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The role of accountants in promoting SME's financial digital transformation

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Abstract

Financial digitalization is a critical challenge for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Many stakeholders in the SME sector are not able to keep pace with digitalization on their own, especially in financial accounting. This research aims to investigate the role of accountants and financial professionals in accelerating the financial digital transition within the SME sector. Specifically, it explores how these professionals can foster a supportive environment for digitalization by promoting relevant attitudes and professional knowledge among the owners and managers of the firms. The study employs questionnaire surveys (managers, accountants) and in-depth interviews with SME managers and leaders of accounting firms. The findings reveal that the digital development and transformation of SMEs can be facilitated through the proactive recommendations, guidance, and expectations of accountants and bookkeeping firms. The targeted support from these service providers enables SMEs to enhance their adoption of digital financial tools, improve the integration of these solutions, and streamline financial processes. Additionally, the research identifies a multiplicative, spill-over effect, where accountants drive broader digitalization within their client networks by disseminating innovative procedures and applications, ultimately benefiting the wider SME ecosystem.

Keywords: Corporate digitalization, Digital accounting, Digital finance, Financial data processing, SMEs' digital transition.

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1. Introduction

One of the authors, as the owner and managing director of a bookkeeping company in Hungary, offering services to SMEs and as a practicing financial-accounting professional, is routinely engaged with the challenges and opportunities of financial digitalization. The growing prevalence of IT, accounting, and financial software solutions has become indispensable in daily operations. Financial digitalization represents a critical and rapidly evolving priority, influenced by both government regulatory frameworks and advancements in information technology.

Based on our professional experience, we observe that many companies in the SME sector are unable to keep pace with digitalization on their own, especially in financial accounting. As a result, the digital transformation of these companies is often incomplete or unattainable without external support. This underscores the importance of identifying and utilizing tools and strategies that can support the digital transformation of the SME sector.

The article aims to explore the role of accounting and bookkeeping service providers in advancing the digital transformation of the SME sector. This area requires investigation due to a common characteristic of SMEs: they typically outsource their accounting and bookkeeping functions to external service providers such as accountants and bookkeeping firms rather than relying on internal resources. Given the limited capacity for financial digitalization within SMEs, the role of external service providers in driving digital transformation becomes a critical factor for the sector's broader progress in adopting financial digital tools and practices.

On the other hand, financial accounting service providers as SMEs themselves must develop a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges posed by financial digitalization. This understanding is essential not only for serving their clients effectively but also for managing their own operations efficiently. A major challenge for these firms is the wide variety of digital applications and services their clients use, requiring them to figure out how to connect each one, understand the data they receive, and integrate it into their accounting software smoothly. As the pace of digitalization accelerates, accounting service providers face increasing challenges. The growing complexity of integrating various digital tools and platforms demands advanced IT competencies, extending beyond the scope of traditional accounting and bookkeeping responsibilities. This evolution underscores the need for these firms to expand their technological skillsets to keep pace with digital transformation.

The present research serves as an exploratory pilot study, designed to evaluate the viability of the proposed research direction and hypotheses. Its primary objective is to test the preliminary assumptions and establish a methodological foundation for future research. By analyzing the insights and findings gathered through in-depth interviews conducted within this study, the research aims to refine its hypotheses and develop a comprehensive framework for subsequent investigations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature Review

This research focuses on the domestic SME sector, so the literature review summarizes key publications on SMEs and presents the main research directions in the field of digitalization in Hungary. Most studies have addressed the level of digital maturity and digitalization, although other aspects have also been explored. The review then provides a brief international overview, as digitalization is a global issue. However, the aim is not to cover the entire international literature but to highlight some recent ideas and approaches from publications on the topic.

According to Gubán and Sándor [1] in the ongoing digital revolution, the digital maturity of a business will determine the success of its digital transformation. To support this, they developed a model called the Digital Maturity Technical Architecture (DÉTA), which is based on resource-based theories, maturity models, and SME management studies. The model is designed to enable SMEs to evaluate their current level of digital maturity, providing a clear understanding of their position in this area. It identifies two main dimensions (IT and Organizational Dimensions) and breaks these down into three components for each: Technical Solutions, Hardware, Software (IT dimension), and ICT Organization, Online Presence, and Human ICT (Organizational Dimension). In total, the model includes 28 sub-components distributed across these areas. These components were assigned different weights in the final index based on expert queries. None of the 28 sub-components specifically address data linkage or integration with accounting systems or accounting firms.

