

# *The Role of Management Consulting in Driving Digital Transformation for SMEs: Insights from 20 Expert Interviews*

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**Abstract** - In the rapidly evolving digital era, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face increasing pressure to adopt and implement digital transformation to remain competitive. This research explores how management consulting services enable SMEs to strengthen their digital capabilities and navigate transformative change. Semi-structured qualitative expert interviews with 20 experts from the Baltic States provide valuable insights into these businesses' challenges and opportunities. The experts come from diverse professional backgrounds, including management consulting, venture capital, information technologies, finance, and professional services related to digital transformation. Qualitative comparative analysis reveals both unique perspectives and shared challenges across these groups. All experts have extensive experience working with SMEs. Key findings highlight significant barriers to digital transformation, such as limited digital skills, financial constraints, capacity issues, and insufficient know-how. Time scarcity and difficulties in maintaining strategic focus further compound these challenges. The research emphasizes the evolving role of management consulting providers, who must adapt their methodologies to meet the shifting technological landscape. The study underscores the pivotal role of management consulting in bridging the digital readiness gap for SMEs. Conclusions indicate that consultants guide businesses through complex transformation processes by offering tailored strategies, facilitating skill development, and optimizing resources. Executive insights reveal a pressing need for accessible and scalable consulting solutions to address the digital divide among smaller enterprises. This research contributes to understanding how consulting services foster digital growth in SMEs and highlights the critical need for innovative consulting approaches in the digital age, especially in the Baltic States. The findings are particularly relevant for policymakers, consultants, and SME leaders striving to enhance competitive strategy and drive digital transformation.

**Keywords** — *Management Consulting, Digital Transformation, Professional Services, SME.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving business environment and volatile uncertainty - digital transformation (DT) is crucial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to enhance digital capabilities and business competitiveness [1] - [3]. DT in SMEs has become a critical research area, emphasizing the need for agility, strategic adaptation, and digital capability development [4] - [5].

The research explores the role of management consulting (MC) – professional services, where experts help to improve performance, solve business problems, and develop strategies to enable SMEs to overcome barriers and strengthen their DT capabilities [6] - [7]. Other research indicates that DT, which refers to the strategic adoption and integration of digital technologies to enhance business operations [8], - plays a crucial role in enhancing the performance of the organization, and the successful implementation of operational efficiency depends on technological readiness and management commitment [9] - [10].

Research gaps identified in previous up-to-date literature reviews are still unclear about how MC services directly benefit the DT that is a part of the strategy for SMEs [7], [11] - [12]. Therefore, the authors performed targeted and semi-structured interviews, including professional service providers, to benefit the existing body of knowledge – how MC works with SMEs, what approaches are suggested, and how expertise can be used for effective DT that is integrated to strengthen competitiveness.

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The research, based on results from an expert interview with 20 professionals across various fields, contributes to two aspects:

a) Research identifies SMEs' key challenges during DT, including limited skills, financial constraints, and insufficient capacity. It also examines how MC services can help with skill-building initiatives and resource optimization for SMEs.

b) Research provides actionable recommendations for SME managers and owners on effectively utilizing MC services. Additionally, it offers insights that can be used by policymakers, consultants, and SME leaders to bridge the digital divide and develop competitive strategies in the digital age.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A brief literature review was conducted using the Scopus database, and relevant articles were selected based on specific keywords related to DT, MC, and SMEs. A comparative analysis was then performed, discussing and contrasting the findings with existing literature to identify key trends, challenges, and research gaps.

Between November 1, 2024, and February 24, 2025, the authors designed and conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with experts from the Baltic States. Active, direct interviews were primarily planned and conducted between December 2024 and January 2025 to capture the most recent conclusions and observations for the calendar year of 2024. However, due to natural scheduling adjustments, 4 interviews took place in late November 2024 and February 2025, still aligning with the study's intent to reflect current insights.

The study employed a three-tier expert reach pyramid framework to ensure a structured and systematic selection of expert interview participants (Fig. 1), categorizing experts based on their expertise, organizational role, public presence, thought leadership, influence, engagement, and relevance to the research focus [13].

