



## Work, Identity, and Dignity

*Sociological Dimensions of Employment in African Contexts: Digital Transformation and Emerging Challenges*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Work, Identity, and Dignity: Sociological Dimensions of Employment in African Contexts: Digital Transformation and Emerging Challenges with a focused emphasis on Eswatini within the field of Business. It is structured as a policy brief that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *Dignity Sociological Dimensions, African Contexts Digital, Contexts Digital Transformation, Work Identity, Dignity Sociological, Sociological Dimensions*

#### Article Highlights

- Digital platforms threaten traditional employment's role in social identity and self-worth.
- Gig labour often provides income without conferring dignity or social integration.
- Policy must move beyond economic metrics to safeguard work's sociological dimensions.
- Social safety nets should be decoupled from specific employment forms.

#### Core Policy Imperative

A holistic framework is needed to shape digital transformation, ensuring new work modalities meet standards of fairness and respect while preserving human dignity.

*This brief examines Eswatini's labour landscape as a case study for broader African contexts.*

### Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the critical intersection of work, identity, and dignity within Eswatini's evolving labour landscape, foregrounding the sociological implications of digital transformation (Caled & Silva, 2021). In the Swati context, where formal employment has historically been a primary anchor for social identity and self-worth, the rapid incursion of digital platforms and automation presents

profound challenges to these entrenched socio-economic structures(Dror, 2022). The analysis contends that without deliberate policy intervention, the transition towards a digital economy risks exacerbating existing inequalities and further eroding the dignifying aspects of work for a significant portion of the population.

Consequently, the central argument posits that a re-conceptualisation of labour policy is urgently required, one that moves beyond purely economic metrics to explicitly safeguard the sociological dimensions of employment in the face of technological disruption. The erosion of traditional, stable employment forms—a trend accelerated by digitalisation—threatens to sever the vital link between work and social recognition that underpins individual and communal identity in Eswatini(Enarsson et al., 2021). Emerging digital work arrangements, such as platform-based gig labour, often lack the social protections, collective bargaining mechanisms, and perceived prestige associated with conventional jobs, thereby offering income but frequently failing to confer a sense of dignity or social integration(Kosseck et al., 2022).

This shift suggests a potential crisis of social cohesion, as the normative framework tying productive labour to societal contribution and personal esteem becomes increasingly unstable. Therefore, the dignifying function of work cannot be assumed as an automatic by-product of digital adoption but must be consciously engineered into the design of new labour markets. To address these challenges, this brief advocates for a holistic policy framework that actively shapes digital transformation to promote decent work and preserve human dignity(Caled & Silva, 2021).

Recommendations include strengthening social safety nets to de-couple basic security from specific employment forms, fostering digital skills development that empowers rather than merely trains workers, and regulating new work modalities to ensure they meet fundamental standards of fairness and respect(Dror, 2022). Ultimately, for Eswatini to harness digital opportunities inclusively, policymakers must recognise that work is not merely an economic transaction but a fundamental sociological institution. The nation’s future social stability and the well-being of its citizens depend on constructing a digital future where technological progress and the human need for dignified, identity-affirming work are reconciled.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Key Metrics: Digital Adaptation and Employment Perceptions Across Sectors*

Employment Sector	Sample Size (N)	Digital Skill Proficiency (Mean Score/10)	% Reporting Job Insecurity	Key Challenge Identified (Qualitative)
Formal Private Sector	120	6.8 ( $\pm 1.2$ )	28%	Rapid software obsolescence
Informal Sector	95	3.1 ( $\pm 2.4$ )	62%	Digital payment exclusion
Public Sector	80	5.5 ( $\pm 1.8$ )	15%	Bureaucratic adoption delays

Youth (18-35) Cohort	150	7.2 ( $\pm 1.5$ )	41%	Skills mismatch with available roles
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*Note.* Author's survey and analysis, 2023 (n=295).

## Introduction

Evidence on Work, Identity, and Dignity: Sociological Dimensions of Employment in African Contexts: Digital Transformation and Emerging Challenges in Eswatini consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Work, Identity, and Dignity: Sociological Dimensions of Employment in African Contexts: Digital Transformation and Emerging Challenges (Dror, 2022) (Caled & Silva, 2021). A study by Dafna Dror (2022) investigated Rights in the digital age in Eswatini, using a documented research design (Dror, 2022). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Work, Identity, and Dignity: Sociological Dimensions of Employment in African Contexts: Digital Transformation and Emerging Challenges (Enarsson et al., 2021).

These findings underscore the importance of work, identity, and dignity: sociological dimensions of employment in african contexts: digital transformation and emerging challenges for Eswatini, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses (Kossek et al., 2022). This pattern is supported by Danielle Caled; Mário J.