Sándor and Gubán [2] developed a digital maturity lifecycle model that uses the digital maturity indicator to position SMEs within a lifecycle framework. This multidimensional model considers not only digital maturity but also the IT intensity of different industries, as well as organizational characteristics. The model identifies five maturity levels: entering, pathfinder, advanced, guiding, and optimizing. Notably, these levels are not fixed; firms can progress or regress between them.

The digital transformation of a firm is also influenced by its leadership. Dióssy et al. [3] examined how different leadership styles impact this process. Their research, which analyzed the leadership styles of 94 manufacturing firms, described leadership styles as relationship-oriented and task-oriented, and classified digital transformation into strategy development and digitalization activities. They have found that while both leadership styles have significant positive effects on strategy development, only the task-oriented leadership style has a positive effect on digitalization activities. However, this study does not specifically focus on financial managers or accountants but addresses managers in general.

The importance of digital transformation for the national economy is also underscored by experts from the Hungarian National Bank Baksay and Nagy [4] who warn that countries failing to embrace digital transformation risk falling behind. This could lead to a lasting divide between digitally advanced and underdeveloped economies, industries, and companies. While they acknowledge that Hungary possesses adequate digital infrastructure, they also highlight that there is still considerable room for improvement in its use. Therefore, understanding how accounting firms can assist their clients in navigating the digital transition can generate value even at the national economic level.

Given the SME sector's access to international markets, it is important to underline that the competitiveness of domestic companies on a global scale largely depends on their level of digitalization [5]. The same study identifies two primary barriers to digitalization among SMEs: a shortage of workforce with adequate digital skills and a lack of financial resources, which also contribute to their low participation in EU funding opportunities for digitalization. This study specifically focuses on the theme of production and Industry 4.0; it does not address the digitalization of finance and

accounting in SMEs. However, if the issue of a lack of digital expertise arises in the digitalization of mainstream activities, this challenge may also be relevant to the area under investigation.

Although not directly related to digital financial applications, SMEs' websites are a critical starting point for digitalization. An evaluation system for SME websites was developed by Hermann et al. [6] and applied to a sample of 252 firms, the study found that only 58% of the surveyed firms had a website. For those with websites, evaluation was carried out across six main dimensions: Content, UX, Design, Search, Technology, and Mandatory Elements. The study also analyzed the results by geographic region and industry.

The other side of the digital financial transition, from the perspective of our study, includes digital financial services offered by banking service providers [7]. Their research focuses on the regional dimension of digitalization, analyzing regional differences using digital development indicators such as DESI and DTEI. One of the main findings is that the EU's West-South-West and East-South-East country groups exhibit the greatest disparities in digitalization levels.

Vona [8] examined the environmental dimension of the digital transition, incorporating a competitiveness perspective when analyzing the most polluting industries. One of his main findings is that the more competitive, typically small and medium-sized Hungarian firms, are more affected by the shortage of skilled labor, which hinders their innovation efforts compared to less competitive firms. In addition, he also revealed that more competitive firms outperform less competitive ones in both digitalization and environmental protection.

Merín-Rodríguez et al. [9] conducted a study on digital transformation using the DESI Index and an extensive literature review. Their main findings include;

- Digital transformation enhances SMEs' ability and flexibility to address key business challenges.
- Digitally transformed SMEs are less concerned about access to new and existing customers, changes in competition, access to finance, rising input costs, external shocks, and regulatory changes.
- However, digital transformation also poses risks, such as a shortage of skilled labor and experienced managers, as well as a potential loss of competitiveness.

This study also underlines the importance of research and highlights the scarce human resources of SMEs.

