Enhancing Concrete Supply Chain Efficiency in Civil Engineering through Digital Transformation: A Comprehensive Review

Hong Zhang [1, 2&*], Rong Hu [3&], Ao Chen[3&], Yufeng Lei[4], Hao Qu[3]

[1] Beijing Jiaotong University, No. 3 Shangyuan Village, Beijing, 100044, China
[2] China Railway Materials Group Co., Ltd., No. 19 West Fourth Ring Middle Road, Beijing, 100143, China
[3] Pangu Cloud Chain (Tianjin) Digital Technology Co., Ltd., No. 599 Ordos Road, Tianjin, 300461, China
[4] Yanjin Kaitou New Materials Co., Ltd., G040 Yanjin New District, Zhaotong, 657599, China
[&] These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

*Email: 18113052@bjtu.edu.cn

Abstract. The rapid advancement and adoption of digital technologies as part of Industry 4.0 have enabled the concrete supply chain in civil engineering to be managed more efficiently, ultimately enhancing the performance of construction projects. This paper focuses on the digitalization of the concrete supply chain, a trend that refers to the evolution towards a smarter model involving digital technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, cloud computing, and blockchain. These technologies increase and enhance the ability to optimize planning, sourcing, and procurement strategies in the concrete industry, leading to improved efficiency, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness in civil engineering projects. Given the relevance of this topic to the scientific community, this paper aims to investigate the main discussion themes related to the digital transformation of the concrete supply chain using a comprehensive review of existing literature and case studies. Incorporating a meta-analytic framework, this review meticulously synthesizes and categorizes significant scholarly contributions, focusing on the potential benefits, challenges, and future prospects of digitalization in the concrete industry, including its impact on inventory turnover rate, transport vehicle utilization, quality qualification rate, information sharing rate, and energy consumption or emission intensity. Results highlight the main issues regarding the digital transformation of the concrete supply chain. The findings also reveal promising future research avenues, such as the development of industry-specific frameworks and best practices for digital technology implementation, addressing interoperability and standardization issues, and exploring innovative solutions to overcome the identified challenges.

Keywords: Civil Engineering; Construction Industry; Supply Chain Digitalization; Content Analysis; Technological Integration

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1 INTRODUCTION

Digitalization significantly enhances the efficiency and resilience of the concrete supply chain, enabling the industry to tackle production risks, increase transparency, and optimize operations through technologies like the Internet of Things (IoT), data analytics, and digital twins[1][2]. In the context of civil engineering, digital transformation plays a crucial role in enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of construction projects. By leveraging advanced technologies, civil engineers can streamline processes, reduce waste, and improve the overall performance of the concrete supply chain. This technological shift has garnered widespread attention, with over 900 documents exploring its impact, underscoring digital transformation's pivotal role in improving supply chain management. Notably, it fosters internal integration and performance enhancement within cement manufacturing and distribution entities, offering avenues to proactively manage risks and bolster stakeholder collaboration.

The concrete supply chain in civil engineering projects faces challenges such as logistical inefficiencies, quality variability, environmental impacts, and the need for cost reduction. Digital technologies like IoT, AI, big data analytics, and blockchain promise transformative solutions, enhancing transparency, efficiency, and sustainability, addressing traditional inefficiencies, and promoting operational efficiency, sustainability, and inter-organizational cooperation.

This review examines digital technology integration within the concrete supply chain in the context of civil engineering, assessing its significance and timeliness, exploring current challenges, investigating how digital technologies drive transformation, and presenting case studies demonstrating tangible outcomes. The central thesis posits that strategic digital technology integration is essential for overcoming existing challenges, elevating the supply chain's efficiency, sustainability, and resilience. Th e study's scope encompasses an extensive analysis of digital technologies and their potential to remodel the concrete supply chain, ensuring it meets modern construction demands while promoting environmental stewardship, economic viability, and social responsibility.

The article is structured to sequentially explore digital transformation within the concrete supply chain, covering the traditional supply chain (Chapter 2), transformative digital technologies (Chapter 3), case studies illustrating tangible benefits (Chapter 4), obstacles and solutions in digital integration (Chapter 5), and concluding with a synthesis of key findings (Chapter 6).

2 BACKGROUND ON CONCRETE SUPPLY CHAIN

The concrete supply chain, integral to the construction industry and global infrastructure development, encompasses several key aspects and challenges.

