





Future-proof human resource competencies as synergetic boosters of workplace stewardship capability



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Orientation: Future-proof human resource (HR) competency models are receiving attention to promote more value-adding, digital-driven employee- and business-centred services and practices.

Research purpose: The study explored HR business acumen as promoter of HR workplace stewardship through the competency mechanism of people advocacy and with the moderating effect of digital agility.

Motivation for the study: Presently, there is a dearth of research on future-proof HR competencies as vital inter-relating capability mechanisms for successfully performing HR roles in the evolving digital-era work world.

Research approach/design and method: The quantitative study involved an availability-based data set of $N = 850$ HR professionals who completed the short version of the T-shaped HR competency questionnaire developed by the Academy to Innovate HR.

Main findings: Confirmatory factor analysis and moderated-mediation analysis revealed new insights into the synergetic complementarity of HR business acumen, people advocacy and digital agility in boosting HR workplace stewardship.

Practical/managerial implications: Human resource professionals' business acumen and people advocacy capability can strengthen their workplace stewardship capability when they carefully gauge their digital agility for goals of employee and organisational thriving.

Contribution/value-add: The new insights contribute to future-proof HR competency theory and inform HR professionals' development as credible members and stewards of the organisation.

Keywords: AIHR T-shaped HR competency assessment; business acumen; digital agility; future-proof human resource competencies; people advocacy; stewardship theory; workplace stewardship.

Introduction

Globally, the integration of transformative technologies into organisations is changing perspectives on managing and developing human resources (HRs) for sustainable organisational performance and competitiveness (Ruiz et al., 2024). In this aspect, HR consultancy firms are advocating for the upskilling and re-skilling of corporate HR professionals to expand their HR capabilities with more future-proof digital, data-driven and employee- and business-centred practices that help them drive business value across the full spectrum of HR services and processes (Mattajang, 2023; Van Vulpen & Verlinden, 2024; Veldsman et al., 2024). Adding HR business value alludes to HR workplace stewardship whereby HR professionals demonstrate the capability to support the organisation's strategic objectives, drive goal achievement through HR data analytics and promote a positive, inclusive, fair, humane workplace that enables people, employers and societies to thrive, rather than merely cope and adjust to a turbulent technology-driven work world (Mattajang, 2023; Moh'd et al., 2024; Van Vulpen, 2024; Veldsman, 2021).

Generally, scholars view HR competencies as a leading construct in HR management research to not only improve the HR function's credibility, performance and agility but also organisational performance and resilience including employee satisfaction and well-being (Ahmad et al., 2022;

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Apascaritei & Elvira, 2022; Daguplo & Daguplo, 2019; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Syrigou & Williams, 2023; Yu et al., 2022). Human resource competencies inform HR professionals' future-fit roles as strategic change champions and business partners, managers of human relations and innovators and integrators of socio-technical HR management subsystems (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). These roles demand well-rounded cross-functional competencies for adapting and navigating the complex reality of the digital-era employee, workplace and the community within which the business is conducted (Van Vulpen & Verlinden, 2024). Core future-proof competencies associated with the roles of HR professionals include *inter alia*, their business acumen, digital agility, people advocacy and workplace stewardship capabilities (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022; Veldsman et al., 2024). Human resource professionals deploy these valued skills sets in strategic ways that benefit organisational efficiency while satisfying employees' needs and expectations (Apascaritei & Elvira, 2022; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Syrigou & Williams, 2023; Van Vulpen, 2024). In this vein, HR scholars argue for more research on the underlying synergies among future-proof HR capabilities to better inform the HR professional's role in strategic HR management practices for sustainable long-term organisational growth, performance and agility (Apascaritei & Elvira, 2022; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Van Vulpen & Verlinden, 2024; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022).

This study focusses on the synergetic complementarity of the future-proof HR competencies of business acumen, digital agility, people advocacy and workplace stewardship to address the present dearth of research on HR competencies as vital inter-relating capability mechanisms for future-fit roles of HR professionals (Apascaritei & Elvira, 2022; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). The objective of this study was to explore HR business acumen as an underlying competency for increasing HR workplace stewardship through the competency mechanism of HR people advocacy and with the moderating effect of HR digital agility. In this regard, this study unpacks HR people advocacy as a mediating competency mechanism through which HR business acumen translates to HR workplace stewardship capabilities. In addition, we strive to answer the question of *when* HR business acumen and HR people advocacy affect HR workplace stewardship capability by examining the moderating role of HR digital agility as a contextual conditional competency mechanism. This study underscores an important direction in future-proof HR competency theory by investigating the moderated-mediating effects on the link between HR business acumen and HR workplace stewardship. This analysis thus significantly contributes to the available literature on HR professionals' future-proof competency development in its investigation of complementary synergies among HR competencies.