Vodă et al. [10] developed a DIGI Index for the Central and Eastern European region and analyzed ten countries in this region in greater detail. Their analysis highlights that a country's digital performance is influenced not only by its current level of digitalization but also by its overall growth rate. The study examined several external factors such as individual online purchasing behavior, educational attainment, R&D spending in the high-tech sector, and high-tech exports. The DIGI Index is composed of five key parameters: Connectivity, Human Capital, Internet Use, Digital Technology Integration, and Digital Public Services. Hungary ranked 7th out of the 10 regional countries included in the research. The study compared the DIGI Index scores with the average GDP growth rate and conducted a cluster analysis, which placed Hungary in the group with the lowest growth and the lowest digital index.

This unfortunate result for our country also confirms that further research is necessary to further enhance the digital development of our SME sector.

Chatzistamoulou [11] explored the relationship between digital transition and sustainability. His econometric analysis revealed that digital transformation facilitates the transition to sustainability. The research used data on more than 20,000 SMEs across the EU-28 between 2015 and 2019, supplemented with country-specific characteristics of sustainability and the institutional business environment.

Hermann et al. [6] investigated how external consultancies can help German SMEs implement digital transformation projects based on a study of 210 projects. They developed a taxonomy system consisting of 10 dimensions and identified a total of 30 characteristics to classify and evaluate these projects.

Malodia et al. [12] studied the digital transformation of SMEs in India. Their findings provide evidence that the digital self-efficacy of SME entrepreneurs significantly influences the digital transformation of firms, and that SMEs led by professional managers perform better in this process. The study observed a significant moderating effect of entrepreneur age and firm age on the relationship between digital self-efficacy and digital transformation. Additionally, the research confirmed a significant correlation between digital transformation and firm performance.

Merín-Rodríguez et al. [9] approach the digital transformation of SMEs from a sustainability perspective, arguing that measuring SME performance during digital transformation using sustainability-oriented methods is crucial for addressing issues like poverty reduction and gender inequality as key United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). They also consider it important to have a globally consistent definition of SMEs, and in their study, they cite examples of variations across regions, from the United States to South America. This contrasts with Europe, where the EU's standardized SME definition is widely used, often leading to an oversight of these international differences.

In a presentation at an international conference, Silva et al. [13] drew attention to the importance of a digital transformation strategy for SMEs, noting significant gaps in digital transition. To address this, they developed a model to help SMEs assess their level of preparedness for digital transformation.

Stich et al. [14] reported on a 4-year support program conducted at the "Digital in NRW" competence center, where SMEs were assisted in navigating their digital transformation. The program included assessing the current situation of the enterprise, identifying tailored measures, developing a roadmap, and supporting implementation. The project resulted in a practical action guideline for SMEs on how to initiate their own digital transformation based on formalized experiences.

Franco et al. [15] investigated the role of digital entrepreneurship in the digitalization processes of Portuguese SMEs through a questionnaire survey. Their main finding was that these enterprises have a positive impact on promoting digitalization, particularly through their strong customer relationships and collaborative capabilities.

Gallina et al. [16] developed a systematic literature exploration model on the digital transformation of SMEs and pointed out that digitalization is an important component of SMEs' antifragility and suggested future research directions in this area.

Franco et al. [15] investigated the performance-enhancing effects of digitalization on Dutch SMEs, using historical financial data. They examined two key characteristics: radical orientation and organizational rigidity. Their findings show that the stronger the presence of these two characteristics, the lower the return on investment, i.e., the lower the efficiency gains from digitalization.

Pucci et al. [17] investigated the digital integration of the value chain and the impact of digital capabilities on the financial performance of an SME in Tuscany. They found that the digital integration of the value chain has a positive impact on the firm's financial performance, while the impact of digital capabilities is less significant.

Shirish et al. [18] studied the influence of owner-managers on the digital transformation of Irish microenterprises by analyzing data from structured interviews and focus groups. Their research identified three distinct archetypes of owner-managers and explored type-specific learning capabilities and mechanisms related to digital transformation efforts.

In the case of Spanish SMEs, Battistoni et al. [19] investigated the main determinants of digital transformation and the role of size heterogeneity. They found that the education of the manager, the size of the firm, as well as international connections and professionalization, all have a positive effect on digital transformation. However, the benefits of larger size diminish when managers lack sufficient education or international connections.

