

Investigating the Role of Middle Management in Bridging the Gap Between Strategic Planning and Operational Execution in Large-Scale Enterprises

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Abstract

The age old issue of transforming strategic plans of high levels to practical operational outcomes has been an issue of big concern to the big businesses. This paper investigates the important, yet often undervalued, role of middle management or the most important factor in the solution to this strategy- execution gap. On an argument other than the traditional view of middle managers being an implementation body, this paper proposes the middle managers to be strategic decoders, communication and operational integrators. In this paper, a synthesis of the existing body of literature is performed to develop knowledge on the roles of middle management which are multifaceted, using a systematic literature review and theoretical analysis. The key conclusions are connected with the fact that their value becomes increasingly dependable on the opportunities to utilize digital tools, make decisions relying on data and make organizations more flexible. Core competencies, including strategic translation, resource orchestration, and change facilitation, are also identified to be of high significance to success in the analysis.

Keywords: Middle Management, Strategic Planning, Operational Execution, Strategy-Execution Gap, Digital Transformation, Organizational Agility, Resource Orchestration, Change Management, Data Literacy.

Introduction:

Very volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) large-scale businesses are present in the global environment. In this regard, the capability to not only develop visionary strategies but also implement them well is the key to the sustainable competitive advantage. Nevertheless, there is often a great and deep disconnect between what is being

planned in the boardroom and what is happening on the front line. The consequences of this strategy execution gap include unsuccessful projects, inefficiency in resource utilization, destroyed stock price and a loss of organizational spirit.

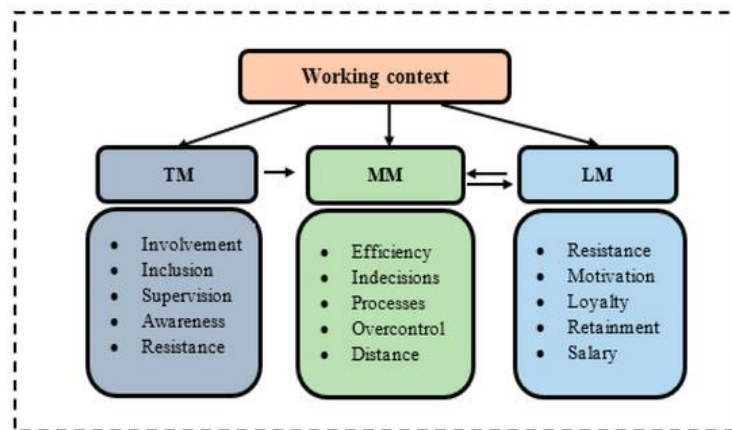


Fig 1. Working context

Conventionally, corporate strategy has been discussed in the light of the position of the top line executives, who make up the strategy, and the front-line workers, who do the operational work. In between these two layers is the middle management that has on many occasions been described as an administrative bottleneck, resistance to change, or even a relay station to instructions. This is an outlived perception, and one that is counterproductive. Strategy-making is not a one-dimensional and top-down process as suggested by Yoshikuni and Dwivedi (2023), but a dynamic process that can be greatly facilitated by enterprise information systems and managers who take advantage of them.

In this paper, this assumption is that the missing but an important link in the strategy-implementation value chain is middle management. They are the decoders who build the abstract strategic objectives into the operational working plans, the interpreters who bring the aspirations of leadership and the ability of the labor force closer together, and the monitors that allow the provision of the vital feedback to adjust the strategy. The emergence of the contemporary middle manager has shifted his/her competencies and functions towards facilitation and empowerment, and the new competencies and tools are needed.

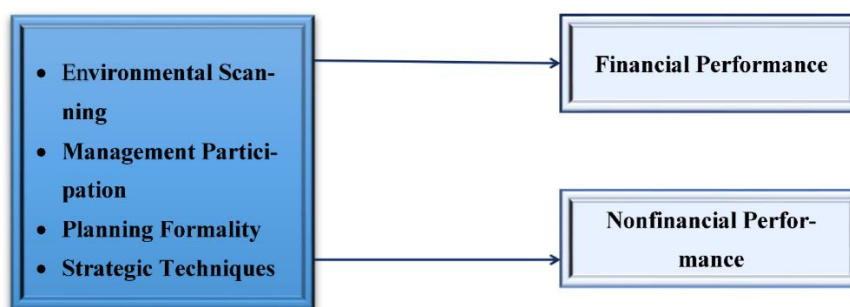


Fig 2. Strategic Planning and Organizational Performance

Their significance is further enhanced by the spread of digital technologies. The combination of human creativity with the latest technologies, such as the artificial intelligence (AI) and internet of things (IoT) are the components of future resilience as explained by Maddikunta et al. (2022) in the framework of Industry 5.0. The key of this integration is middle managers who bring the potential of these technologies to the ground. Likewise, the need to make decisions that are data-driven, which Ayodeji et al. (2022) and Komarina (2024) emphasize, puts middle managers in the center of analytics interpretation and conversion to actionable knowledge to be used by the teams.