Theoretical underpinning

Stewardship theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991) helps our understanding of business acumen as an underlying competency mechanism that increases HR workplace

stewardship behaviour through the HR capabilities of people advocacy and as influenced by the competency mechanism of HR digital agility. Stewardship theory posits that individuals are generally self-actualising, others-serving and collective-minded, and therefore intrinsically motivated to fulfil the role of steward by working for the greater good of others in the fulfilment of the duties and responsibilities for which they are entrusted (Chrisman, 2019; Wei et al., 2021).

Building on the basic premises of stewardship theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Wei et al., 2021), we argue that the HR competency of workplace stewardship reflects HR professionals' pro-organisational motivation to work for the collective interest of the organisation and its people. As workplace stewards, they assume the responsibility of taking care of human and socio-technical resources and performing their job in ways that produce larger benefits for the people, business and society (Veldsman, 2021; Wei et al., 2021). Accordingly, we argue that having business acumen inculcates the motivation for HR people advocacy, which in turn, increases HR workplace stewardship behaviour. This assumption is based on the view that the overall purpose of strategic HR management is to ensure that the organisation can achieve success through its people (Bakuwa, 2013; Boon et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2022). However, the extent to which HR digital agility influences these two motivational competency mechanisms towards HR stewardship behaviour, is unclear and thus investigated by this study.

Human resource people advocacy and workplace stewardship

Human resource workplace stewardship and people advocacy are behavioural constructs that are entirely voluntary in their nature, and HR professionals ascribing to these behaviours act as the promoters and defenders for their organisation, its people, its products and services, and its brand to the external community (Ahmad et al., 2022; Walden & Kingsley-Westerman, 2018). From this perspective, the link between HR people advocacy and workplace stewardship behaviours is well-documented in the research literature (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Mamman et al., 2019; Mattajang, 2023; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). Human resource workplace stewardship behaviour is formed because of the HR function's strategic business partner orientation towards, advocacy for, and assumed custodianship of support practices and services that promote the psychological and physical safety, well-being and performance of the organisation and its people (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Moh'd et al., 2024; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022).

People advocacy alludes to HR professionals' ability to create a strong inclusive internal culture that creates opportunities for all groups while balancing individual well-being needs with the overall needs of the organisation and championing constructive actions in scenarios of conflicting stakeholder priorities (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Van Vulpen, 2024; Veldsman et al., 2024). In the same vein, HR people advocacy activities are attributed for a greater pro-organisational and social

benefit, and thus HR professionals may feel motivated to apply their knowledge and expertise towards workplace stewardship activities that involve the nurturing of a strong inclusive and collaborative community and supportive environment where individuals, the organisation and society thrives (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Veldsman, 2021). Therefore, in this study we propose a positive link between the HR competencies of people advocacy and workplace stewardship:

H1: Human resource people advocacy capability boosts HR workplace stewardship capability.

Human resource business acumen, people advocacy and workplace stewardship

Business acumen has received significant attention in the research literature to spur the strategic business partner role of HR professionals (Button, 2023; Schultz & Nel, 2020; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). Proponents of strategic HR management highlight HR professionals' business acumen as an essential value-adding competency to help align strategic HR initiatives with the company's goals and priorities for improved, sustainable employee and business performance (Button, 2023; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Schultz & Nel, 2020).

Aligned with stewardship theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Wei et al., 2021), HR professionals' business acumen is a collective-minded, pro-organisational attribute that alludes to the ability to co-create business strategy for sustainable business results through people. Human resource business acumen is evident in the ability to demonstrate the business impact of HR activities and basing HR work priorities on business goals and strategic objectives. Sound business acumen also enables HR professionals to create HR value by using financial acumen to make fiscally sound and responsible decisions, anticipating how market trends will impact the organisation, and intentionally integrating internal customer insights into daily HR practices (Button, 2023; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Veldsman et al., 2024). Business acumen thus implies that HR professionals not only understand the business and its performance drivers but also anticipate business needs, propose solutions while articulating the quantified business opportunities, risks and impacts of HR management decisions (Schultz & Nel, 2020). In this aspect, well-rounded HR business acumen may drive HR people advocacy and HR workplace stewardship behaviours to facilitate alignment between business, team, and individual goals and stakeholder expectations (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). Therefore, it can be suggested that:

H2: Human resource business acumen boosts HR workplace stewardship capability.

H3: Human resource people advocacy capability plays a mediating role in the link between HR business acumen and HR workplace stewardship capability.