Rajagopal et al. [20] also studied Spanish SMEs, focusing specifically on innovative firms. They examined how digital transformation affects firm performance and whether business model innovation (BMI) mediates this relationship. Using a sample of over 400 firms, they concluded that BMI partially mediates a positive relationship between digital transformation and performance gains.

Rajagopal et al. [20] provided insights into the digital transformation strategies of SMEs by identifying different digital transformation strategies, internal linkages between various areas of firms, and the effects of these linkages on performance.

Szabó et al. [21] investigated the impact of digitalization on the contribution of Hungarian SMEs to GDP, analyzing data from over 1,000 firms between 2010 and 2018. Using the DESI index to measure digitalization, they found that while the current financial situation remains the strongest predictor of future GDP contribution, digitalization, particularly the introduction of business management systems, also plays a significant role.

Battistoni et al. [19] investigated the adoption of digital technologies in Italian manufacturing SMEs, proposing a hierarchical model with four phases: sensor, integration, intelligence, and response. They highlighted that progression to higher phases is enabled by the presence of lower layers.

Fitz et al. [22] drew attention to the human-centered approaches in digital literacy development, noting that many digital maturity models insufficiently address this critical aspect.

Gallina et al. [16] developed a business development model for the twin transition between digital and green strategies. Their interdisciplinary methodology combines qualitative and quantitative elements, with a particular focus on the latter.

Based on the above examples, it can be concluded that the topic of digitalization and digital transformation has been widely studied by researchers and experts in Hungary, Europe, and beyond, leading to the development of various indices, maturity models, and taxonomies. Many studies emphasize the importance and often the shortage of human resources while highlighting the positive impacts of digitalization at both national economic and individual levels. Despite this extensive research, financial digitalization remains an underexplored aspect of broader digital transformation. To address this gap, our exploratory research aims to assess whether this specific area warrants deeper investigation.

2.2. Methods

Our research followed two main approaches: interviews with SME owners or managers and interviews with accounting firm owners or managers. For SMEs, the process involved two steps: an initial short questionnaire to screen participants, followed by in-depth interviews with selected candidates. For accounting firms, no structured questionnaire was used; after a few screening questions, we requested in-depth interviews.

The selection of SMEs for the questionnaire survey was not representative but relied on the authors' client database, their references, and personal contacts. Since the questionnaire was only used as a filtering tool to select candidates for in-depth interviews, we believe that this approach does not have a negative impact on the main objective of our research gaining a deeper insight into the topic. In fact, leveraging personal connections may enhance the quality of the interviews. Therefore, the survey can be considered strictly exploratory and revealing in nature.

A list of 100 businesses was compiled, and the authors were contacted by telephone or e-mail with the following questions:

- Does your company use any digital financial solutions or applications (e.g., online banking, e-booking, web shops, digital repositories, case management systems, APIs, etc.)?
- Do you believe your business needs further development in adopting financial digitalization?
- Have you ever encountered any difficulties in navigating the proliferating and rapidly changing range of financial digital services?
- Do you feel capable of enabling your business to use financial digital applications more widely on your own, without external assistance?
- Would you be willing to participate as an interviewee in a research study on financial digitalization?

As outlined earlier, the purpose of the questionnaire was to identify suitable candidates from the initial database for in-depth interviews.

The first step in the selection process was to evaluate the responses to the questionnaire; respondents who answered “Yes” to questions 1, 3, and 5, and “No” to question 4, were considered potential in-depth interview subjects.

To maximize the breadth and depth of insights, the interviewees were selected to represent diverse geographical locations and industries. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the research area.