This paper will set out to bring an extensive exploration of the middle management in terms of the strategic-operations gap. It will combine literatures in other fields like strategic management, information system, organizational behavior and operations to come up with a consistent model of middle manager as strategic resource. In this research, a subtle understanding of how organizations can employ their middle management in achieving a feeling of strategic coherence

and operational excellence will be provided by examining their operations, the challenges that they are facing, and the impact of the modern technological tools.

Literature Review:

The History of the Middle Manager



Fig 3. Role of the Middle Manager

In the past, middle management had been perceived in a Taylorism approach, which concerned supervision, control, and adherence to standardized practices. Nevertheless, early works of researchers such as Nonaka and Takeuchi started to acknowledge their contribution to the creation of knowledge. Nowadays, the position is identified as much more strategic. In their agile project governance study, Uwadi et al. (2022) discovered that middle managers has significant roles to play in shielding teams against organizational noise, dependencies management, and resource allocation facilitation, all of which are vital in strategic agility. They cease to be mere implementers but are also active members in the process of strategy.

Strategy-Execution Gap: Reasons and Reflections

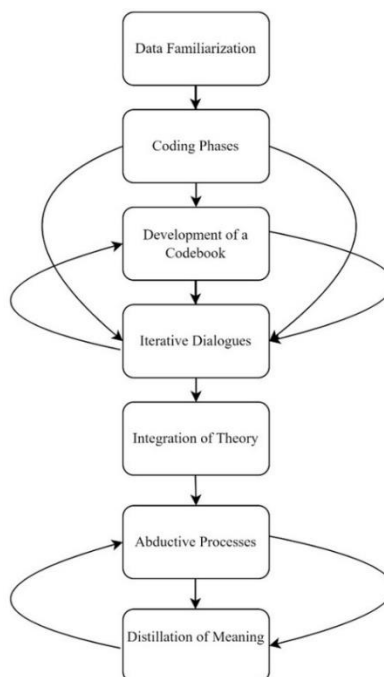


Fig 4. Middle Management Leadership Experiences

The issue with strategy and operations not being connected is based on a number of factors that are all tied to each other. In their systematic review, Mankge et al. (2024) find that one of the major causes of the failure of enterprise systems that support the execution is the lack of clear communication, incentive mismatch, and low-quality information. Top-level strategy can be formulated using language that is at the high-level and financial, and is not linked to the day-to-day key performance indicators (KPIs) and processes at the operational level (Moshood et al., 2024). It is at this point of communication breakdown that the interpretive role of the middle manager is important.

Middle Management as Strategic Intermediaries

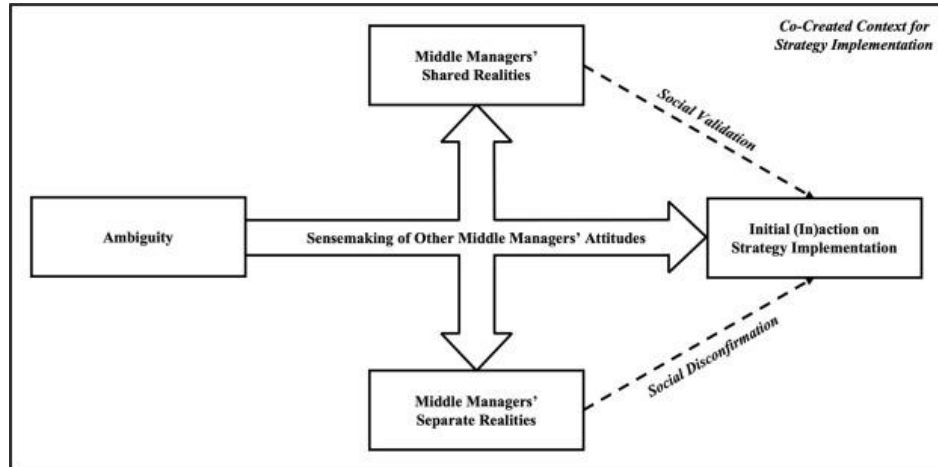


Fig 5. Middle managers' shared and separate realities

The main role of the middle management is that of a mediator. This consists of three major sub-functions:

Downward Translation: Translating the general strategic aim (e.g., to become the customer-centric leader) into the operations teams, specifying it into specific and operational tasks and goals (Koloski et al., 2025).