The mediating role of HR people advocacy as an outcome of HR business acumen in predicting HR workplace stewardship behaviour is unclear in the research literature. However, prior research by Mamman et al. (2019) highlights the strategic or instrumental (respecting employees' interests to secure their commitment to the achievement of business

objectives) and normative (organisation's obligation to look after the interests of employees regardless of the strategic imperative) reasons for HR people advocacy in achieving business goals (Mamman et al., 2019). Schultz and Nel (2020) further suggest that business acumen is intertwined with the company's human, organisational and social capitals as complementary business performance resources. Human resource professionals' people advocacy is an important social capital mechanism to integrate HR into the strategic business focus of the organisation. Flowing from people advocacy activities, HR workplace stewardship becomes evident in the promotion of work practices that are sustainable for society and the environment, behaviours that are aligned with organisational values and collaborative processes to solve problems, achieve business goals and align individual employee contributions to the mission and vision of the organisation (Mamman et al., 2019; Mattajang, 2023; Veldsman, 2021; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022; Veldsman et al., 2024).

The moderating role of human resource digital agility

The moderating effects of HR digital agility in the associations between the HR competencies of business acumen, people advocacy and workplace stewardship are still to be explored. This study fulfils this research gap by examining the extent to which HR digital agility as a contextual competency condition influences the positive links between these three HR competencies. Prior research acknowledges that HR management practices need to account for the contextual influence of digital transformation in the workplace to achieve intended HR outcomes (Tan et al., 2024).

Like HR business acumen, people advocacy and workplace stewardship, the HR competency of digital agility aligns well with the pro-organisational, others-serving, collective mindset posited by stewardship theory (Chrisman, 2019; Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Wei et al., 2021). Human resource digital agility alludes to aspects of HR professionals' roles as strategic change champions and business partners, and innovators and integrators of HR management socio-technical subsystems (Mattajang, 2023; Ruiz et al., 2024; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). These roles help ensure that the HR function adapts to evolving business conditions by utilising the latest technology to increase the impact of HR while also preparing the organisation for the adoption of transformative digital practices (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Mattajang, 2023; Veldsman, 2018; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022).

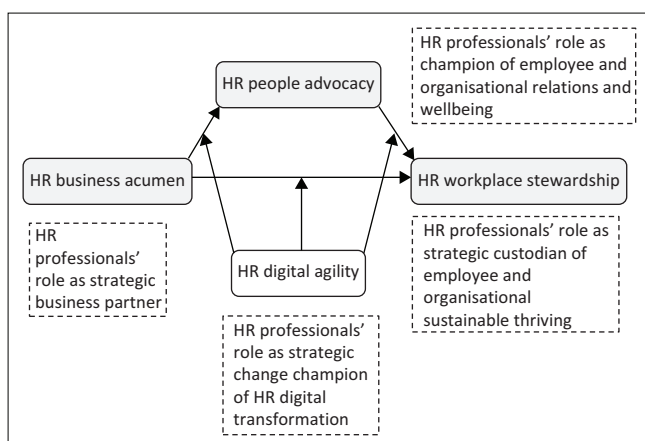
Human resource digital agility has received considerable attention from contemporary scholars. For example, Chong and Zainal (2024) emphasise the importance of HR digital agility to align HR management activities with the rising demand for data-driven, evidence-based HR practices that not only bolster problem-solving capabilities and innovation but also help build a more resilient workplace. Ruiz et al. (2024) further argue for more research on understanding the socio-technical synergy in strategic HR management practices. An organisation's performance is conditional upon

an optimal cohesion between the social (people) and technical (digital) subsystems. The fusion of HR activities with digital technologies facilitates strategic business collaborative processes that enable organisational agility in responding to changing business needs and priorities (Dhanpat et al., 2020; Mattajang, 2023; Ruiz et al., 2024). In this vein, the strategic change champion and business partner and innovator and integrator roles of the HR function acknowledge the importance of the synergetic interaction between HR digital agility capabilities and the pro-social and business capabilities of HR business acumen, people advocacy and workplace stewardship to achieve business goals (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022; Veldsman et al., 2024). Hence, we hypothesise this interaction as follows:

H4: Human resource digital agility moderates the effect of HR business acumen and HR people advocacy on HR workplace stewardship.

The inclusion of HR digital agility stems from the understanding that HR professionals' workplace stewardship capability may vary because of the interactions between their level of digital agility and their levels of business acumen and people advocacy. Through our research, we thus provide a meaningful extension of future-proof HR competency theory through the examination of the moderating role of HR digital agility as a key contextual competency that explains the effect of HR professionals' levels of business acumen and people advocacy on their workplace stewardship capability.

