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Human Touch, Digital Reach: Leading Hybrid Teams in Central India

[1] [2] [3]
Pragya Patel | Pragati Patidar | Dr. Shine David
[2]
IMS DAVV (Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya), Indore, Madhya Pradesh,
[1] [2] [3]
patelpragya281@gmail.com pragatipatidar90@gmail.com daviddrshine@gmail.com

Abstract— This study examines how Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Digital HRM Practices (DHRM) together shape Leadership Efficacy (LE) among service-sector employees in Madhya Pradesh, Central India. EI and DHRM are tested as predictors, with Psychological Safety (PS) and Employee Trust (ET) as mediators. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey of 144 respondents was analysed with GLM Mediation Analysis in Jamovi.

EI had the strongest total effect on LE ($\beta = 0.426$, $p < .001$). Employee Trust was the main mediator for both EI ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < .001$) and DHRM ($\beta = 0.130$, $p = .001$). DHRM also had a direct effect on LE ($\beta = 0.209$, $p = .006$). PS was strongly shaped by EI ($\beta = 0.507$) and DHRM ($\beta = 0.272$) but did not mediate LE on its own; it appears to be a supporting condition for trust, which fits India's hierarchical workplaces. To our knowledge, this is the first study to test an integrated EI–DHRM–LE model in Central India.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Digital HRM Practices, Leadership Efficacy, Psychological Safety, Employee Trust, Hybrid Work, Madhya Pradesh

I. INTRODUCTION

India's service sector is changing fast. Hybrid work, where employees split their time between home and office, has pushed organisations to rethink what good leadership looks like. The same digital tools that make organisations efficient can also create emotional distance that traditional leadership was not built to handle.

Digital HRM systems, such as AI-based performance tracking, automated feedback and virtual onboarding, have changed how HR works. But these systems cannot build trust, inspire teams or support employees through uncertainty on their own. This is where Emotional Intelligence (EI) matters. A leader who can recognise, understand and manage emotions, both their own and their team's, links a digital HR system to genuinely human-centred leadership.

This is especially true in India, where workplace culture rests on personal relationships, mentorship and respect for hierarchy. Although EI and DHRM both matter in India's IT, BPO, banking and consulting sectors, little research has studied how they work together to shape leadership effectiveness.

Madhya Pradesh is a useful setting. Its service sector is growing, and Indore, its commercial capital, is also its leading IT hub, home to Crystal IT Park and firms such as TCS, Infosys and Impetus. These firms serve clients across time zones, so hybrid work is common there.

This study therefore brings EI and DHRM together in one model. It examines how they jointly influence Leadership Efficacy, defined as a leader's confidence and ability to guide teams through hybrid work challenges, with Psychological Safety and Employee Trust as connecting pathways. It uses responses from 144 working professionals in Madhya Pradesh.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review covers 15 peer-reviewed, open-access studies published between 2021 and 2026 and indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science. It is organised into three areas: (A) Emotional Intelligence and Leadership, (B) Digital HRM Practices, and (C) the link between EI, Digital HRM and leadership.

A. Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Efficacy

1. Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez (2023). This review of 104 articles (1998–2022) found that emotionally intelligent leaders improve individual behaviour and organisational outcomes, especially in teams. Transformational leadership was most closely linked to high EI. The authors called for more research on post-COVID hybrid and digital workplaces, which is the gap this study addresses.

2. Kavitha Kumari et al. (2022). Using PLS-SEM on 422 respondents, this study found a strong positive link between servant leadership and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), with EI as a partial mediator. In Indian service settings, emotionally intelligent leaders encourage employees to go beyond their formal roles.

3. Lai et al. (2024). This study found that perceived EI fully mediates the link between affective job satisfaction and organisational identification. When employees see high EI in their leaders, they identify more strongly with the organisation, which can help retention in India's high-turnover service sector.

4. Papadimitriou et al. (2025). This PRISMA-based systematic review showed that transformational leaders improve employee performance through higher EI and stronger cognitive skills. All reviewed studies linked higher EI with greater leadership effectiveness.