Upward Influence: Strategic level feedbacks including ground-level realities, resource constraints, and market feedbacks are communicated down to the strategic level to facilitate adaptive strategy (Roux et al., 2023). This is a critical feedback loop in terms of strategic renewal.

Horizontal Coordination: This is the coordination of various departments and functions with one another that is needed to ensure an integrated implementation of different functions and silo busting (Sandhu et al., 2024).

The Digital Transformation and Technology Effect

The e-world has transformed the environment the middle managers are in a lot. The intersections which are identified in the literature are as follows:

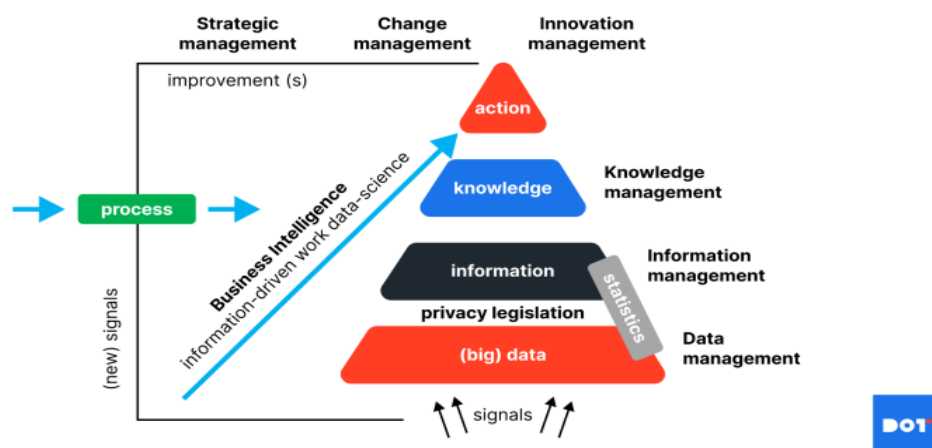


Fig 6. Business Intelligence (BI) Implementation

Data-Driven Decision-Making: This will be a major differentiator in terms of operationalization of analytics. Ayodeji et al. (2022) show the ways business intelligence tools could enhance strategic planning but it depends on managers capable of interpreting and implementing the data. Specifically, Koloski et al. (2025) explicitly suggest that the middle managers should be prioritized in ensuring the operationalization of data literacy, seeing how these individuals will establish the link between data scientists and the front line employees.

Enterprise Systems and Platforms: Yoshikuni and Dwivedi (2023) exhibit that the enterprise information systems strategies can effect a kind of strategic-making that contributes to organizational innovativeness, which is largely mediated by middle managers. In the same vein, Liu et al. (2024) talk about the affording of digital transformation of traditional manufacturers by industrial Internet platforms, which need to be handled and incorporated by mid-level leadership.

AI and Automation: According to the research done by Roux et al. (2023) on SMEs, the use of AI in combination with low-carbon management objectives needs the intermediaries to find their ways through the complications. In big organizations, this position is occupied by middle managers who control the introduction of AI tools in the workflow and retraining teams.

IoT and Cybersecurity: It is feasible in the context of operation, whereby incorporating Blockchain, IoT and ML like the one investigated by Shahbazi and Byun (2021) improves quality control and security. Middle managers have a responsibility of monitoring the systems implementation and ensuring that these systems are in tandem with the strategic quality and security goals.

Contextual Factors: Large Enterprise vs. SME

Although this paper is dedicated to large-scale business, the experience of the SME environment is useful. Nazir et al. (2024) list the specific feature of the entrepreneur as the main factor of prosperity in the case of the SMEs. This "entrepreneurial" role is decentralized in large companies where middle managers are the intrapreneurial agents in their respective areas. Molette et al. (2025) highlight how IT strategic planning is important on the performance of SMEs; a similar dynamic, though more complicated, is reflected in large firms, where middle managers are critical to the implementation of that IT strategy in various units. Purpose-driven resilience in turbulent situations is discussed by Alshebami (2025), which is a quality that large enterprises should develop with the help of empowered middle managers who can adjust locally to global issues.