In summary, based on stewardship theory, we constructed a moderated-mediation model, as shown in Figure 1, to explore the synergy between HR business acumen, people advocacy and digital agility in boosting HR stewardship capability. Understanding both the moderation and mediation links between the four future-proof HR competencies is important to elucidate the synergetic complementarity of HR competency mechanisms that influence the future-fit role capability of the HR professional. Insight into the inter-dynamics between HR competencies not only help HR professionals assert their real working potential and business value but also enable them to be useful, credible members of the organisation (Ahmad et al., 2022; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023).



HR, human resource.

FIGURE 1: Hypothetical research model.

Research design

Participant sample

The availability-based sample was an aggregated data set of $N = 850$ records of individual respondents who completed the T-shaped HR Competency Survey on the open real-time survey platform of the Academy to Innovate HR (AIHR). The large sample is attributed to the global range of clients subscribing to AIHR and its HR competencies assessment services. The respondents were HR professionals employed in global organisations from South Africa, Rest of Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand.

Measurement instrument

The 25-item short version of the AIHR T-shaped HR Competency Survey was used to measure respondents' HR workplace stewardship:

'(7 items, e.g. *I use my knowledge and expertise to create an environment where people, the organisation, and society thrives*'), HR business acumen (8 items; e.g. *'I leverage my understanding of the inner workings of our organisation and industry to create HR value'*), HR digital agility (6 items; e.g. *'I actively look for ways to improve HR impact using the latest technology'*) and HR people advocacy (4 items; e.g. *'I struggle to balance the wellbeing needs of the individual with the overall needs of the organisation'*- reversed scored). (AIHR, 2024; Veldsman et al., 2024)

Responses are measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency reliability of the scale was 0.72.

Data collection procedure and ethical considerations

The T-shaped HR Competency Survey (Veldsman et al., 2024) is available on the AIHR (2024) website and included on platforms containing information on AIHR courses and articles with educational content. Academy to Innovate HR clients and non-clients are invited to voluntarily complete the T-shaped survey for HR competencies assessment. The AIHR is a global HR development consultancy company specialising in future-proofing HR professionals with the skills and knowledge required for an evolving technology-driven work world (AIHR, 2024).

The participating HR professionals could access a link to the T-shaped HR competency questionnaire via the secure online, open survey platform on the AIHR website. Once completed, participants receive their results via an online dashboard that only they can access. They are also emailed a link that gives them access to the dashboard for the future. If they are subscribers to the AIHR platform, these results are also stored for them on their learning dashboards that is password protected and if they decide to retake the assessment in future, they can compare the measurement periods.

Response data are automatically captured on an Excel spreadsheet generated by an AIHR software program. The

data were transformed into a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) data file for statistical purposes. The authors received permission from AIHR to utilise the data set for research purposes. The data set was anonymous group-based data and posed no risk to respondents' privacy and confidentiality.

Statistical analysis

The IBM SPSS version 29.0.0 (IBM Corp, 2023) and IBM SPSS Amos Version 28.0 (Arbuckle, 2021) statistical software programs with the robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLE) were utilised for the data analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the data set to assess the construct and discriminant validity of the measurement model. We applied the following fit indices to evaluate acceptable model fit (Jain & Chetty, 2022; Kline, 2016): Chi-square/difference (CMIN/degree of freedom [df] ≤ 5); comparative fit index (CFI ≥ 0.90); root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) ≤ 0.08 .

We applied the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Alarcón & Sánchez, 2015) to test convergent validity by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) with AVE values of ≥ 0.50 and CR coefficients ≥ 0.70 indicating acceptable convergent validity. Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio values smaller than 1.0 (ideally < 0.85) indicated acceptable discriminant validity among the scale factors (Hamid et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). Cronbach's alpha coefficients ≥ 0.70 indicated acceptable internal consistency reliability. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and bi-variate correlations were also calculated to evaluate the magnitude and direction of associations among the four competency constructs.

We conducted a moderated-mediation model in SPSS PROCESS Macro 4.2 (Hayes, 2022) with ordinary least squares and logistic regression for the mediated and moderated models' analyses. We also performed a post hoc relative weights analysis (RWA: Tonidandel & Le Breton, 2015) of the relative weighted importance of each of the significant predictors with metric of percentage of predicted variance. The significance of the analyses was established when the bootstrapped 95% lower-level and upper-level confidence interval (CI) range did not include zero.

The Johnson-Neyman (JN) simple plot technique (Carden et al., 2017) assisted in identifying the confidence bands for which values of the moderator HR digital agility indicate that the effect of the focal predictor of HR business acumen and people advocacy (mediator) on the outcome variable of HR workplace stewardship is significant. The JN technique is seen as a global floodlight method that illustrates for which values of the moderator, the effect of the focal predictor on the outcome variable becomes or ceases to be significant (Carden et al., 2017).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Economic and

Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department (reference number 4057).