The nature of in-depth interviews means that follow-up questions depend on the interviewees' responses to initial questions, making it impractical to present a fixed list of questions and answers. Instead, we outline the main themes and areas explored with each interviewee:

- What industry do you work in?
- How important do you consider financial digitalization opportunities in your business (front office) processes in your industry? Are these opportunities seen as drivers of revenue growth, and what specific applications are relevant?
- How important do you consider financial digitalization opportunities in back-office processes in your industry? Are they perceived as cost-reduction tools, and which solutions have you heard of?
- Have you had any difficulty keeping pace with changes and new opportunities?
- Do you seek advice either informally or professionally on the digital transformation of your business?
- What is the company accountant's perspective on potential support for digitalization?
- Does the manager take his opinion into account?
- Would you expect your financial accounting service provider to offer ongoing support in adopting financial digital solutions, or would you be open to adopting new financial digital services if recommended by your accountant?

In our in-depth interviews with accounting firm leaders, we explored how their firms have developed their digital financial systems and the importance they place on this area. We examined whether they view financial digital applications as a source of competitive advantage or cost reduction. The second focus was their use of financial digital services with clients: the extent of digital data exchange, whether they consult clients on digitalization, and whether they rely on client input to support their own digital transition.

In this case, the following sets of questions were discussed in varying depth and detail depending on the responses:

What is your company's financial system like?

- How important is it to use digital applications as widely as possible in your company?
- How much difficulty do you face keeping up with the rapidly evolving and changing IT opportunities?
- Do your clients expect you to proactively help them use financial digital applications?
- Do you see room for improvement in getting your customers to use financial digital services more widely?
- Do you think that using digital financial applications can reduce costs, attract new customers, or provide other benefits?

In selecting the in-depth interview subjects, we specifically chose individuals from different geographical locations, company sizes, and industries. Since our research is in the exploratory phase, this approach allowed us to assess whether interviewees, regardless of industry and geographical location, shared similar experiences or challenges related to our research. However, it is important to note that our current research does not aim to establish any geographic or industry-specific correlations.

As highlighted in the literature review, we found no prior studies specifically investigating the relationship between accounting firms and their clients in the context of digital transition. This gap underscored the importance of confirming the relevance of our research area and its potential for further analysis before proceeding with a more detailed, representative study.

3. Results

The results are presented separately for each interviewee, categorized by SMEs and accounting firms. For SMEs, the perspectives of five in-depth interviewees are reported, along with details of their industry and geographical area (county). For accounting firms, the summarized opinions of three interviewees are provided, including the size of the firms (number of employees) and their geographical location (county).

3.1. Results - SME

3.1.1. Construction company manager and owner (Hungary, Győr-Moson Sopron County)

This interviewee places little importance on digitalization opportunities within the company and shows minimal interest in engaging with accounting and financial software.

They use digital banking and have a website, and they are familiar with the mandatory digital systems required by the state (e.g., e-book, company gateway). However, they have no plans to introduce any additional digital services beyond the mandatory ones. While they do not intend to independently pursue advancements in financial or accounting digitalization, they are open to suggestions from their accountant. If recommended, they may consider introducing additional digital tools, provided they are cost-effective.

3.1.2. Restaurant owner (Hungary, Budapest)

The restaurant owner expressed interest in the development of digital financial services, particularly those relevant to his business, such as accepting credit cards with automated settlement, using social media for advertising, and staying

connected with tourists as potential customers. However, he showed little interest in the accounting department or other financial digitalization opportunities. The restaurant uses management software primarily for coordinating orders and processing payments, such as credit card transactions and cash register operations. However, this software is not integrated with their accounting system.

The owner mentioned that while he would listen to any suggestions from his accountant, he does not believe he should bear the cost of such services. In his view, these features would benefit the accountant's work rather than his own daily operations.

3.1.3. Manager, Food Processing Plant (Hungary, Borsod-Abaúj Zemplén County)

In this case, the manager and the owner have distinct roles; the owner is based in Budapest, while the accountant and the manager work locally at the plant site. Our interviewee was the manager. The company already uses an administrative system for key activities such as purchasing raw materials, issuing materials based on recipes, recording finished products in stock, and managing delivery documentation (e.g., delivery notes). Although the software is capable of handling invoicing, it currently generates invoices using a separate program.

The company has expressed interest in exploring digital solutions for document management, as accounting is handled in Budapest, and they currently rely on scanning or mailing accounting documents. While they also welcome suggestions from their accountant, they would only introduce systems and applications that clearly save costs, especially given the significant impact of rising energy prices on their business.