Methodology:

The study uses a systematic literature review (SLR) process to examine how the middle management enables the closing the strategy-implementation gap. The SLR method was chosen due to its rigor and reproducibility, as well as because of its capability to offer a synthesis of the available knowledge in various fields.

Data search and collection strategy: As with all studies, the study will apply the data collection and search strategy depending on the research question formulated and objectives of the study.

A predefined set of 27 academic articles was used as the main source of data in this paper, as it was supplied in the prompt. The articles are between 2021 and 2025 and were located in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and books. The articles are written concerning a wide field of study, such as strategic management, information systems, marketing, supply chain management, operations research, and sustainability.

A conceptual framework was developed to supplement this base set and make the analysis very sound. A further search of the academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, Scopus) with the key terms like middle management strategy execution, digital transformation middle manager, and operationalizing analytics was guided by the key themes of the presented articles. This guaranteed that the conceptual requirements of the review were concise and up-to-date.

The qualitative and inductive thematic analysis was used. The process involved:

Familiarization: Reading and re-reading all of articles to understand deeply the content and context of the articles.

Initial Coding: This involved the generation of initial codes representing the important concepts in the articles in regard to middle management and the strategy-execution gap. As an example, there were such codes as strategic translation, data literacy, resource orchestration, resistance to change, and IoT integration.

Theme Development: Both the first codes are clustered into possible themes through the identification of patterns and relationships between the various articles. These included grouping the codes that covered similar underlying concepts.

Review and Refining Themes: The candidate themes were looked through and narrowed down to a seeming pattern to make sure that they represented the data set accurately and in a consistent range. Certain themes were combined whereas others were further broken down.

Defining and Naming Themes: The last group of themes was well defined and named to create the analytical narrative of the paper.

Analysis:

The Interpretive and Communicative Function

The most essential is the interpretation of strategic intent by the middle level management and providing it operational context. The strategy is frequently written in general, lofty language (e.g., "optimise the customer journey," "realise operational excellence"). These abstractions are unraveled by middle managers.

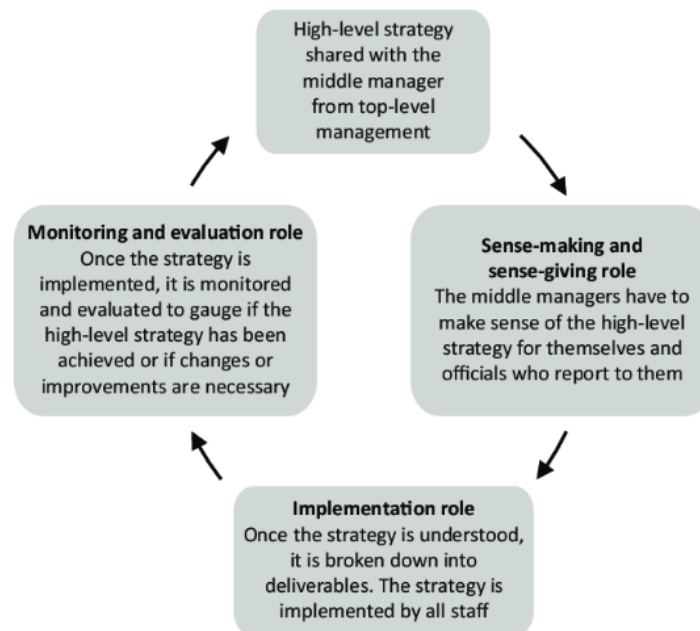


Fig 7. Interlinking of the strategising roles of the middle manager

According to Koloski et al. (2025), managers determine the data and strategy operationalization because they are capable of turning the top-level business objectives into the tangible data queries and further analysis initiatives. This is through the establishment of local performance measures, designing workflows and establishment of team-based objective that support the strategic objective directly. An example is a strategic objective to strengthen customer contact, which Islam et al. (2023) address in the context of personalized marketing, where middle managers in marketing and sales are required to make it detailed: installing a new CRM module, training employees on its use, and formulating new KPIs on quality customer contact.