**Broad reach (top-level)** – At the initial stage, 35 experts were identified based on their general influence, professional visibility, and relevance to the study's thematic area. These individuals were widely recognized for their contributions to the field but were not necessarily engaged in direct decision-making within the study's scope.

**Targeted influence (middle-level)** – From this broader pool, 29 experts were further qualified as relevant to the study's objectives, particularly about SMEs. These experts demonstrated specialized knowledge, industry understanding, and managerial experience. They were identified through professional networks, academic and industry publications, leadership roles, and sector affiliations. All experts at this level were contacted to ensure an inclusive and representative selection. Five did not respond, even after several channel uses and repeated attempts to reach them, and 4 declined.

**Core experts (bottom-level)** – ultimately, 20 participated in the semi-structured qualitative interviews. These individuals represented one of the most influential professionals with direct, hands-on experience shaping strategies for SMEs, policies, and industry practices relevant to the study. Their insights formed the foundation of qualitative data analysis.



Fig. 1. The three-tier expert reach pyramid framework - based on qualitative interview data analyzed by the authors.

This hierarchical selection process ensured that the study captured both high-level industry perspectives and deep, experience-based insights, contributing to the reliability and validity of the findings. The pyramid structure facilitated a systematic narrowing of the expert pool, ensuring that only the most relevant and knowledgeable professionals were engaged in the final interviews and were willing to share their experiences, which is a common practice in social science [14].

The selection of experts for this study was based on a targeted approach to identify professionals with both practical experience in DT and MC services, specifically for the SME segment over the past 3-5 years and with overall relevancy with MC not less than 10 years (as seen in Table 1). Even if individuals share various roles in other organizations, they all work within firms offering MC, DT, or similar professional services for SMEs combined or separately during the research period. The current top executive-level positions of experts are indicated in Table 1 as the primary role in the company they are currently working for in the study's focus field: (D) directors, (P) partners, or (C) C-level executives.

A key criterion was the expert's experience and collaboration with stakeholders across the Baltic States, ensuring a diverse and regionally relevant perspective regardless of their current or former employer's size, headquarters location, or international service scope. This process ensured that the selected experts possessed deep industry expertise and hands-on experience working directly with SMEs. This enabled them to provide valuable insights into the challenges and tactics when adopting DT and to relate answers to previous findings of DT adoption [1], [15].

TABLE 1 DATA OF THE STUDY'S PARTICIPANTS

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Value</i>
Experts / Participants	Count	20
Gender	Count (M-male, F-female)	16 (M) / 4 (F)
Relevant experience in the MC field	Range in years	10-30
Primary role in the company related to MC	Count: (D) director, (P) partner, (C) C-level	8 (D) / 6 (P) / 6 (C)
Direct work with SMEs currently	Count (direct, indirect)	16 (direct) / 4 (indirect)
Area of professional expertise:  - MC and professional service providers (MC-PS), - DT and IT service firms (DT-IT), - "Big Four" or similar size/recognition (BF+), - Venture capital and financial sector (VC-FS)	Count:  MC-PS, DT-IT, BF+, VC-FS,	6 (MC-PS) / 6 (DT-IT) / 5 (BF+) / 3 (VC-FS)

Source: Created by authors based on expert interview data analysis.

Expert interviews were conducted through pre-scheduled 45–55-minute online video meetings to ensure a structured and systematic data collection process. Participants were informed about the research aim in advance, and all interviews were arranged via calendar invites, ensuring confirmation and accessibility through a valid online meeting link.

Before each session, technical reliability was ensured, including a private setting, stable internet connection, and functional audio-visual equipment. A digital note-taking template was prepared to facilitate real-time documentation of key insights. Responses were systematically transcribed after each interview, and the template was completed for consistency. Following professional practices and ensuring high-quality and trustful answers, the interview excludes names, projects, and companies like practice done in other research [13].