5. Kranthi (2024). This India-based study found that EI-driven leadership does not produce learning outcomes directly. It works first by building psychologically safe and empowered environments. In India's hierarchical organisations, safety and empowerment may therefore need to come before leadership efficacy fully appears.

6. Santa, Moros et al. (2023). Using structural equation modelling, this study found that EI positively influences both OCB and leadership style, which together drive operational effectiveness. EI's effect therefore often works through other channels, in line with the mediated pathways tested here.

7. Valderrama-Diaz et al. (2026). This meta-analysis of 22 studies found positive correlations between EI and team effectiveness ($r \approx 0.41$), transformational leadership and team

effectiveness (r ≈ 0.45), and EI and transformational leadership (r ≈ 0.63). Most studies were in the services sector, which limits generalisability.

B. Digital HRM Practices and Organisational Outcomes

8. Hu & Lan (2024). This time-lagged study (N = 487) found that digital HRM improves innovative performance by increasing employees' sense of work gain, while reducing counterproductive behaviour by addressing relative deprivation.

9. Zhou et al. (2025). This study found that when employees understand the purpose and effects of digital HRM changes, they align better with organisational goals and behave more constructively. This matters in India, where digital skills vary widely.

10. Fenwick, Molnar & Frangos (2024). This paper argued that AI in HRM, including predictive analytics, automated performance management and AI-driven training, needs a human-centred approach to succeed. Without EI, digital HRM risks becoming technically advanced but emotionally disconnected, which links DHRM and EI directly.

11. Singh & Pandey (2024). This case study of AI adoption in Indian HR found that digital leadership, HR data readiness and human–machine collaboration are key success factors. Adoption is still uneven, particularly in service industries, so emotionally intelligent leaders are needed to manage the change.

12. Zhang et al. (2023). This study identified four directions of digital HRM transformation: digital recruitment, performance evaluation, learning and development, and employee engagement. Leaders with better digital HR tools get better talent information and smoother people management, which may explain the direct effect of DHRM on LE found here (β = 0.209, p = .006).

C. Convergence of EI, Digital HRM and Leadership

13. Kilroy et al. (2022). Using the idea of a 'Zone of Reciprocity', this study showed that managers' behaviour shapes how supported employees feel, which drives commitment and OCB. HR practices, digital or not, do not work alone: the emotional quality of frontline leadership decides whether they improve performance.

14. Li, Yang et al. (2024). This study found that digital leaders with high EI raise employee engagement by combining technical skill with empathy. EI mediated the link between digital leadership and engagement, so it acts as a bridge between digital practices and leadership results.

15. Levitats, Ivcevic & Brackett (2022). This study found that EI-related HRM practices predict higher engagement and protect against exhaustion. HR practices can carry EI norms across an organisation, so digital HRM that supports EI could build leadership efficacy beyond individual leaders.

III. RESEARCH GAP AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

A. Research Gap

The reviewed studies show the importance of emotional intelligence (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Papadimitriou et al., 2025; Valderrama-Diaz et al., 2026), digital HRM (Hu & Lan, 2024; Zhou et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023) and leadership efficacy (Kranthi, 2024; Kilroy et al., 2022). However, no study we know of has tested how EI and DHRM together predict Leadership Efficacy in India's service sector. Existing evidence comes mainly from China (Hu & Lan, 2024; Zhou et al., 2025), the United States (Levitats et al., 2022) and Europe (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Valderrama-Diaz et al., 2026). India's hierarchical structures and fast-digitising HR functions need their own evidence. Li et al. (2024) and Kilroy et al. (2022) point to EI as a bridge between digital practices and leadership outcomes, but this has not been tested in Indian services.

B. Conceptual Model

The study tests the following model:

- **EI as a predictor.** EI is the ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions in oneself and others. Here EI reflects employees' perceptions of their leaders' emotional behaviour, not leaders' self-reports.
- **DHRM as a predictor.** Digital recruitment, onboarding, feedback and training systems streamline HR work and improve access to performance data, which can reduce leaders' administrative load (Zhang et al., 2023). This may explain the direct effect of DHRM on LE (β = 0.209, p = .006).
- **PS and ET as mediators.** PS and ET are built by both EI and DHRM and in turn help leaders perform better. The strong PS–ET correlation (r = 0.669) suggests that safety creates the conditions for trust to grow.
- **LE as the outcome.** LE is a leader's confidence and ability to guide hybrid teams through digital-era challenges.