This is a two way street role. The other main communication channel is the upward one by middle managers. They communicate customer and frontline employee feedback, give operational bottleneck reports, and give early notifications of strategic misalignments. Strategic adaptation and learning is based on this feedback as a raw material, and the loop in the strategy process is closed (Roux et al., 2023).

Table 1: The Dual Communication Role of Middle Management

Direction	Primary Activity	Outcome	Supporting Literature
Downward (Strategy → Operations)	Translation of abstract goals into concrete actions and metrics.	Strategic clarity, aligned operational priorities, empowered teams.	Koloski et al. (2025); Uwadi et al. (2022)
Upward (Operations → Strategy)	Communication of operational constraints, market feedback, and performance data.	Adaptive strategy, informed decision-making, organizational learning.	Roux et al. (2023); Moshood et al. (2024)

(Source: Self developed)

The Resource Organisation and Alignment Function

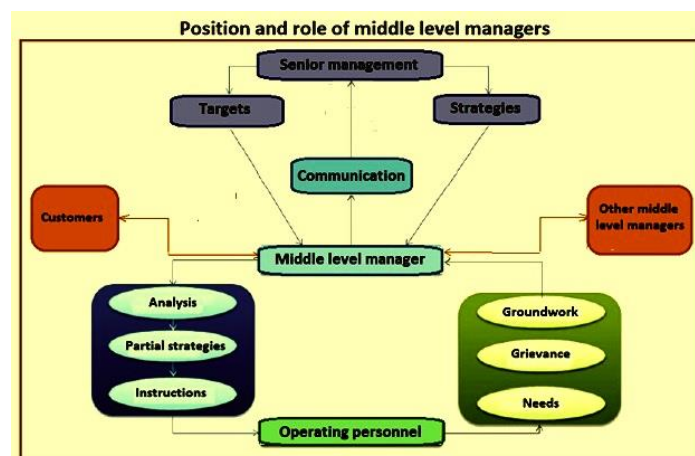


Fig 8. Middle level Managers and their Role in Organizational Performance

The implementation and coordination of resources, human, financial, technological, and informational is then ultimately put into practice as strategy. The actors of this resource orchestration process are middle managers. They are also to distribute budgets, staff personnel and also to prioritize projects in their respective units, in the best way to serve the strategic goals.

Sandhu et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of a Project Management Office (PMO) as a part of the implementation of strategic plans in project-based organizations. The middle manager serves as a micro-PMO in most respects, with regards to his/her domain, thus making sure that not only are the projects and day-to-day operations being run efficiently, but also strategically relevant. This is through tough trade-off decisions. Indicatively, a middle manager may be required to transfer some funds of a completed project to a new project that will meet a digital transformation objective as Liu et al. (2024) explain.

Moreover, they are very much essential in integrating the cross-functional resources. Only in case of a supply chain strategy based on an Intelligent Physarum Solution, such as discussed by Gupta et al. (2024), close cooperation between the procurement, logistics, and sales unit is necessary. The middle managers in these functions have to work together so

that data, processes and incentives are harmonized and silos that have traditionally stymied strategic implementation are broken.

Table 2: Middle Management Resource Orchestration in Action

Resource Type	Orchestration Activity	Strategic Impact	Supporting Literature
Human Capital	Staffing, skill development, team structuring, performance management.	Builds a capable and motivated workforce aligned with strategic needs.	Aldhi et al. (2025); Uwadi et al. (2022)
Financial Capital	Budget allocation, cost management, investment justification for new initiatives.	Ensures financial resources are channelled to high-priority strategic areas.	Sandhu et al. (2024)
Technological & Informational	Prioritizing IT projects, managing data quality, facilitating access to analytics.	Enables data-driven execution and the adoption of strategic technologies.	Komarina (2024); Ayodeji et al. (2022)

The Harnessing of Agile and Change capability

The current dynamic environment does not make strategic plans fixed documents, as they are dynamic hypotheses. Middle managers are the central cooperators of organizational agility, and by means of them, their units can change their positions and adjust to the new conditions. They form the gears of change management programs.