This study is based on 20 expert interviews, totaling 18 hours of direct online communication, which resulted in 68 pages of transcribed responses and quotations. The experts, as mentioned in Table 1, represent a diverse range of professional backgrounds, categorized and coded for further reference as follows:

a) 6 experts – MC and professional service providers who also offer or are connected to DT services (boutique consulting firms, specialized advisory firms) – MC-PS.

b) 6 experts – DT and information technology (IT) service firms – both recognizable and respectable in the Baltic State area and Europe (providing MC alongside technology solutions) – DT-IT.

c) 5 experts – large multinational consulting firms with branches in the Baltic States (all “Big Four” and one similar globally recognized firm) who develop competitive strategies in the digital age for all-size companies, including SMEs – BF+.

d) 3 experts – venture capital and financial sector (investment professionals, financial analysts, and strategy advisors working with SMEs) – VC-FS.

Given the overlapping nature of professional trajectories, some experts have held multiple roles across these categories. For instance, an expert previously serving as a director at a “Big Four” firm may now be a partner in a boutique consulting firm, contributing cross-sector insights into SME's DT and MC practices.

The expert selection method described above aligns with knowledge dissemination research, ensuring that insights from experienced professionals are effectively identified and shared. The semi-structured approach, due to its flexibility [16], captures broad MC, DT, and specialized knowledge trends relevant to SMEs.

The semi-structured interview comprised seven question categories, each containing 2 to 7 sub-questions (2-7q) that help trigger the focused topic of the research:

1. General understanding of DT and SMEs (3q).
2. MC for SMEs (7q).
3. DT Guidance for SMEs (5q).
4. Sector-specific insights (2q).
5. Balance of internal and external expertise (4q).
6. Competitive strategy in the digital age (3q).
7. Long-term problem-solving and focus of (6q).

All the questions were asked, and the answers were captured in the digital template based on all the information provided and addressed to the exactly related category and its fitting question during or after the interview. Interview design allowed experts in collaboration with authors-interviewers to provide in-depth insights, share specific expertise and real-world examples, and focus on areas most relevant to the research.

The collected data was then subjected to qualitative comparative and content analysis, ensuring a structured and comprehensive examination of expert perspectives.

In this article – analysis is limited to the first two question groups based on the authors' aim for this scientific research.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The flexible semi-structured interview process ensured that discussions remained both comprehensive and aligned with the expert's domain knowledge, maximizing the value of their contributions. Two question groups that altogether included 10 sub-questions and were analyzed based on two categories:

1. General understanding of DT and SMEs (3q).
2. MC for SMEs (7q).

Thematic analysis, based on all 20 expert interviews, reveals key themes structured into four levels based on frequency, as shown in Table 2. These themes are not tied to any specific expert group, suggesting a broad consensus on the overall focus direction, and alignment with the research scope.

TABLE 2 FREQUENCY OF KEY THEMES MENTIONED IN EXPERT INTERVIEWS OF 1<sup>ST</sup> AND 2<sup>ND</sup> QUESTION CATEGORIES

Key themes in interviews	Frequency
Pressure of urgency	7
Legacy platforms	8
Digital maturity	8
Digital transformation as a buzzword	10
Business process automatization	10
Co-funding, Financial support, and grants	11
Hands-on experience	14
Priority and goal-setting	15
Trust and reputation of the consultant	16
Lack of financial resources	19
Digital transformation	20
Management consulting	20

Source: Created by authors based on expert interview data analysis.

As expected, – the most frequently mentioned topics include DT and MC (20 mentions each) and the lack of financial resources for SMEs (19). These findings highlight that while DT is a critical priority for businesses, financial constraints and the need for consulting expertise significantly impact its successful implementation. The information explored from real-life expert examples matches previous observations from literature studies [11]-[12] that SMEs face resource constraints regarding time, finances, and managerial capacity.

Another important set of factors relates to hands-on experience (14), priority and goal setting (15), and trust and reputation of the consultant (16). These elements emphasize the importance of practical knowledge, planning, and the credibility of external advisors in shaping DT and business strategies. From an expert perspective - SMEs recognize that expertise and trust in consulting services are major in guiding them, especially through complex changes.

The analysis highlights the significance of DT as a buzzword (10), suggesting that while the term is widely discussed, its practical implications may vary across businesses. Business process automatization (10) is also a key theme, indicating that companies recognize the necessity of streamlining operations to improve efficiency. Additionally, co-funding, financial support, and grants (11) emerge as crucial factors, reflecting the reliance on external funding to facilitate DT and sustain business growth. These factors collectively emphasize the need for conceptual clarity and practical resources in the digitalization journey.