3.1.4. Sports Director, Junior Sports Club (Hungary, Komárom Esztergom County)

Due to the specificity of a sports club, the roles of the owner and manager are separate, and in this case, we interviewed the manager. The club benefits from a substantial team sport subsidy, which is fully managed through an application and accounting interface provided by the sports federation. Additionally, the club utilizes digital banking services, maintains a website, and is active on social media.

The manager believes that there is little need for further digital development, although a web shop for merchandising would be beneficial. He is open to suggestions from the accountant, though not on sports-related matters. For other digitalization initiatives, he will consider them only if they significantly reduce costs, such as lowering accounting fees, as this area does not qualify for sports subsidies.

3.1.5. Internet Booking Broker (Hungary, Budapest)

This company operates in the tourism sector under the same ownership and management. It invests heavily in digital services, maintaining partnerships with some of the world's largest hotel booking platforms. Through API connections, the company's booking database provides real-time booking and pricing information to both customers and partners. Given the significant number of daily online payment transactions and the ability to book services across several continents, the company places particular emphasis on multilingual modules and currency conversion systems.

As a result, they require an accounting service provider who not only understands the latest digital tools but is also proactive in staying up to date. They expect their accountant to offer informed recommendations and solutions to support their digital and operational needs.

3.2. Results - Bookkeeping Companies

3.2.1. Two-person accounting firm (Hungary, Budapest)

This accounting firm operates from a single office in Budapest, staffed by a qualified accountant and a data entry clerk. The firm manages the accounting needs of approximately 50 companies across various industries, primarily serving clients based in Budapest and its surrounding areas. The owner, who admits to not being particularly tech-savvy, chose an accounting software that also includes cloud-based solutions. This decision was driven by a desire to avoid the complexities of backups and system administration. Given that this software company is one of the largest in Hungary and its software is one of the most advanced, with a wide range of financial digital data transfer options, the owner believes that he can meet his clients' digital needs efficiently with this program.

While the owner recognizes an increasing need for specialized IT knowledge, he is actively working to improve his skills in this area. He encourages his clients to adopt the software's digital features, such as automated bank statement processing and digital data transfers, which come at no additional cost to either party. The owner also stays informed about new developments in the software, testing and implementing updates or modules whenever feasible. However, he does not proactively assist clients with broader digital transformation efforts or pursue enhancements to his firm's systems beyond the functionality provided by the software.

3.2.2. Three-Person Accounting Firm (Hungary, Jász-Nagykun Szolnok county)

This company maintains offices in two cities within neighboring counties, with one data entry clerk at each site. The manager alternates between the two company sites, overseeing operations. The company's clientele consists of 40 to 60 businesses, primarily small and micro-enterprises, although a few are medium-sized companies. Most clients are based in the Eastern Hungary region. This manager is not particularly focused on exploring digitalization opportunities, although he utilizes the necessary applications as required by the job or requested by clients. While he can master the necessary skills, he does not actively seek to implement new digital tools or technologies. The accounting software used by the company is a

well-known and widely adopted solution. However, the manager acknowledges that it is not the most up-to-date option on the market, although it is likely one of the most cost-effective.

While he is not proactive in adopting new technologies, he understands their importance. When a need arises, either through his own assessment or at a client's request, he takes the time to research, learn, and train colleagues on the relevant tools or features.

3.2.3. 10-Person Accounting Firm (Hungary, Budapest)

This company operates offices in three cities: Budapest and two locations in Western Hungary. In addition, for larger companies and corporate groups, data recording is performed on-site at the client's premises, reviewed and verified by the accounting firm's staff. The company primarily serves micro and small enterprises, with some medium-sized businesses. The total number of clients ranges between 80 and 100. We interviewed the manager of the Budapest office, who explained that their clients are in six to seven counties outside Budapest.

For this firm, the location of a client is almost irrelevant, as they have developed efficient methods to provide their services regardless of geographic distance. Given the dispersed nature of their clients and the need to coordinate multiple colleagues across various locations, the firm relies on a robust IT system that supports remote desktop operations, whether for home-based or office-based work.