Results

Measurement model

We first tested a single factor CFA, and then a four-factor CFA model. Table 1 shows that the four-factor CFA model showed an acceptable model fit with the data. The Chi-square/ df was < 5 and the RMSEA (0.06) and SRMR (0.05) estimates showed good model fit. The CFI (0.88) estimate was close to 0.90, indicating acceptable model fit and acceptable construct validity of the measurement model. We also tested for common method bias by conducting a Harman's one-factor test. The single factor CFA did not have a good fit with the data suggesting a multifactor model. In addition, with the Harman's one-factor showing that the total variance extracted by one-factor is 29.17% (thus < 0.50), we assumed that the presence of common method bias did not pose a threat to the interpretation of the findings.

Table 2 shows that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients (α) were all above 0.70, indicating good to high internal consistency reliability of the measurement model. The CR coefficients are estimates of the construct reliability of a measure. The CRs were all > 0.70 and below 0.90, indicating construct reliability of the measurement model. Except for the business acumen construct (AVE = 0.38), the other three constructs had AVE estimates > 0.40 and some close to 0.50, which indicated acceptable convergent validity when also considering the high CR estimates. Overall, the measurement model was deemed a reliable measure of the four HR competency constructs.

In terms of bi-variate correlations, Table 2 shows that all the four constructs positively and significantly correlated ($r \geq 0.28$; $r \leq 0.55$; $p = 0.001$; moderate to large practical effect), indicating construct coherence of the measure and meaningful relationship dynamics among the four competency dimensions.

In terms of discriminant validity, Table 3 shows that the HTMT ratio values were all well below < 0.85 , which indicated good discriminate validity among the constructs of the measure. Thus, potential issues of multicollinearity were negligible (i.e., the constructs measure uniquely different competency domains).

Research hypothesis testing

Research hypothesis testing firstly involved testing main and interaction effects between the variables. As shown in Table 4, two regression models were computed for this purpose.

TABLE 1: Confirmatory factor analysis results ($N = 850$).

CFA models	CMIN/ df	p	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC
Single factor CFA	11.53	< 0.001	0.61	0.11	0.09	3270.80
Multi-factor CFA	4.25	< 0.001	0.88	0.06	0.05	1256.00

Note: Harman's single factor = 29.17%.

CFA, Confirmatory factor analysis; CMIN/ df , Chi-square/degree of freedom; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual; AIC, Akaike Information Criterion.

TABLE 2: Reliability, convergent validity, descriptive and bi-variate correlation statistics ($N = 850$).

Variable	α	CR	AVE	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Workplace stewardship	0.83	0.83	0.42	4.17	0.56	-				
Business acumen	0.83	0.83	0.38	3.81	0.67	0.55	-			
Digital agility	0.82	0.83	0.45	3.42	0.82	0.38	0.50	-		
People advocacy	0.77	0.78	0.47	3.56	0.87	0.38	0.28	0.25	-	
Overall scale	0.72	0.79	0.49	3.75	0.53	0.73	0.79	0.76	0.64	-

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < 0.001$.

α , Cronbach's alpha; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted; SD, standard deviation.

TABLE 3: Heterotrait-monotrait analysis results: Testing discriminant validity.

Variables	WS	BA	DA	PA
Workplace stewardship (WS)	-	-	-	-
Business acumen (BA)	0.55	-	-	-
Digital agility (DA)	0.38	0.50	-	-
People advocacy (PA)	0.38	0.28	0.25	-

In model 1, people advocacy was treated as outcome variable. The F -statistic was significant ($F = 28.96$; $p = 0.000$) and the model explained 9% ($R^2 = 0.09$) of the variance in people advocacy (small practical effect). Table 4 (Model 1) shows that as independent constructs, business acumen ($\beta = 0.26$; $p = 0.000$; lower-level confidence interval [LLCI] = 0.16; upper-level confidence interval [ULCI] = 0.36) and digital agility ($\beta = 0.16$; $p = 0.000$; LLCI = 0.08; ULCI = 0.24) had significant and positive main effects on people advocacy. However, when combined, they had no significant interaction effect. Thus, the effect of business acumen on people advocacy was not conditional upon levels of digital agility ($\beta = 0.02$; $p = 0.67$; LLCI = -0.07 ; ULCI = 0.11).

In model 2, workplace stewardship was treated as outcome variable. Model 2 summarises the main effects of business acumen, people advocacy and digital agility on workplace stewardship including the moderation effects of digital agility. The F -statistic was significant ($F = 95.15$; $p = 0.000$) and the model explained 37% ($R^2 = 0.37$) of the variance in workplace stewardship (large practical effect).