The model shows how human and digital factors combine to build leadership effectiveness. The study tests the separate effects of EI and DHRM, not whether they interact.

C. Study Contributions

- Tests an integrated EI–DHRM–LE model in an Indian hybrid service setting.
- Identifies Employee Trust as the main mediator through which EI and DHRM influence leadership.
- Shows that Psychological Safety works as an upstream condition for trust rather than a direct mediator, which fits India's high power-distance workplaces.
- Gives HR practitioners evidence for investing in both EI development and digital HR systems.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine how EI and DHRM influence LE through PS and ET. GLM Mediation Analysis in Jamovi tested direct, indirect and total effects at the same time. All β values are completely standardised coefficients.

B. Research Objectives

- To assess the direct effects of EI and DHRM on Leadership Efficacy.
- To examine the mediating roles of PS and ET in the EI/DHRM–LE relationship.
- To identify significant standardised path coefficients (β) among the five constructs using GLM Mediation Analysis.

C. Population and Sample

The population is employees of service-sector organisations with hybrid work experience, including IT, BPO, consulting, banking and CA offices, mainly in Indore and Madhya Pradesh. There

were 144 valid responses with no missing values. Of these, 60.4% were male and 38.9% female (one preferred not to say), and 54.9% were aged 18–23 and 25.7% aged 24–28. Most worked in the private sector (67.4%), followed by the public sector (27.8%) and semi-government bodies (4.8%). By business type, 50.7% were in services, 21.5% in IT/technology, 8.3% in combined service and IT, and 19.4% in manufacturing and others.

D. Sampling Method

Convenience-cum-purposive sampling was used to reach people with direct hybrid work experience. Respondents were recruited through LinkedIn, WhatsApp networks and in-person visits in Indore and Madhya Pradesh. This reached people familiar with hybrid work but limits generalisability (see Limitations).

E. Research Instrument

Data were collected through an online questionnaire (Google Forms) in English and Hindi, with 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) across five sections:

- **Leader's Emotional Intelligence (6 items):** perceiving, using, understanding and managing emotions in hybrid work, as seen by employees.
- **Digital HRM Practices (5 items):** AI-enabled recruitment, virtual onboarding, digital training, performance monitoring and team engagement tools.
- **Psychological Safety (5 items):** interpersonal risk-taking, openness in virtual meetings and freedom from fear of judgment.
- **Employee Trust (5 items):** trust in leaders' ability, benevolence and integrity.
- **Leadership Efficacy (3 items):** confidence in communicating vision, giving emotional support and guiding teams through hybrid transitions.

F. Common Method Bias Assessment

All constructs were self-reported by the same respondents at one time, so common method bias (CMB) is possible. To check this, Harman's single-factor test was run on all 24 items using principal components extraction without rotation. The first factor explained 31.2% of the variance, well below the 50% concern threshold. The pattern of correlations (Table 2) also lacks the uniformly high values typical of severe CMB. Future research should use multi-source or time-lagged data.

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the five constructs, all measured on a 5-point scale (N = 144, no missing data).

Variable	Mean (x■)	Median	SD	Min	Max	Skew	Kurt
EI_Score	3.53	3.67	0.759	1.17	5.00	−0.493	0.119
DHRM_Score	3.53	3.60	0.849	1.00	5.00	−0.586	0.532
PS_Score	3.48	3.40	0.790	1.00	5.00	−0.280	0.789
ET_Score	3.64	3.80	0.864	1.40	5.00	−0.180	−0.335
LE_Score	3.78	4.00	0.830	1.33	5.00	−0.336	−0.096

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 144). Skewness is within ±1 and kurtosis within ±2, supporting normality.

Means ranged from 3.48 to 3.78. Leadership Efficacy had the highest mean (M = 3.78, SD = 0.830), followed by Employee Trust (M = 3.64). EI and DHRM were rated equally (M = 3.53), so respondents see the human and digital sides as equally present. Psychological Safety had the lowest mean (M = 3.48), pointing to a climate gap that can be addressed.

