Digital leadership in South Korea

Developing leaders for the digital age is mission-critical for organisational success.
Korn Ferry research indicates that leaders across Asia are not yet digital-ready and risk derailing digital sustainability initiatives by perpetuating legacy ways of working. We also hear from many leaders who understand the need for change, but are struggling to balance performance expectations today, while innovating for the future.

The fact is, according to Korn Ferry’s digital sustainability research, failure to act now risks the future success of the business and has real and quantifiable bottom-line impact.

The research also pinpoints people as the lynchpin of digital sustainability. The role of leaders in activating people to support change can’t be underestimated. But first, leaders must personally transform in order to inspire and engage their people and create a more open, agile and networked culture to power performance.

Korn Ferry’s DSI research quantifies the compelling commercial advantages of digital sustainability:

The index proves that high performers in the dimensions of sustainable transformation see a 5.6 percentage point increase in profit margin (earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation — EBITDA) versus the low performers.

People are the key to unlocking these benefits; the DSI dimensions describe the essential organisational conditions but great digital leaders must operationalise them for success.

Download the report here:
http://engage.kornferry.com/digital-sustainability-kfhome
Great digital leaders are flexible and inclusive, responding seamlessly to the push-and-pull priorities of the digital environment.

Drawing on the Korn Ferry Four Dimensions of Leadership and the Korn Ferry Assessment of Leadership Potential, we analysed the traits, competencies and drivers of more than 500 digital leaders, and compared them against population norms from our 4.5 million data point assessment database to create a distinctive profile of the qualities needed for the digital age.

Together, these characteristics describe a leader who is people-centric, not necessarily tech-centric. They’re humble leaders who are innately comfortable in dealing with risk in unstructured and ambiguous environments. Combined with strong situational and emotional awareness, these qualities allow them to step back and empower their people to test ideas; to succeed or fail and change direction as the conditions require. Critically, they create a supportive and focused environment for their people through engaging and inspiring them in a strong future vision and keeping a continued eye on driving for results.

What do great digital leaders look like?

The unique characteristics of high-performing digital leaders

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<tr>
<th>Traits</th>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>Drivers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Cultivate innovation</td>
<td>Independence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tackle problems in a novel way, see patterns in complex information and pursue deep understanding</td>
<td>Prefer an entrepreneurial approach and limited organisational constraints</td>
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<td>Risk taking</td>
<td>Manage ambiguity</td>
<td>Structure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are willing to take a stand, or take changes based on limited information</td>
<td>Prefer asymmetric, unstructured work environments</td>
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<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Strategic vision</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are comfortable with unanticipated changes of direction or approach</td>
<td>Are motivated by achievement in the face of tough obstacles</td>
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<td>Tolerance of ambiguity</td>
<td>See ahead to future possibilities and translate them into breakthrough strategies</td>
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<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Engage and inspire</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Believe that they can influence positive outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consistently achieve results, even under tough circumstances</td>
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Spotlight on South Korea

The South Korea leadership profile reveals significant gaps against the great digital leader archetype, but change is possible.

South Korean leaders have a strong entrepreneurial spirit rooted in a strong sense of responsibility, shown by their high independence driver. This spirit is a strong motivator for leaders and finding ways to embrace the entrepreneurial aspects of this driver more frequently in more situations will help grow their capacity for working through and making decisions in uncertain conditions, as well as fostering breakthrough solutions.

Cutting against this is a general preference for structure, which may be culturally informed particularly for leaders who have grown up in the South Korean economy. This can promote the “safe” approach, rather than giving free rein to more ‘out of the box’ thinking and iterative decision-making. These preferences also play out in the significant gaps in the traits relating to curiosity, confidence and risk-taking and their capacity to cultivate innovation.

South Korean leaders show a high level of discomfort with ambiguity which limits their capacity to manage and adapt to changing conditions. Increasing their comfort level here will be essential for leading in the digital age and will also help them to develop a strong vision for the digital future of the enterprise to better engage and inspire their people.

South Korean Leaders vs global digital benchmark

Given the relatively small sample size of 200 South Korean leaders, further research is required to validate our findings.

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Based on Korn Ferry Assessment data.
Three ways to kickstart the shift to a digital mindset

1. Prioritise

Don’t do everything at once. Instead, take time to diagnose the critical leadership circuit breaker in your organisation. Create opportunities to clear this blockage first and build from there. This could involve engaging leaders’ entrepreneurial driver to encourage more curiosity and help grow their risk tolerance rather than reverting to what they know to be certain.

2. Start recruiting and developing the mindset

While working with existing leaders, start investing in the next generation. While recruiting leaders with international exposure may help bring in a less structured mindset, South Korean businesses also need to invest in their homegrown talent. Develop a holistic talent strategy, supported by assessments and success profiles, to engage internal and external talent in the vision for the organisation and how they can contribute to it, even in the early stages of their career.

3. Create and align symbols of change

Many of the challenges facing South Korean leaders have their roots in cultural norms which are difficult to shift. Actively creating symbols of change that align to the organisation’s goals will help address this. This might mean creating opportunities to open up hierarchies by using new channels of communication between leaders and employees through collaborative software and encouraging more connectivity between employees with international exposure and those who have grown up in South Korea.

We hear our clients talking a lot about industry 4.0; it’s part of our culture - we’re very sensitive to new things and pay attention to change. Business leaders know that change will be the norm and that uncertainty and ambiguity come with this. Now, that knowledge and awareness needs to be channelled into action.

Kyounghee Lawton
Senior Client Partner and Managing Director
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Find out more

Download our whitepaper on ‘Digital Leadership in Asia Pacific’

http://focus.kornferry.com/digital-leadership
About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organisational consulting firm. We help companies design their organisation—the structure, the roles and responsibilities, as well as how they compensate, develop and motivate their people. As importantly, we help organisations select and hire the talent they need to execute their strategy. Our approximately 7,000 colleagues serve clients in more than 50 countries.

About The Korn Ferry Institute

The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books, and a quarterly magazine, Briefings, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth, and success. Visit kornferryinstitute.com for more information.