Finally, some underlying constraints emerge, such as the pressure of urgency for SMEs to act (7), legacy platforms (8), and digital maturity (8). While these aspects are mentioned less frequently than financial and strategic concerns, they still influence the pace and effectiveness of DT initiatives. Businesses face challenges in balancing the urgency of transformation with their existing technological infrastructure and overall readiness for change.

In performing comparative analysis - experts broadly agree that DT is essential for SMEs to remain competitive, with key drivers including process automation, operational efficiency, and access to new markets. However, SMEs often face significant barriers to adoption, such as financial constraints, lack of knowledge, and uncertainty regarding DT project timelines. The expert insights from the four groups - MC and professional service providers (MC-PS), DT and IT experts (DT-IT), “Big Four” and similar firm (BF+), and venture capital and financial sector (VC-FS) reveal both shared perspectives and notable differences regarding following question categories that are further analyzed in:

#### A. General understanding of DT and SMEs

All groups emphasize that DT is essential for SMEs, not only for efficiency and competitiveness but also as a necessary adaptation for survival in the digital age. There is consensus that the maturity level of an SME significantly influences its approach to DT - companies with a higher digital maturity level tend to integrate data-driven decision-making, automation, and customer experience improvements, whereas those with a low maturity level struggle with strategic planning, implementation, and investment decisions.

A common challenge identified by all groups is the lack of resources - financial capacity, talent, or strategic vision - which hinders SMEs' ability to fully embrace DT. Furthermore, all groups recognize the role of government grants and external funding in enabling digital adoption that matches other research data as a common problem of SMEs while adopting DT [17]. However, concerns about inefficient allocation or reliance on funding without clear strategic planning are raised.

Additionally, all groups acknowledge the importance of change management - SMEs often resist digital change due to fear of disruption, lack of understanding, or the complexity of new systems. This is further complicated by decision-making being concentrated in a few key individuals (especially in majority-stake owner-led SMEs that often are limited to their digital literacy [11], [18]), limiting the speed and scope of transformation. SMEs contribute significantly to economic growth and employment, and often major challenge is ensuring SMEs' long-term sustainability and performance – especially in family businesses where generation transition happens [19].

MC-PS, VC-FS and BF+ approach DT strategically, emphasizing its role in redefining business models and enabling expansion into new markets. They caution that

SMEs often underestimate the importance of strategic planning and project management, which can result in a reactive rather than proactive approach to digitalization. In contrast, DT-IT group experts prioritize the operational aspects of DT, such as process automation, data analytics, and IT infrastructure improvements. They stress the necessity of clear implementation steps and realistic assessments of return on investment (ROI) to ensure SMEs can effectively navigate the transformation.

The perceived barriers to DT vary among different perspectives. MC-PS and BF+ identify organizational resistance, leadership buy-in, and knowledge gaps as key challenges, advocating for education, advisory services, and structured DT roadmaps, which are also advised by researchers to be implemented in the strategies of SMEs [4], [10]. DT-IT, however, emphasizes technological complexity and cost concerns more, arguing that SMEs often lack awareness of DT's financial implications and potential benefits. They also warn that DT is sometimes overhyped and can incorrectly affect the overall perception of SMEs, leading to unrealistic expectations. Meanwhile, VC-FS highlights financial strength and scalability as crucial factors influencing DT adoption, noting that well-funded SMEs are more likely to succeed. At the same time, smaller businesses may struggle without external investment or strategic partnerships.

Regarding external support and funding, MC-PS and VC-FS see venture capital and external funding as essential drivers of DT, enabling SMEs to scale their operations and expand their digital capabilities. In contrast, BF+ and DT-IT take a more cautious stance, emphasizing that financial assistance alone does not guarantee successful digitalization, which is underscored in several studies [4], [20]. Experts point out that SMEs often lack strategic clarity when applying for digitalization grants, leading to misallocated investments in technology that fail to address core business needs.