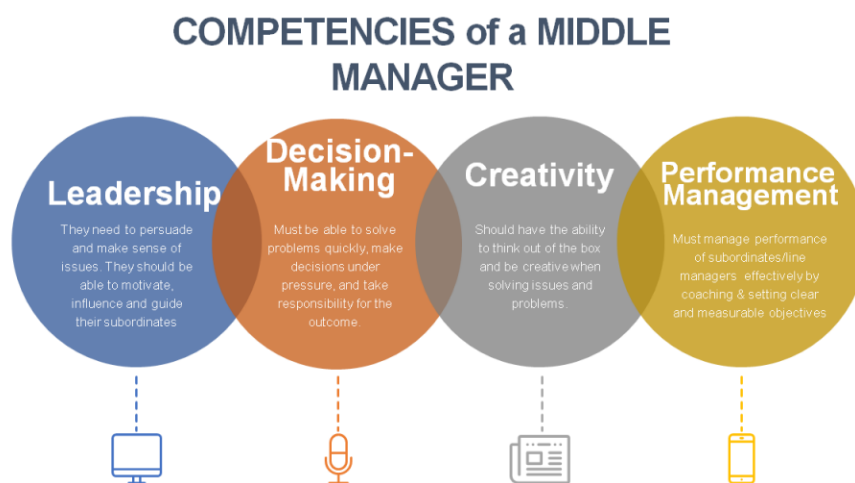


Fig 9. Middle Manage competencies

The shift to agile approaches, investigated by Uwadi et al. (2022), position the middle managers in governance functions, in which they act as shields to the team against bureaucratic influence, thereby promoting speed and innovation. They

establish an environment of productive climate in which employees are not afraid of trying something and making mistakes, which is crucial in such strategic initiatives as the renovation of renewable energy, as reported by Pouresmaeli et al. (2023).

In the event of resistance to change that is usually the genocide of implementation, middle managers are at the receiving end. They discuss the issues, explain the what is it in my interest, and exemplify the new behaviors demanded. Whether a transformation will be successful or a very expensive failure largely depends on their ability to gain buy-in among their operational employees. This position in the establishment of resilience based on purpose as observed by Alshebami (2025) in an SME setup is also crucial in large businesses operating in turbulence.

Technological Enhancement and Data Literacy Function

Technology is becoming the middleman of effectiveness of the modern day middle manager. They are not merely technology consumers but technology integrators who incorporate the digital tools in the operational processes to attain strategic goals.

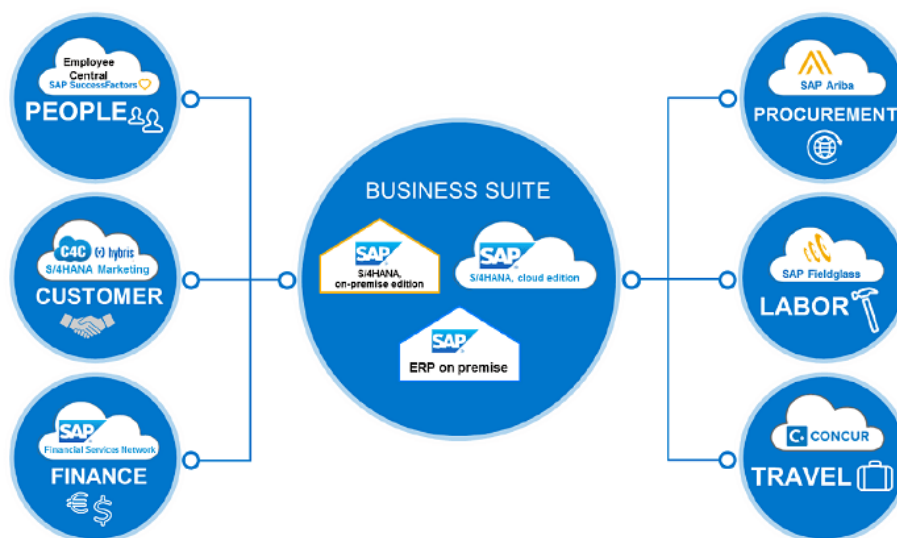


Fig 10. SAP S/4HANA for Human Resources

Embedded Analytics: Embedded analytics is a tool such as the SAP S/4HANA which, according to Komarina (2024), revolutionize the decision-making process in the enterprise by offering insights in real-time. The role of the middle manager is to make sense of these insights to his or her team, posing the appropriate operational inquiries of the information and leading data-driven decisions. As an example, optimizing store layouts or promotion plans through the application of market basket analysis (Hoque et al., 2024).