B. Pearson Correlation Matrix

As Table 2 shows, all correlations were positive and significant at $p < .001$.

Variable	EI	DHRM	PS	ET	LE
EI	—				
DHRM	0.573***	—			
PS	0.663***	0.563***	—		
ET	0.589***	0.562***	0.669***	—	
LE	0.613***	0.569***	0.525***	0.648***	—

*Table 2: Pearson's Correlation Matrix. *** $p < .001$. No correlation exceeds 0.85, so multicollinearity is not a concern.*

The strongest correlation was between PS and ET (r = 0.669), which supports the idea that PS is an upstream condition that builds trust. The ET–LE correlation (r = 0.648) gives early support for ET as the main pathway to LE.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the GLM Mediation Analysis, with EI and DHRM as predictors, PS and ET as mediators and LE as the outcome.

A. GLM Mediation Analysis: Model Structure

The model was run in Jamovi as three simultaneous regressions: (m1) PS ~ EI + DHRM; (m2) ET ~ EI + DHRM; and (m3) LE ~ PS + ET + EI + DHRM. Four indirect effects (EI and DHRM → PS or ET → LE) were tested using completely standardised coefficients (β) and Delta-method confidence intervals (N = 144). Table 3 gives the results.

Type	Effect / Path	Est.	SE	β (Std.)	z	p-value
Indirect	EI → PS → LE	−0.0272	0.0487	−0.025	−0.559	.576 (ns)
	EI → ET → LE	0.1690	0.0486	0.155	3.479	<.001 ***
	DHRM → PS → LE	−0.0131	0.0236	−0.013	−0.554	.579 (ns)
	DHRM → ET → LE	0.1268	0.0398	0.130	3.187	.001 **
Component	EI → PS	0.5286	0.0757	0.507	6.985	<.001 ***
	PS → LE	−0.0515	0.0919	−0.049	−0.560	.575 (ns)
	EI → ET	0.4524	0.0881	0.397	5.137	<.001 ***
	ET → LE	0.3735	0.0790	0.389	4.728	<.001 ***
	DHRM → PS	0.2535	0.0677	0.272	3.747	<.001 ***
	DHRM → ET	0.3396	0.0787	0.334	4.313	<.001 ***
Direct	EI → LE	0.3241	0.0900	0.297	3.600	<.001 ***

	DHRM → LE	0.2039	0.0738	0.209	2.764	.006 **
Total	EI → LE	0.4658	0.0831	0.426	5.609	<.001 ***
	DHRM → LE	0.3177	0.0743	0.325	4.279	<.001 ***

*Table 3: GLM Mediation Results. β = completely standardised coefficients. CI: Delta method. N = 144. *** p < .001, ** p < .01, ns = not significant.*

B. Path Model

Figure 1 shows the tested model with standardised coefficients (β) on each path. Significant paths (p < .05) are marked with asterisks and non-significant paths with (ns).

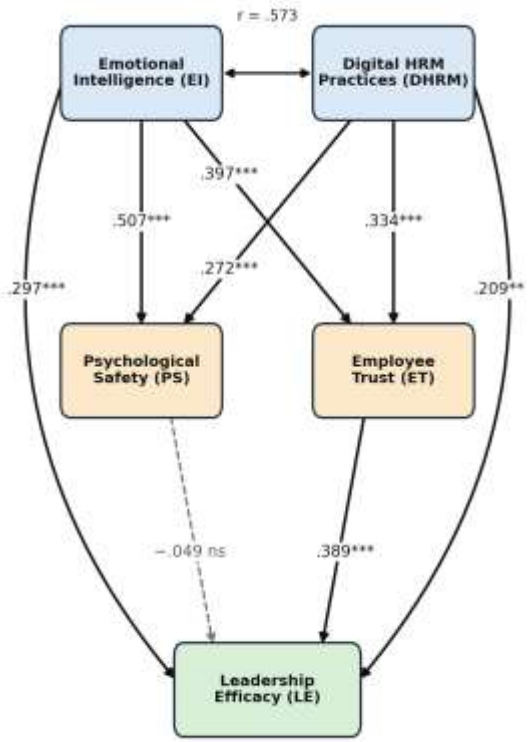


*Figure 1: Path diagram of the tested model (standardised β). Solid lines = significant paths; dashed line = non-significant (ns). *** p < .001, ** p < .01. EI and DHRM are correlated (Pearson r = .573).*