(1) Raw Material Procurement

The initial phase involves sourcing essential components such as aggregates, cement, water, and additives. Challenges arise from geographic and environmental constraints, necessitating sustainable sourcing strategies and minimizing transportation costs and environmental impacts.

(2) Production Process

The batching process produces concrete, requiring stringent quality control to achieve industry-standard consistency and strength. Challenges include maintaining consistency across batches and adapting to raw material quality variability.

(3) Transportation

The perishable nature of concrete requires timely and coordinated logistics to preserve workability during transportation to construction sites. Solutions are needed to mitigate premature hardening and maintain quality during transit.

(4) Distribution and Application

Efficient use at construction sites necessitates collaboration among suppliers, contractors, and construction teams. Challenges include managing demand variability, aligning delivery with construction schedules, and reducing delays or waste.

(5) Supply Chain Management Challenges

The concrete supply chain encounters several overarching challenges:

Coordination and Communication: The involvement of numerous stakeholders without sufficient integration and communication leads to inefficiencies such as delays and increased costs.

Quality Control: Maintaining consistent quality throughout the supply chain is challenging, impacting timelines and costs.

Environmental Impact: The environmental footprint from raw material extraction to transportation necessitates sustainable practices to reduce carbon emissions and resource consumption.

Market Sensitivity: Demand fluctuations, driven by market conditions and construction trends, require flexible supply chain strategies.

Addressing these challenges is imperative for enhancing the concrete supply chain's resilience, efficiency, and sustainability, vital for meeting modern infrastructure development demands while minimizing environmental impacts.

3 DIGITALIZATION IN SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

3.1 Principles of Digital Transformation in Supply Chains

3.1.1 The Evolution from Analog to Digital

The shift from analog to digital systems has significantly transformed supply chain management, introducing efficiency, agility, and resilience. Traditional supply chains, hampered by manual, paper-based processes, suffered from poor visibility and slow decision-making[3]. Digitalization, through the adoption of technologies like IoT, big data analytics, AI, and cloud computing, has revolutionized these operations, enabling real-time data utilization, process optimization, and improved collaboration[4].

The adoption of digital technologies varies, starting with the automation of basic tasks and evolving towards sophisticated capabilities like real-time tracking and predictive analytics[5]. This transformation is facilitated by the widespread availability of affordable digital tools, allowing businesses of all sizes to engage with digitalization without significant upfront costs [6].

This digital shift not only enhances operational efficiency but also fosters innovation and new business models focused on customer-centricity and sustainability. As digital technologies advance, the digitalization of supply chains is expected to deepen, driving further innovation and redefining supply chain management's future.

3.1.2 Core Technologies Driving Change

Our research employs a meta-analysis approach to systematically examine the research trends in the digitalization of the concrete supply chain. Compared with conventional literature analysis methods, the use of a meta-analysis approach offers a robust framework for synthesizing and evaluating extensive datasets from numerous studies, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the digital transformation trends within the concrete supply chain. The reference management software EndNote is used to organize the 216 relevant articles obtained through manual screening, and key information from these articles is extracted and compiled into a structured CSV file format. Python's Natural Language Processing (NLP) library, NLTK, is then utilized to preprocess the textual data, involving tokenization and the removal of stop words. The obtained metadata is imported into VOSviewer, a tool for visualizing and analyzing bibliometric networks, to calculate the occurrence frequencies of different technology terms and group them by publication year.

This process investigates the temporal trends and evolution of technology applications in the digitalization of the concrete supply chain, as shown in Figure 1. The network's density suggests an interdisciplinary and collaborative research landscape, where technological themes are interwoven, indicating the multifaceted approach required for digital transformation. The gradual shift in color coding from 2014 to 2023, from green to yellow, indicates an evolution in research focus areas, with a noticeable transition from 'IoT' 'Cloud Computing' towards technologies such as 'Blockchain' 'Artificial Intelligence'. This shift could reflect an increasing exploration of how new technologies are implemented in digital technologies of the concrete supply chain.