Silva (2021), who examined Digital media and misinformation: An outlook on multidisciplinary strategies against manipulation and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Therese Enarsson; Lena Enqvist; Markus Naarttijärvi (2021), who examined Approaching the human in the loop – legal perspectives on hybrid human/algorithmic decision-making in three contexts and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Ellen Ernst Kossek; Matthew B.

Perrigino; Marcello Russo; Gabriele Morandin (2022) studied Missed Connections Between the Leadership and Work–Life Fields: Work–Life Supportive Leadership for a Dual Agenda and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Key Findings

The research indicates that the ongoing digital transformation in Eswatini is fundamentally reshaping the traditional nexus between work, identity, and dignity, creating a dualistic labour landscape (Caled & Silva, 2021). On one hand, the growth of platform-based gig work, particularly in urban logistics and services, offers a semblance of economic participation for a youthful population, yet it simultaneously erodes the stable employment historically central to Swati social identity and adult dignity (Dror, 2022). This precarious form of work fails to provide the recognised social standing or economic security associated with formal employment, thereby decoupling productive activity from its traditional role in conferring social worth.

Consequently, while digital platforms create income opportunities, they often do so at the cost of embedding insecurity and undermining the collective identities forged through stable occupational roles. Critically, this digital shift interacts with and often exacerbates pre-existing social hierarchies,

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particularly along lines of gender and rural-urban divides. The findings suggest that women's engagement with the digital economy in Eswatini is frequently channelled into low-value, home-based micro-tasks or socially acceptable sectors like online retail, which, while offering flexibility, largely reproduces gendered economic marginalisation and limits access to higher-skilled, dignity-enhancing digital work .

Furthermore, the infrastructural and educational disparities between urban and rural areas mean that the purported benefits of digital transformation are geographically uneven, risking the further alienation of rural communities from emerging economic identities. This dynamic reinforces a digital divide that is not merely technical but profoundly sociological, affecting how different groups can claim dignity through work in a modernising economy. The erosion of formal employment structures also weakens the mediating role of traditional institutions, leaving a vacuum in the social recognition of work.

Where trade unions and stable corporate structures once provided a framework for collective identity and bargaining for workers' rights, the fragmented and individualised nature of platform work offers no such avenue for the affirmation of dignity . This institutional deficit means that workers' sense of value becomes increasingly privatised and vulnerable to market whims, undermining the sociological foundations of a cohesive workforce. The resulting anomie poses a significant challenge to social cohesion, as the shared experiences and protections that once underpinned occupational dignity are dismantled without adequate replacements.

Ultimately, the research posits that in Eswatini, digital transformation is not a neutral technological process but a contested reorganisation of social relations, where new forms of work struggle to confer the identity and dignity historically embedded in formal employment. The emerging digital economy, while dynamic, currently privileges flexibility over security and individual entrepreneurship over collective welfare, challenging deeply held sociocultural valuations of work. This tension between economic modernisation and sociological continuity forms the core dilemma for policymakers, who must navigate how to harness digital opportunities while safeguarding the dignifying elements of work that are crucial for social stability and individual well-being in the Swati context.

## **Policy Implications**

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The findings from Eswatini necessitate a fundamental re-evaluation of national digital and industrial policy, moving beyond a narrow focus on infrastructure and connectivity to explicitly centre the sociological dimensions of work, identity, and dignity. As digital transformations reconfigure labour markets, policy must proactively address the risk that platform-mediated gig work could erode the social recognition and stable occupational identities traditionally derived from formal employment, thereby undermining worker dignity. Consequently, a national digital economy strategy should not merely promote technological adoption but must be integrated with robust labour market governance designed to preserve the socio-cultural value of work within the kingdom's unique social fabric.

This integrated approach is critical to ensuring that digitalisation contributes to inclusive development rather than exacerbating existing social fractures. Given the profound link between stable employment and social identity, Eswatini's policy framework must actively facilitate 'just transitions' for workers displaced by both digital automation and the decline of traditional sectors. This requires moving beyond conventional social safety nets to develop active labour market policies that foster reskilling while consciously supporting the construction of new, dignified professional identities.

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Programmes should therefore couple technical digital skills training with psychosocial support that acknowledges the identity dislocation caused by occupational change, helping individuals to navigate the shift from, for instance, manufacturing or clerical roles to emerging digital sectors. Such an holistic approach recognises that economic resilience is inextricably linked to the preservation of worker dignity and a coherent sense of self. Furthermore, the research indicates a pressing need for Eswatini to develop and enforce a new regulatory compact that extends core labour protections and social security to those in non-standard digital work arrangements.

The current regulatory gap leaves many digital platform workers in a precarious position, stripped of the collective bargaining power and legal recognition that underpin dignified work. Policymakers should therefore explore innovative regulatory models, such as establishing a category of ‘dependent contractor’ or creating sectoral standards for digital work, to ensure a baseline of rights and security. This would represent a crucial step in affirming the dignity of all workers, irrespective of their contractual status, and in preventing the digital economy from fostering a new underclass.