Testing research hypothesis 1

Model 2 in Table 4 provided empirical evidence in support of **H1** by revealing that people advocacy ($\beta = 0.16$; $p = 0.000$; LLCI = 0.12; ULCI = 0.19) had a significant and positive main effect on workplace stewardship.

Testing research hypothesis 2

Model 2 in Table 4 provided empirical evidence in support of **H2** by revealing that business acumen ($\beta = 0.36$; $p = 0.000$; LLCI = 0.31; ULCI = 0.41) had a significant and positive main effect on workplace stewardship.

Testing research hypothesis 4

In terms of moderation effects, Table 4 shows that the effect of business acumen on workplace stewardship was not conditional upon levels of digital agility ($\beta = 0.02$; $p = 0.37$; LLCI = -0.03 ; ULCI = 0.08). Individually, the two competencies had uniquely separate roles in enhancing workplace stewardship. However, when combined, the effect of people advocacy on workplace stewardship was conditional upon

TABLE 4a: Results of moderation effects ($N = 850$).

Variables	β	SE	t	p	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Model 1: Outcome = People advocacy						
Business acumen	0.26	0.05	5.26	0.000	0.16	0.36
Digital agility	0.16	0.04	4.02	0.000	0.08	0.24
Business acumen x digital agility Interaction	0.02	0.05	0.43	0.67	-0.07	0.11

Note: $F = 28.96$; $p = 0.000$; $R^2 = 0.09$. Variables were mean-centred prior to analysis. Business acumen acted as focal predictor (X), workplace stewardship as outcome variable (Y), digital agility as moderator and people advocacy as mediator.

In terms of dominant percentage contribution towards the prediction (main effects) of workplace stewardship, the post hoc relative weights analysis (Table 5) shows that business acumen contributed 57.08%, people advocacy 24.45% and digital agility 18.47% towards explaining the variance in workplace stewardship.

SE, standard error; LLCI, lower-level confidence interval; ULCI, upper-level confidence interval.

TABLE 4b: Results of moderation effects ($N = 850$).

Variables	β	SE	t	p	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Model 2: Outcome = Workplace stewardship						
Business acumen	0.36	0.03	13.28	0.000	0.31	0.41
People advocacy (mediator)	0.16	0.02	8.36	0.000	0.12	0.19
Digital agility	0.08	0.02	3.46	0.001	0.03	0.12
Business acumen x digital agility interaction	0.02	0.03	0.89	0.37	-0.03	0.08
People advocacy x digital agility interaction	-0.05	0.02	-2.27	0.02	-0.09	-0.01

Note: $F = 95.15$; $p = 0.000$; $R^2 = 0.37$; $f^2 = 0.59$. Variables were mean-centred prior to analysis. Business acumen acted as focal predictor (X), workplace stewardship as outcome variable (Y), digital agility as moderator and people advocacy as mediator.

In terms of dominant percentage contribution towards the prediction (main effects) of workplace stewardship, the post hoc relative weights analysis (Table 5) shows that business acumen contributed 57.08%, people advocacy 24.45% and digital agility 18.47% towards explaining the variance in workplace stewardship.

SE, standard error; LLCI, lower-level confidence interval; ULCI, upper-level confidence interval.

TABLE 5: Relative weight analysis of predictors of workplace stewardship ($N = 850$).

Variables	Raw relative weight	Rescaled relative weight (%)	95% CI lower bound	95% CI upper bound
Business acumen	0.21	57.08	0.16	0.26
Digital agility	0.07	18.47	0.04	0.09
People advocacy	0.09	24.45	0.06	0.13

Note: $R^2 = 0.36$.

CI, confidence interval.

levels of digital agility ($\beta = -0.05$; $p = 0.02$; LLCI = -0.09 ; ULCI = -0.01). The Cohen f^2 estimate for the significant interaction effect was 0.59 (large practical effect).