C. Finding 1: EI Is the Strongest Overall Predictor of Leadership Efficacy

EI had the highest total effect on LE (β = 0.426, p < .001), above DHRM (β = 0.325, p < .001). In this model, EI matters more than DHRM for leadership outcomes. The direct effect of EI on LE was also significant (β = 0.297, p < .001), so EI works both directly and through mediators. This agrees with Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez (2023), Papadimitriou et al. (2025) and Valderrama-Diaz et al. (2026). For India's service sector, digital transformation without EI development is not enough to build effective hybrid leadership.

D. Finding 2: Employee Trust Is the Main Mediating Pathway

Both indirect effects through ET were significant: EI → ET → LE (β = 0.155, p < .001) and DHRM → ET → LE (β = 0.130, p = .001). Organisations should therefore invest in building trust, not just skills or systems. This supports Kilroy et al. (2022), who showed that the emotional quality of frontline managers' behaviour decides whether HR practices lead to real outcomes.

E. Finding 3: Psychological Safety Is Built but Does Not Mediate on Its Own

EI predicted PS (β = 0.507, p < .001) and so did DHRM (β = 0.272, p < .001), but the indirect paths through PS to LE were not significant (EI → PS → LE: p = .576; DHRM → PS → LE: p = .579). We read this as a refinement of PS's role, not a failure. PS is a shared climate that makes risk-taking feel safe, while trust is a judgement about a leader's ability, benevolence and integrity. A mediator carries an effect, whereas a condition makes it possible, and the data suggest PS plays the second role. Its near-zero path to LE (β = −0.049) likely reflects shared variance with ET and EI, not a true negative effect.

This order makes sense in Indian workplaces, which are often high in power distance. Employees first judge whether it is safe to speak up, disagree or admit mistakes before they extend trust to leaders. This matches Kranthi (2024), who found that safe and empowered environments must come first in India. PS therefore seems to work upstream of trust, not alongside it, unlike Western models that treat them as equal parallel pathways. Because the PS → ET path was not modelled directly, future studies should test this order with serial mediation.

F. Finding 4: DHRM Directly Predicts Leadership Efficacy

DHRM also directly predicted LE (β = 0.209, p = .006). DHRM seems to help by reducing leaders' administrative load and giving them better data for decisions. Zhang et al. (2023) found that tools such as digital performance evaluation give leaders better people information, and Fenwick et al. (2024) argued that human-centred AI-driven HR systems are strategic enablers of leadership, not just efficiency tools. This resolves the apparent 'digital distance paradox': DHRM does not replace human leadership but equips leaders to lead better.

G. Finding 5: EI and DHRM Are Independent, Complementary Predictors

EI predicted both PS (β = 0.507) and ET (β = 0.397), and DHRM also predicted both PS (β = 0.272) and ET (β = 0.334), all at p < .001. Both kept significant direct effects on LE when entered together (EI: β = 0.297; DHRM: β = 0.209), so each adds unique explanatory value. This fits an additive pattern. We did not test whether the two interact, so we make no claim of synergy. In practice, organisations do not need to choose between developing emotionally intelligent leaders and investing in digital HR tools. This supports Fenwick et al. (2024), who warned that digital HRM without EI can be technically advanced but humanly disconnected, and Li et al. (2024).

H. Synthesis: How the EI–DHRM–LE Process Works

Process summary: EI + DHRM → PS + ET → LE. ET is the main pathway and PS the upstream climate that enables trust. Most of each effect is direct (EI: 0.297 of 0.426; DHRM: 0.209 of 0.325), so organisations should invest in the human and digital sides of leadership together (Kilroy et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024).

VII. LIMITATIONS

- **Sampling.** Respondents came from convenience-cum-purposive sampling (LinkedIn, WhatsApp and in-person visits), mainly in Indore and Madhya Pradesh. The sample skews young, digitally connected and urban, so findings may not generalise. Future studies should use stratified random sampling across cities and sectors.