AI and IoT Integration: Middle managers manage the realization of intelligent systems, including AI in supply chains (Roux et al., 2023) and IoT to monitor the environment (Phasinam et al., 2022). They also guarantee efficient utilization of such technologies to achieve strategic objectives such as efficiency, sustainability, or quality management (Shahbazi and Byun, 2021).

Feeling literate with data: This is an important emerging skill. Koloski et al. (2025) claim that the data literacy needs to be made operational and middle managers are the way to do it. They help close the technical data and the operational personnel, whereby data is not only gathered but also interpreted and implemented. It is essential in the context of such initiatives as optimizing digital advertising (Kunekar et al., 2024) up to strategic decision-making (Moshood et al., 2024).

The correlation between technology and the middle manager can be modelled in the following way:

In which failure of one of the components would greatly reduce effectiveness.

Moreover, their contribution to the feedback loop may be simulated as a form of critical control:

Equation 1: Managerial Effectiveness = f(Strategic Acumen, People Skills, Data Literacy, Technological Fluency)

Equation 2: Adapted Strategy (t+1) = Original Strategy (t) + \int (Middle Management Feedback * Organizational Learning Rate) dt

This equation demonstrates that the strategy to be used in the next period is a solution of the initial strategy and the integration of the feedback given by the middle management over time, divided by the power of the organization to learn by the feedback.

Discussion:

The discussion confirms the fact that the key catalytic agent that glues strategy to operations is middle management. Nevertheless, to achieve their potentials, they have to overcome serious challenges and use the opportunities offered by digitalization.

Strategic Reconceptualization of Middle Management as a Strategic Asset

The case is effectively presented, and the argumentation is that there should be a paradigm shift in the way organizations view and invest in middle management level in organizations. As opposed to treating them as an overhead expense, they must be regarded as a strategic asset and source of competitive advantage. They are unique as they are the mix of strategic intent and operational reality and cannot be avoided in navigating complexity. It is vital to empower them, engage them in the process of strategic planning stages, and acknowledge their input. Those reasons of failure cited as per Mankge et al. (2024) on enterprise system failures in most cases are associated with absence of managerial buy in, which highlights the cost of not involving this layer.

Navigating the Challenges

Middle managers have to overcome tough challenges despite their critical role:

Role Ambiguity and conflict: Separated between the expectations imposed by top management and the needs set by their teams, they also frequently have conflicting priorities and expectations.

Lack of Strategic Involvement: In case they are not involved in strategy making, their capacity to adequately interpret and become the champions of the same strategy is badly undermined. They are used as context-less and convictionless messengers.

Middle resistance: They may be opposed to the changes that may jeopardize their established power or to the technologies that they do not know, which may make them bottlenecks (Uwadi et al., 2022).

Skill Gaps: Change in technology is rapid to the extent that there is a continuous skills gap particularly in areas such as data literacy and digital fluency (Koloski et al., 2025).

The Data Literate and Digital Leader Notion

The technological augmentation debate brings to a critical conclusion that data literacy is no longer a niche skill, but a managerial skill. Organizations have to invest into training programs that would improve the capacity of middle managers to work with data, pose critical questions, and lead data-driven teams. Moreover, as Aldhi et al. (2025) observe in the setting of smart cities, the digital leadership on the top should be integrated with the managerial digital readiness in the middle. The top managers should establish an atmosphere where experimentation with new technologies is promoted and decisions based on data are rewarded.

Generalizations of Trends in Synthesis

Middle management is directly related to such macro tendencies as Industry 5.0 (Maddikunta et al., 2022), of human-machine co-operation and sustainability. The middle managers are the ones who will implement this collaboration both in a factory and on the office. Similarly, the emphasis on sustainability and resilience (Alshebami, 2025; Poursmaieli et al., 2023) requires the middle management to implement the following goals in their daily operations; managing the energy consumption, as well as building adaptable employees.

Conclusion:

This study has conclusively established the middle management to be the mediator between the strategy-implementation gaps in large companies. They are not a passive entity but rather agents that are active, strategic, interpret, adapt, orchestrate and facilitate. There is a combination of communication, resource, change leadership and technological integration in their role. Those organizations that will become successful in a digital transformation era and a volatile environment are those that appreciate their middle managers as the driver of their plan. They lessen the gap between the visionary and the realistic, meaning that they make ambitious plans to sustainable performance so that not only business can survive at this point, but also twins its own future. The middle manager is not being pushed out of existence, therefore, he or she is more than ever.

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