The JN simple slope plot in Figure 2 illustrates the significant negative interaction effect between people advocacy and digital agility by showing that the effect of people advocacy on workplace stewardship becomes weaker at higher levels of digital agility. After levels of 1.58, the effect of people advocacy becomes non-significant if digital agility levels are very strong. People advocacy has a stronger effect on boosting workplace stewardship at low levels of digital agility (-2.42). Thus, the competency of people advocacy has a greater positive effect on

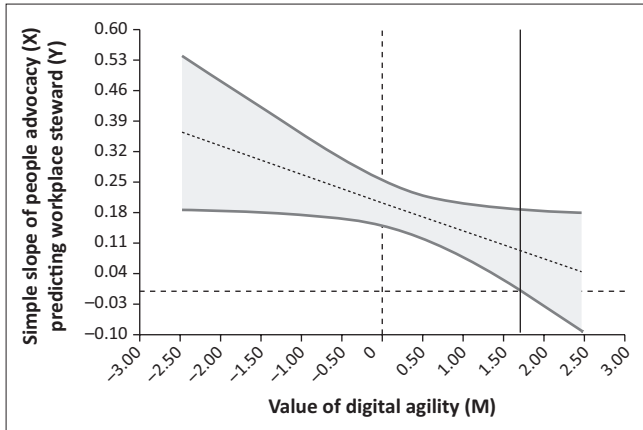


FIGURE 2: Simple Johnson-Neyman slope plot for probing the moderating effects of digital agility.

workplace stewardship capability at significantly low values of digital agility. The simple slope plot indicates that the presence of high digital agility might diminish the effectiveness of people advocacy. When combined, the two competencies might tend to compete for resources. People advocacy might be effective at low levels of digital agility in enhancing workplace stewardship but less effective or even counterproductive at high levels of digital agility, leading to a negative interaction effect. The results provided support for **H4**.

Testing research hypothesis 3

Next, we analysed the moderated-mediation effects as summarised in Table 6 and Table 7. Moderated-mediation assumes conditional indirect (mediation) effects: moderated-mediation occurs when the effect of the focal predictor (business acumen) on the outcome variable (workplace stewardship) via the mediator (people advocacy) significantly differs depending on levels of the moderator variable (digital agility). In Table 6 and Table 7, the bootstrapping results showed that the values of the beta (β) for the conditional direct effect of business acumen on workplace stewardship at the values of the moderator (digital agility) were significant but reduced for the conditional indirect effects. The conditional indirect effects remained significant, which indicated a partial mediation effect of people advocacy between business acumen and workplace stewardship. The results provided support for research **H3**.

Discussion

This study focussed on HR workplace stewardship capability as a synergetic outcome of HR professionals' business acumen, people advocacy and digital agility capabilities. Human resource workplace stewardship reflects HR professionals' role as strategic custodians of workplace practices that promote a thriving inclusive environment for people, the organisation and society, including collaborative problem-solving processes that connect employees' contributions with the company's mission, vision, goals and values (Veldsman et al., 2024). Relative to HR digital agility, the empirical results unveiled HR business acumen and people advocacy as the most prominent competencies contributing to HR professionals' workplace stewardship capability. In this aspect,

TABLE 6: Results of direct effects of moderated-mediation analysis.

Moderator (digital agility value)	β	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
-0.92	0.33	0.04	10.93	0.000	0.27	0.40
0.08	0.36	0.03	13.12	0.000	0.30	0.41
0.91	0.38	0.04	10.03	0.000	0.30	0.45

Note: Conditional direct effect: Business acumen \rightarrow workplace stewardship.

SE, standard error; LLCI, lower-level confidence interval; ULCI, upper-level confidence interval.

TABLE 7: Results of indirect effects of moderated-mediation analysis.

Moderator (digital agility value)	β	Boot SE	Boot 95% LLCI	Boot 95% ULCI
-0.92	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.09
0.08	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.06
0.91	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.06

Note: Conditional indirect effect: Business acumen \rightarrow people advocacy \rightarrow workplace stewardship.

SE, standard error; LLCI, lower-level confidence interval; ULCI, upper-level confidence interval.

the study's findings provide empirical evidence that the competency of HR business acumen (HR strategic business partner role) directly translates to higher levels of HR workplace stewardship capability while also inducing higher levels of people advocacy (acting as HR champion of work practices that promote constructive people relations and employee and organisational well-being), which further strengthens HR workplace stewardship behaviours. This finding extends previous studies highlighting the importance of balancing HR professionals' role as strategic business partners with their people-centric tasks to ensure positive alignment between employee and business performance outcomes (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). The finding of this study further aligns with previous studies that illuminate the synergetic bond between the company's strategic organisational, human and social capitals as complementary business performance resources with HR professionals' people advocacy acting as a key social capital mechanism to integrate HR into the company's strategic business intent (Schultz & Nel, 2020; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022).