The digitalization of supply chains is propelled by core technologies like IoT, big data analytics, AI, cloud computing, and blockchain, each playing a pivotal role in transitioning towards Industry 4.0. IoT connects physical assets to the digital ecosystem, enabling real-time data capture. Big data analytics offers insights for better decision-making and process optimization. AI predicts trends and automates complex decisions, increasing responsiveness[4]. Cloud computing provides a scalable platform for data management and collaboration[6]. Blockchain introduces security and transparency, facilitating trust and automating transactions[7]. Collectively, these technologies streamline supply chain operations, enhance efficiency, and foster innovation, marking a significant shift towards more agile and intelligent supply chain management .

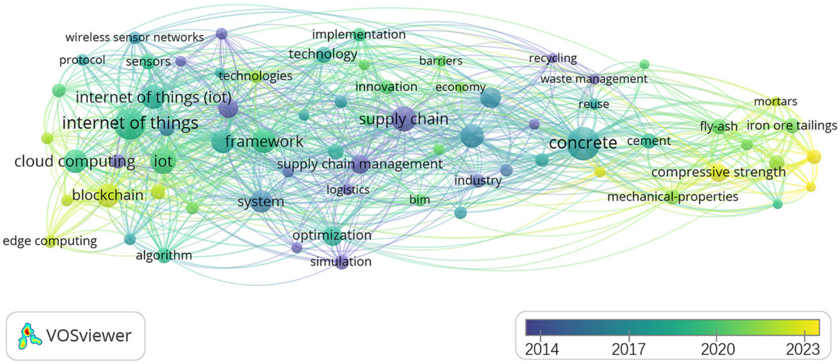

Fig. 1. Technology trends in digitalization of concrete supply chain

3.2 Impact of IoT on Supply Chain Dynamics

3.2.1 Real-Time Tracking and Asset Management

IoT enhances supply chain management by facilitating real-time tracking and asset management. Integrating sensors, RFID tags, and IoT devices allows for continuous data transmission, enabling precise decision-making, optimization, and disruption management. In the concrete supply chain, IoT monitors production, transportation, and delivery, ensuring quality and consistency[4]. It also tracks equipment usage, location, and condition, promoting efficient allocation, maintenance scheduling, and downtime reduction. IoT fosters transparency, creating a comprehensive digital record for regulatory compliance and quality management. Challenges include device durability and the need for sophisticated data analytics and secure management practices.

3.2.2 IoT-Enabled Predictive Maintenance

IoT integration shifts supply chain management from reactive to predictive maintenance, using real-time sensor data for early issue detection. In the concrete supply chain, IoT monitors machinery parameters in batch plants, mixing trucks, and pumps, identifying potential malfunctions. Sensors detect wear, imbalance, blockage risks, and mechanical faults[5][8], enabling condition-based maintenance scheduling, efficiency enhancement, and spare parts inventory optimization. Challenges include sensor durability, advanced analytics application, and integration with existing maintenance operations[9]. Addressing these requires a multidisciplinary approach and commitment to skill development and process adjustment.

3.3 Leveraging Big Data for Strategic Insights

3.3.1 Data Analytics in Demand Forecasting

Big data analytics has markedly improved demand forecasting in supply chain management, enabling precision in predicting future demands through comprehensive data analysis. In the concrete supply chain, analytics aligns production and delivery with construction project demands, utilizing advanced algorithms and machine learning. Predictive models analyze concrete consumption, project timelines, and activity to fine-tune production schedules and logistics. Real-time IoT data refines forecasts, adapting to project progress and consumption patterns[10]. Challenges include ensuring data quality, harmonizing diverse data sources[11], and enhancing data literacy and decision-making capabilities.

3.3.2 Enhancing Decision-Making with Data

Data-driven decision-making, enhanced by big data analytics, is crucial for optimizing the concrete supply chain. Traditional methods are giving way to insights from ERP systems and IoT devices, enabled by advanced analytics. This approach informs decisions across the supply chain, from selecting suppliers to optimizing production planning and improving logistics. Challenges include data integration, developing data literacy, and investing in IT infrastructure[12]. Overcoming these hurdles is vital for leveraging data-driven decision-making to enhance supply chain performance and maintain a competitive edge.