Ultimately, these policy implications underscore that Eswatini’s journey towards a digital future must be guided by a sociologically-informed vision which places human dignity at its core. The kingdom’s development agenda should explicitly aim to harness digital technologies to create not only wealth but also meaningful work that reinforces positive social identities and community cohesion. By foregrounding these dimensions, Eswatini can craft a distinctive and sustainable path of digital transformation that resonates with local values and aspirations, setting a precedent for contextualised policy-making in the African context.

## Recommendations

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Building upon the identified policy implications, a multi-pronged strategy is required to harness digital transformation for enhancing, rather than eroding, work-based dignity in Eswatini. Firstly, the government, in partnership with telecommunications providers and educational institutions, must prioritise the development of foundational and advanced digital literacy programmes that extend beyond urban centres. Such initiatives should be explicitly designed to preserve the social identity and communal knowledge embedded in traditional sectors, perhaps by digitising indigenous crafts for global markets while ensuring artisans retain ownership and recognition .

Secondly, a critical revision of labour legislation is imperative to explicitly recognise and protect workers in platform-mediated gig economies, who currently occupy a precarious legal grey area. Establishing clear criteria for employment relationships, alongside provisions for fair algorithmic management and dispute resolution, would confer a basic legal dignity upon this growing workforce and mitigate the risks of digital exploitation . Concurrently, the private sector must be incentivised through targeted policy to move beyond a purely technocratic adoption of digital tools and towards a more sociologically informed model of innovation.

This involves fostering workplace cultures where digitalisation complements human skill rather than merely displaces it, thereby supporting workers’ sense of competence and identity. Programmes that facilitate the co-creation of digital solutions with employees, particularly in Eswatini’s dominant agricultural and manufacturing sectors, could ensure technologies augment dignified labour and sustain communal work practices . Furthermore, supporting the formation of digital cooperatives and entrepreneur networks can provide a collective buffer against the isolation and volatility of digital

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piecework, enabling microbusinesses to pool resources, share risks, and build a collective professional identity that reinforces individual dignity.

Ultimately, these recommendations advocate for a syncretic approach that aligns technological adoption with Eswatini's specific social fabric. Continuous, participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, involving trade unions, civil society, and worker representatives, are essential to assess the sociological impacts of digitalisation on different demographic groups. This ongoing dialogue will ensure that policies remain responsive, helping to forge a future where digital economic growth in Eswatini is inextricably linked to the strengthening of work-based identity and the universal provision of dignified employment .

The goal is not to resist technological change, but to consciously shape its trajectory so that it reinforces, rather than undermines, the sociologically rich connections between work, self-worth, and community in the kingdom.

## Conclusion

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This analysis has demonstrated that the digital transformation of work in Eswatini presents a complex duality, simultaneously challenging and reconstituting the sociological dimensions of employment, identity, and dignity. While digital platforms and automation introduce precariousness and disrupt traditional occupational identities, they also create new avenues for economic participation and narrative reconstruction of the self, albeit within constrained parameters. The central contribution of this policy brief lies in synthesising these sociological insights with pragmatic business and policy considerations, arguing that dignity in the digital age must be framed not merely as a residual outcome of employment but as a foundational principle for labour market governance.

Consequently, the most pressing practical implication for Eswatini is the urgent need to evolve its social contract, ensuring that regulatory frameworks and corporate practices explicitly protect worker agency and social recognition amidst technological change. The preceding recommendations, focusing on adaptive regulation, social dialogue, and inclusive digital infrastructure, provide a concrete pathway for stakeholders to mitigate the risks of digital disruption while harnessing its potential for dignified work. Implementing these measures requires a concerted, multi-stakeholder approach that prioritises the voices of workers themselves in shaping the future of work.

A critical next step, therefore, is the commissioning of a national social dialogue forum dedicated to the future of work, tasked with translating these broad principles into a costed, time-bound national action plan specific to Eswatini's socio-economic context. Ultimately, the trajectory of digital transformation need not be deterministic; with deliberate and informed policy intervention, Eswatini can steer technological adoption towards outcomes that reinforce, rather than erode, the dignity of its workforce. Future research should longitudinally track the lived experiences of workers navigating this transition, providing an evidence base to continually refine policy.

By placing sociological understandings of identity and dignity at the heart of its digital strategy, Eswatini can aspire to a form of modernisation that is both economically progressive and profoundly human-centred.

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## Contributions

This policy brief makes a distinct contribution by applying a sociological lens to the specific business context of Eswatini's digital transformation. It provides an original analysis of how rapid technological adoption, observed during 2021-2022, is reshaping workplace identities and challenging traditional notions of occupational dignity.

The study offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and business leaders seeking to foster inclusive digital economies. Furthermore, it enriches scholarly discourse by centring African experiences in global debates on the future of work, moving beyond purely economic or technical frameworks to highlight the profound human dimensions of employment change.

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