This study further introduced HR digital agility (acting as strategic change champion for HR digital transformation) as a contextual competency mechanism moderating the effect of both HR business acumen and HR people advocacy on HR workplace stewardship capability. The findings provide new insights regarding HR professionals' role as socio-technical integrators aiming to achieve synergy between HR strategic business and people-centric practices and HR digital transformation strategies (Ruiz et al., 2024). The findings indicate that HR professionals' levels of digital agility do not influence the effect of their business acumen (directly or indirectly via their people advocacy) on their HR workplace stewardship capability. However, the findings indicate that HR people advocacy has a stronger effect on raising HR workplace stewardship behaviour at low levels of HR digital agility. Human resource people advocacy might be less effective or even counterproductive at high levels of HR digital agility. This finding aligns with prior research indicating the importance of achieving a cohesive synergy between digital technologies and HR people-oriented practices (Ruiz et al., 2024). Drawing from the socio-technical arguments of Ruiz et al. (2024), it appears from this study's findings that the

worth of HR people advocacy capability in boosting HR workplace stewardship outcomes is contingent upon its carefully leveraged harmonisation with HR digital agility capabilities to ensure sustainable employee and organisational thriving.

Implications for theory and practice

The results of this study contribute to future-proof HR competency theory by providing new insights into the potential for synergy or complementarity between a set of future-proof HR competencies that elucidate HR professionals' roles as strategic business partners (business acumen), strategic change champions of HR digital transformation (digital agility), employee and organisational relations and well-being champions (people advocacy) and strategic custodians of employee and organisational sustainable thriving (workplace stewardship). The study's findings fill a research gap identified in the HR research literature concerning the scant knowledge on underlying synergies among these future-proof HR capabilities (Apascarietei & Elvira, 2022; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Van Vulpen & Verlinden, 2024; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022).

Practically, the findings suggest that developing business acumen may help to strengthen both HR professionals' people advocacy and workplace stewardship capabilities. Previous studies found that restructuring of the HR function around its HR strategic business partner role enables greater involvement in the formulation and implementation of the business strategy, which helps HR professionals better align HR people-centric practices and achieve greater credibility and trust from line managers because of the ability to demonstrate tangible contributions to the business (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). In this context, the synergetic complementarity of the four future-proof HR competencies alludes to the successful integration of business and socio-technical HR subsystems in a way that aligns business strategy and HR digital transformation with sustainable employee and organisational well-being and thriving. Previous studies showed important links between organisational performance improvement and the integration of strategic and people-centric HR roles (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). Developing the future-fit HR competencies of business acumen, people advocacy, digital agility and workplace stewardship may help HR professionals to manage the complexities of and tensions between their multifaceted roles. Human resource professionals may derive professional and personal benefit from their ability to achieve this integration, which could translate into greater HR credibility because of the mutual benefit for the business and its employees (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023).

Digital transformation of the workplace adds to the complexity of HR professionals' roles as strategic change and business partners, workplace custodians and employee champions. Practically, the negative interaction between HR digital agility and people advocacy in predicting HR workplace stewardship capability suggests that managers and HR professionals need to think carefully about the impact of digital transformation on employees and their

well-being. The integration of the social (people) and technological subsystems of the organisation may benefit from a people-centric approach to ensure that the digital transformation processes and practices mutually benefit the HR function, employees and the business. Aligned with the reasoning of Cayrat and Boxall (2023), HR professionals need the astuteness to apply their insight into the synergetic dynamics between the four future-fit HR competencies to balance the potential tension in being a strategic business partner with the need for digital transformation and their duty to act as people advocates and workplace stewards to ensure employee well-being and thriving continuity.

Limitations and future research

The findings of the study should be viewed in the light of a few limitations, which may provide direction to future research initiatives on future-proof HR competencies for HR professional development. The study relied on self-reported questionnaire data from HR professionals, which may subject the findings to potential sampling bias because all the variables were measured using a single survey instrument designed for a specific profession. Future research could consider collecting data from multiple sources such as managers, stakeholder, professionals and employees. The quantitative approach did not explore human feelings and perceptions about the synergy among their future-proof competencies. Future studies should use a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus group discussions to support the validity of the study's findings. The study explored the inter-dynamics among variables from a single survey questionnaire. Future research could consider assessing the external validity of the survey questionnaire by exploring the link with other measures of HR competencies.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the study limitations, our research makes valuable contributions by providing new insights into the synergetic complementarity of key future-proof HR competencies in boosting HR workplace stewardship for employee and organisational thriving in times of digital transformation. Specifically, our research illuminates the synergy between HR professionals' business acumen and people advocacy capabilities in fostering HR workplace stewardship behaviours. The study results further indicate that HR professionals' people advocacy capability can strengthen their workplace stewardship competency when they carefully gauge and adjust the use of their digital agility for the goals of employee and organisational thriving. The insights gained from our study's findings may help HR professionals assert their real working potential and business value as useful, credible members and stewards of the digital-era organisation.

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M.C., D.V., I.L.P. and N.F. contributed equally to the conceptualisation and writing of the article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, N.F.

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