and other types of resources (by example, digital competences, time to invest in digitization project)
2. Dependent variables: the resistance to change, the readiness to adopt digitization, the quantity of paper saved due to digitization.

The research sample consists of 6 respondents, entrepreneurs and managers of small family businesses from various industries, including dentistry, horeca, legal services, and installation of photovoltaic systems. The limited numbers of analysed family firms is linked to their modest acknowledge of the advances in research participation, and due to their full engagement in their business generating low involvement in out of job activities.

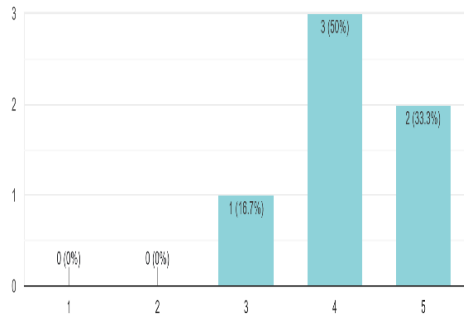
The results on this papers recommends extending to a large number of responders in order to ensure generalisation. All surveyed companies have less than 50 employees and are at least 3 years old in business world. The responders were requested to indicate if they

had already started document digitization or if they had considered starting this process in the near future.

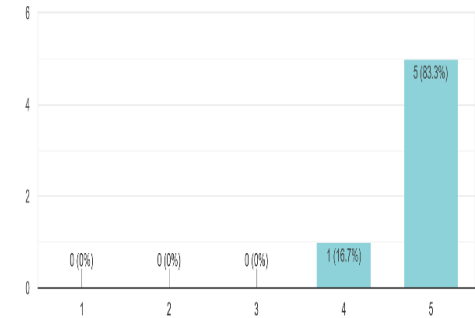
4. Results

The answers received during interview indicate a high interest in family businesses to digitize documents, 83% of respondents recognized the importance of this process. Comparing the answer on two similar questions it can be observed in Figure 1 and 2 that even they do not consider very important the document digitalization., they are very confident in the success of a future implementation

**Figure 1.** How important is it for your business to improve its document management practices? On a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)



**Figure 2.** How confident are you that your business could successfully implement a document digitization system? On a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)



Although the transition to the exclusive use of electronic documents is not complete, more than 67% of participants have already implemented digital solutions, while the rest are in the exploration phase. Certainly, part of the firms had already implemented digital tools, such as CRM (customer relationship management) applications or digital invoicing platforms. Meanwhile, others had no previous experience with digitalisation relying on traditional paper-based documents.

Responding to the question: What are the perceived benefits of document digitization? Multiple benefits were indicated. With a percentage of 92% the accessibility is the most valued, followed by operations activities efficiency (75%) and the compliance to regulation (mainly e-invoice) with an average appreciation of 58%. Other digitalization tools mentioned by respondents are: digital signature, cloud document management, CRM and ERP operation management. The companies that already started document digitization, registered an 80-85% reduction in paper consumption. But the others, which have not started yet, predicted that the digitalization will not reduce the paper consumption or the percentage is not relevant enough for them to take steps toward digitization. This contradiction reflects the difference between industries and the subjectivism or trust in digitization.

For the study question “What are the main challenges in document management?”, responders indicated the following concerns: cybersecurity, mentioned by

88% of them, technical risks (power outages, equipment incompatibilities or issues), and legal validity of electronic documents (42%) in case of litigation. The resistance to change and the lack of digital skills of employees are mentioned by 54% of the companies analyzed. Among the difficulties discussed by family business members are: the level of access to digital documents, missing temporary internet connection, and their capacity to arrange and keep track of a large document volume.

In addition, linked to the main research question, “What are the factors that influence the readiness for document digitization?” respondents noted that they spend a lot of time on document management activities and other administrative tasks. The estimated time spent for managing documents ranged from 30% to 60% of an employee's workday. This indicates the urgency to have a technological solution, in order to really streamline employees' time and reduce no-value activities. The available future time can be redirected to solve different client requests or complaints or even “just stay”. The cheering answer received is that most businesses are not troubled by the interference of digitization implementation with their current activities and projects.

Their focus is on critical documents such as contracts, reports, and work records. These findings underscore the need for a structured approach on digital transformation. Each industry could have his own specificities, this can generate different prioritise in document digitalisation. Having a small number of respondents from a diversity of industries a conclusion in this direction it is not possible. Future research could concentrate on identifying a matrix that includes: the industry, the priority of document digitalization and level of difficulty in implementing.

In relation to the question: What is the financial impact and other resources necessary to start document digitization? even if the importance of document digitalization was rated with 4 or 5 on a scale to 5, the responder explained the impact of resources in their decision to start digitization. In the list of missing resources, they mentioned digital leadership skills and employee training.

In the attempt to identify readiness to change by analyzing people's resistance to change, we identified that family members played a key role in supporting or postponing digitisation. This suggests that internal business dynamics significantly affect adoption decisions. While some respondents reported positive acceptance of digitalization, others indicated that discussions with employees have not yet taken place, suggesting the need for more proactive communication and training.

The results indicated that the perceived digitization benefits of small business firm it is influenced by factors such as information security, technological infrastructure, trust in digital work efficiency, and legislative regulations. In the long term, investments in digital technologies and employee education will facilitate document digitization.

## 5. Conclusion and further research

The small sample is the main limitation of the research. The results can not be generalised, but they can represent the start of a more detailed study. Another constraint is the subjectivity of the responder, not to disregard his capacity to manage a business in contemporary regulation. Thirdly, analysing industries with different needs of daily paper consumption it can influence the decision to start digitization.

The digitization of documents is a practical solution for small family businesses to reduce paper consumption and to actively contribute to worldwide sustainability goals. Even though the implementation process can be difficult due to the investment needed in time, money, skills training, the long-term benefits are beneficial to the entire community. In addition owners could consider the benefit of decreasing expenses and increased efficiency, public reputation by demonstrating a commitment to sustainability. This positive image can attract customers and partners who value ecologistics, obtaining a competitive advantage in the market.

A step-by-step strategy allows an easier and less disruptive transition to digital documents. It is important for small family businesses to start with the painful (or sensitive) documents and with higher volume documents such as daily reports. It is essential for all companies to identify and implement accessible and scalable digital solutions (technologies) that can adapt to their specific requirements and resources (Bakker & Steenberg, 2019). For example, cloud-based technologies can reduce direct costs and provide a high degree of flexibility for future business growth. Using cloud apps at no cost with limited storage space, is a first easy step that may encourage future increase usage of documents in digital formats. Other software's, example accounting applications, are offering trial version and payment by month in function of the usage level. This is a good practice recommended by family business owners. A collaborative approach, with business associations or partners, can facilitate the access to specialised training and resources. This will accelerate the shift to a digital work environment.

In conclusion, document digitalization shows that it represents an important strategic choice for small family businesses, bringing benefits both from an operational point of view and from the perspective of the positive impact on the company's environment and reputation. By adopting a phased digitalization implementation strategy and investing in continuous training and strong strategic partnerships, companies have the ability to successfully overcome initial challenges and fully exploit the transformative potential of corporate digitalization.

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