- **Cross-sectional design.** Data capture perceptions at one point in time, so the mediation results show association, not proven cause. Longitudinal designs would help.
- **Single-source self-report data.** All constructs were self-reported by the same respondents. Harman's test (31.2%) suggests CMB is not a major concern, but multi-source data would be stronger.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Conclusion

This study examined how EI and DHRM together shape Leadership Efficacy in Central India's service sector, using data from 144 respondents.

The results show five connected patterns. First, EI is the strongest driver of Leadership Efficacy (total β = 0.426); about 70% of its effect is direct (β = 0.297) and the rest passes through trust. Second, DHRM also helps (total β = 0.325), both directly (β = 0.209) and through trust (β = 0.130). Third, Employee Trust is the working mediator: both EI → ET → LE (β = 0.155, p < .001) and DHRM → ET → LE (β = 0.130, p = .001) were significant. Fourth, Psychological Safety is strongly built by EI (β = 0.507) and DHRM (β = 0.272) but did not mediate LE (β = −0.049, p = .575); because it correlates most strongly with trust (r = 0.669), it appears to be a supporting condition for trust. Fifth, EI and DHRM keep separate direct effects on LE, so they work side by side rather than replacing each other.

Overall, the pattern is: EI and DHRM → Psychological Safety (supports) → Employee Trust (carries the effect) → Leadership Efficacy, with direct paths from EI and DHRM as well. The study did not test a moderator; hybrid work is the setting, not a variable. Because the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, the results show association, not proven cause. The study adds India-specific evidence to a field that lacked it.

B. Implications

Theoretical implications

- **Tests EI and DHRM together.** EI and DHRM each keep a direct effect on LE, so they add to each other rather than replace each other.
- **Refines the role of psychological safety.** Both EI and DHRM build it, but it works as an upstream climate for trust rather than a parallel mediator, which fits high power-distance workplaces (Kranthi, 2024).
- **Positions trust as the main pathway.** EI and digital HR practices reach leadership efficacy largely through the quality of leader–employee relationships (Kilroy et al., 2022).

Managerial and HR implications

- **Build EI through structured programmes.** EI has the strongest total effect on LE (β = 0.426), so EI training should be part of leadership development for managers of hybrid teams (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Papadimitriou et al., 2025).
- **Design DHRM around human outcomes.** Judge digital HR tools by how well they support trust and leader capability, not only efficiency (Zhang et al., 2023; Fenwick et al., 2024).
- **Treat trust as a measurable goal.** Build it through regular check-ins, transparent digital feedback and fair digital decisions (Kilroy et al., 2022).
- **Invest in psychological safety.** Employees need to feel safe to speak up and disagree, which is likely to support trust (Kranthi, 2024).

Implications for Madhya Pradesh and Indore

- **Service and IT employers.** In Madhya Pradesh's growing service economy, and for Indore's IT firms in particular, the priority is to pair digital HR investment with emotionally intelligent, trust-building leaders.
- **Regional skilling.** State bodies, IT parks and management institutes could include EI and hybrid-leadership training in workforce programmes.
- **Scope.** Because of convenience sampling, these implications are indicative for Central India, not nationally representative.

Implications for future research

- **Test the links not examined here.** Future studies should test whether EI and DHRM interact, model PS → ET in a serial mediation (EI/DHRM → PS → ET → LE).
- **Strengthen the design.** Larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal data and multi-source measures would clarify the causal order of the five constructs.

C. Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the findings show that leadership effectiveness in hybrid, digitally managed service organisations rests on people as much as on technology. Organisations that develop emotionally intelligent leaders and design digital HR practices around trust can expect stronger leadership efficacy, a safer climate for open communication and more reliable leader–employee relationships. These benefits matter for business because confident leaders and trusting teams are better placed to sustain performance, retain talent and adapt to change in hybrid work settings. Employers in Central India, and in Madhya Pradesh and Indore in particular, can therefore gain most by treating emotional intelligence and digital HR as complementary investments rather than competing priorities.

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