Although primarily discussed in the fourth question category, "Sector-specific insights," which is beyond the scope of this article, industry-specific challenges are also mentioned in the first two question groups, highlighting their influence on DT adoption. MC-PS and BF+ note that industries like e-commerce and finance are naturally more inclined toward digitalization, whereas traditional sectors such as manufacturing and services face greater resistance due to legacy systems. DT-IT emphasizes the varying levels of automation and artificial intelligence adoption among SMEs, pointing out that some overestimate their capabilities while others completely avoid digitalization. Additionally, VC-FS highlights that SMEs in consumer-driven markets (e.g., retail and fintech) must adopt DT more rapidly than B2B sectors, where DT progresses more gradually.

The definition and scope of DT differ depending on the perspective. MC-PS and BF+ view DT as a continuous, strategic shift that reshapes business models and operations, requiring a fundamental rethinking of processes beyond merely adopting new technology. In contrast, DT-

IT and VC-FS take a more pragmatic stance, considering DT as a tool for efficiency, automation, and cost savings rather than a goal itself. DT-IT experts especially criticize the overuse of DT as a buzzword, arguing that SMEs should prioritize practical improvements over large-scale transformations that may not align with their business realities.

### *B. Management Consulting for SMEs*

The comparative analysis of expert responses from the biggest expert number groups, MC-PS and DT-IT, highlights both shared perspectives and key differences in their understanding of MC for SMEs.

Both groups recognize the importance of external expertise in guiding SMEs through strategic and operational challenges. They agree that MC acts as a bridge between different business areas, offering valuable insights that SMEs might lack internally. Trust and relationship-building emerge as crucial factors in consulting effectiveness, with both groups stressing the need for consultants to align with the client's culture and decision-making style. Additionally, both acknowledge financial constraints as a limiting factor for SMEs when engaging in high-level consulting services, emphasizing the role of funding programs in facilitating access to expert advice. It goes together with studies that underscore manager and employee capabilities and digital know-how that play a dual role in driving DT - acting as both enablers and barriers due to skill gaps, resistance to change, outdated systems, resource constraints, and cultural resistance [5], [21].

However, the MC-PS group emphasizes process-driven strategic consulting, viewing SMEs as distinct from larger enterprises, requiring tailored approaches rather than traditional corporate methodologies. They stress that SMEs often lack structured budgeting and long-term strategic planning, leading to a reliance on practical, hands-on consulting rather than theoretical frameworks. The DT-IT group, in contrast, focuses more on technological integration and business model innovation, positioning consultants as facilitators of DT. They highlight the need for hands-on execution rather than mere advisory roles, warning against "empty advice" without clear implementation strategies.

Another key difference lies in their perspective on consulting value. MC-PS experts stress the role of consultants as external team members who must deeply understand SMEs' realities and provide ongoing, action-oriented guidance. In contrast, the DT-IT group highlights the consultant's role in overcoming "tunnel vision", bringing external perspectives to help SMEs explore new technological opportunities. They emphasize the importance of structured methodologies, goal setting, measurement of results, and competitive analysis to ensure measurable consulting outcomes, which is also advised in theoretical studies [4].

The perspectives from two smaller groups, BF+ and VC-FS, provide added analysis of MC's role for SMEs,

complementing and contrasting the views of MC-PS and DT-IT.

BF+ and VC-FS emphasize the lack of awareness and appreciation for MC among SMEs, particularly in the Baltic States. The BF+ group highlights that SMEs often overestimate their own knowledge, demonstrating reluctance to pay for strategic consulting services. Similarly, VC-FS experts note that SME owners often serve as CEOs and may lack time and interest in engaging external consultants, seeing it as an unnecessary expense unless specifically required.

Another shared theme is the critical role of financial and strategic guidance in helping SMEs navigate growth. The BF+ group highlights how consulting becomes essential when external funding (e.g., venture capital, co-funding projects, or grants) requires structured strategy and execution. Likewise, VC-FS experts stress that consulting is most valuable when companies face unfamiliar challenges, particularly in scaling or securing investment. Both groups acknowledge that larger companies are more likely to seek and value consulting services as they have more complex structures and external accountability (e.g., shareholders and investors).