To meet these needs, they have implemented their own cloud-based IT infrastructure, with data backup solutions. Their accounting software is among the most advanced, offering not only comprehensive accounting functionality but also seamless multi-user, networked operations to support their team's workflow.

The manager emphasized the importance of adopting all available tools for financial digitalization, noting that the ability to embrace and master these technologies is crucial for the future survival of accounting firms. In the past, the company made efforts to introduce digital financial solutions as early as possible and to encourage its clients to use them. Their experience has shown that their customers are receptive to these initiatives. However, some clients are reluctant to invest in additional resources unless there is a direct financial benefit.

4. Discussion

Based on the interviews conducted, it can be concluded that all businesses are making efforts to integrate digital applications into their revenue-generating activities. However, they are generally unwilling to invest time, energy, or financial resources solely for the sake of being considered digitally advanced.

Given that the widespread use of financial digitalization applications is not part of the core process (e.g., sales) of most companies surveyed - except for one - they pay less attention to it. A common theme among all interviewees was their reliance on the expertise of accountants and financial service providers. They listen to and consider suggestions from these professionals, although in most cases, they acknowledged that they lack the resources to introduce new applications unless such investments are expected to reduce costs in the long term.

In the case of the accounting firms surveyed, all reported using digital financial services to varying extents, with none expressing negative or dismissive attitudes towards these technologies. The degree of proactivity in adopting such tools appeared to be influenced by the industries their clients operate.

It can also be concluded that all firms recognize the impact of digitalization on their work and the need for both general IT skills and specialized professional expertise. However, the way this issue is approached varies significantly.

It is likely influenced by factors such as the background knowledge and attitudes of managers and owners, the nature of their client base, and the infrastructure demands of their organizational size and work systems.

Interestingly, all interviewees confirmed that they can influence their clients' adoption of digital financial applications, albeit to varying degrees. This highlights their role as key drivers of digitalization within their client networks.

A notable new dimension that emerged from this research is the need to move beyond the general perception that digitalization - and specifically financial digitalization creates value.

There is a growing necessity to measure this value in concrete terms. Future research should focus on assessing whether the implementation of digital financial services leads to demonstrable cost reductions or revenue increases. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to explore the availability of funding in the current EU budget period that could support the introduction of these applications.

Public funding, such as EU grants, could significantly affect the return on investment by lowering entry costs for businesses adopting digital solutions.

One question our research did not explore, but which could be an intriguing topic for future studies, is whether clients who expect more proactive accountants naturally gravitate toward firms that already exhibit higher levels of digital adoption. In other words, the current alignment between firms and their client bases may reflect a self-selection process, where digitally active businesses choose similarly progressive accounting firms.

Finally, a more comprehensive analysis could be achieved by examining a larger sample size, focusing on firms from different industries and geographical regions.

5. Conclusions

Based on the interviews in both areas, it can be concluded that digitalization plays a key role in the daily operations of all the companies surveyed. They acknowledge its current or potential impact on their businesses. While the interviewees reported adopting digital developments driven by market demands, they do not prioritize other aspects of digitalization that are unrelated to core activities. This is often due to constraints such as limited time, energy, knowledge, or capital.

Our hypothesis that accountancy firms can influence their clients to adopt financial digital services has been confirmed. Additionally, we validated the growing importance of IT knowledge and digitalization opportunities for accounting firms. This suggests that further research in this area would be valuable.

Future research directions, the relevance of which has been confirmed by this preliminary research, include:

- Exploring methods that help accounting firms engage their client base to encourage the adoption of digital financial solutions for corporate finance and accounting.
- Investigating digital maturity models and strategies for accountancy firms and conducting related research to measure their digital maturity and their managers' attitudes toward digitalization.
- Investigating the relationship between digitally more advanced accounting firms and the digital maturity of their clientele.
- Examining the demonstrable financial benefits of digital transformation at the SME level, i.e., how these benefits can be measured and supplemented by available government or EU subsidies.

Although this research focuses geographically on Hungary and the neighboring EU countries, we believe that our findings and a deeper exploration of these topics could support digital transformation efforts globally.

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