Both groups also highlight the importance of execution and project management as hands-on approaches, echoing a sentiment from the MC-PS group. BF+ experts criticize the lack of a consulting culture in the region that appreciates implementation, whereas VC-FS experts suggest that companies engaging consultants should expect clear, actionable steps to ensure execution, particularly in due diligence and operational improvements to justify the ROI.

While BF+ and VC-FS recognize the strategic gap in SMEs, their focal points differ. BF+ experts discuss broader business misconceptions and cultural resistance - SMEs' unwillingness to pay for consulting, lack of strategic thinking, and misjudgment of consulting value. They highlight the need for trust and long-term relationships, aligning with the MC-PS and DT-IT perspective that SME maturity and trust in consultants influence success.

VC-FS argues that generic MC often lacks justification unless tied to tangible financial returns. This aligns somewhat with the DT-IT perspective, which emphasizes consulting's role in driving DT with clear key performance indicators. VC-FS experts highlight the need for specialized consulting, especially in high-value sectors, linking their views to expert platforms to find the right expertise.

The BF+ group's observations on SMEs' strategic immaturity align with the MC-PS perspective that many SMEs do not engage in structured business planning. However, BF+ experts are more critical of SMEs' unwillingness to pay for consulting services, seeing cultural skepticism as a major barrier. This contrasts with MC-PS experts, who focus more on the value consultants bring in bridging knowledge gaps and guiding SMEs through structured frameworks.

Future research should explore SME perception of consulting through surveys or interviews to understand their decision-making factors, investigate industry-specific consulting needs in high-growth and tech-driven sectors, analyze cost versus value impact on consulting adoption rates to identify attractive pricing models, assess the long-term effects of consulting engagements on SME performance, and examine alternative consulting models (such as fractional executives, on-demand expertise platforms, and digital advisory tools based on MC-PS answers) to explore more accessible and scalable solutions for SMEs. Additional future research literature exploration can include dynamic capabilities and related theories about knowledge-based perspective, which as a direction, is indicated as valuable and practical [8], [22].

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The collective insights from the four expert groups highlight a broad agreement on the necessity of DT for SMEs, with differences in focus, perceived barriers, and strategic approaches. While some view DT as a fundamental business transformation, others emphasize its role in operational efficiency. The maturity level, industry context, financial resources, and leadership mindset influence DT adoption. The findings suggest that successful DT implementation requires technology adoption, strong leadership, strategic planning, and a clear understanding of ROI.

In defining the role of MC services for SMEs – all four expert groups recognize the value of MC for SMEs; MC-PS and BF+ focus on relationship-driven, strategic business consulting, whereas DT-IT prioritizes technological enablement and execution-focused consulting. Their differences reflect their respective areas of expertise - MC-PS and BF+ consulting rooted in business strategy and process efficiency and DT-IT in DT and operational scalability. Across all four groups, the role of MC in SMEs is recognized, but perspectives differ on its value, challenges, and execution. BF+ experts highlight cultural and strategic barriers, while VC-FS experts take a stronger stance on the necessity of financial justification for consulting engagement and ROI – that aligns closely with DT-IT experts, who stress that consulting must deliver practical, measurable value rather than theoretical insights.

MC-PS and BF+ experts emphasize the need for trust and relationship-driven consulting, whereas DT-IT experts stress the necessity of execution-focused consulting with clear goals and result measurements. The findings also suggest that while financial and strategic aspects remain the primary concerns, hands-on experience, trust and reputation of the consultant, and technological preparedness also play crucial roles in shaping DT efforts. Addressing these factors holistically can enhance business resilience and long-term competitiveness – especially if MC is used for tailored strategies for SMEs.

Ultimately, successful consulting for SMEs requires a blend of strategic alignment, financial feasibility, and

execution-focused engagement, ensuring that consulting services are insightful but also actionable and results-driven. For MC to gain wider adoption in the Baltic States, consultants must emphasize tangible results, financial justification, and long-term relationship-building to overcome cultural resistance and demonstrate value.

Further research should explore all remaining question categories from original and full-scale interview content - by exploring competitive strategy, problem-solving aspects, appropriate balance on external expertise use, guidelines for choosing the right consulting service and relevance to the industry.

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