3.4 The Role of AI in Optimizing Operations

3.4.1 AI in Logistics and Inventory Management

AI is transforming supply chain management by enhancing logistics and inventory management within the concrete supply chain[13]. AI's capabilities optimize delivery routes, manage inventory effectively, and ensure efficient asset maintenance, boosting efficiency and customer satisfaction. AI-driven route optimization uses real-time data to determine the most efficient delivery paths. AI predicts demand patterns and optimal stock levels, reducing the risks of overstocking or stockouts. AI enables smart inventory allocation and real-time tracking with IoT integration. AI also facilitates predictive maintenance for logistics assets[14]. Challenges include ensuring high-quality data, integrating AI into existing systems, and developing necessary AI skills[15].

3.4.2 Cognitive Automation of Supply Chain Processes

AI enables cognitive automation within supply chain management, automating complex tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence. This technology benefits the concrete supply chain by streamlining operations across order processing, production planning, and supplier management. AI enhances order processing efficiency[16], optimizes production schedules, enables real-time monitoring and adjustment, facilitates supplier communication and assessment, and improves quality control. Challenges include data quality for AI training and the integration of AI solutions with existing systems. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fully realizing cognitive automation's benefits in the concrete supply chain.

3.5 Cloud Computing: Facilitating Scalability and Collaboration

3.5.1 Cloud-based Supply Chain Integration

Cloud computing revolutionizes the concrete supply chain by enabling scalable integration and real-time collaboration across stakeholders. It provides a centralized platform for unified information sharing, improving visibility and decision-making [17]. Automated data exchanges enhance transaction efficiency, while facilitating collaborative planning to optimize inventory and production. Cloud flexibility allows quick adaptation to market changes, and supports IoT and AI integration for operational optimization and predictive maintenance[18]. Challenges include ensuring data security and privacy, and achieving interoperability across diverse systems.

3.5.2 Cloud Solutions for Data Storage and Accessibility

Cloud computing enhances data storage and accessibility for the concrete supply chain, addressing the challenges of managing vast data volumes. Cloud storage offers a scalable, secure, and cost-efficient solution for data handling, crucial for data-driven decision-making. Scalability allows organizations to adjust storage resources as needed. Cloud storage ensures high availability and reliability, minimizing data loss risks. Cloud solutions facilitate real-time data sharing and collaboration, eliminating manual data exchange. Enhanced security features protect sensitive information. Cloud storage simplifies data management and governance, providing tools for consistent data policies and integration. Challenges include navigating data security concerns, ensuring compliance, and avoiding vendor lock-in.

3.6 Blockchain for Trust and Transparency

3.6.1 Enhancing Security in Transactions

Blockchain technology strengthens transaction security within the concrete supply chain by providing a decentralized, immutable ledger that enhances trust and transparency. Its decentralized nature reduces reliance on central authorities and minimizes single points of failure. Cryptographic techniques ensure transaction integrity, offering a tamper-proof record. Blockchain secures various supply chain transactions, creating an auditable trail that deters fraud. Smart contracts automate and enforce agreements, minimizing errors and disputes. Blockchain's effectiveness depends on factors like consensus mechanisms and network infrastructure. Challenges include integrating blockchain with existing systems and achieving interoperability among diverse platforms.

3.6.2 Blockchain for Traceability in the Supply Chain

Blockchain enhances traceability in the concrete supply chain, creating an immutable record of material transactions[19]. This ensures material provenance and quality are verified across the supply chain stages[20], with each transaction securely logged and accessible. Blockchain's decentralized nature reduces data tampering risks, fostering trust through consensus-validated changes. It streamlines processes via smart contracts and supports sustainability and regulatory compliance. Adopting blockchain for traceability faces hurdles like the need for industry collaboration and standardization and significant investments in technology integration and training.

4 CASE STUDIES AND APPLICATIONS

Through a systematic and data-driven approach, we have identified and quantified the key benefits of digitalization in the concrete supply chain within the civil engineering domain. By employing natural language processing techniques on the metadata of relevant literature, we discovered five prominent areas where digital transformation has made a significant impact: increasing inventory turnover rate, transport vehicle utilization, quality qualification rate, information sharing rate, and reducing energy consumption or emission intensity.

To substantiate these findings, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of the full text of the literature, extracting specific and quantifiable metrics that demonstrate the extent to which digitalization has enhanced or reduced these key performance indicators. For instance, the studies indicate an increase in inventory turnover rate ranging from 12% to 20%, with P. Russo reporting the highest improvement at 20%[21]. Similarly, A. Gupta reported a substantial 28% increase in information sharing rate[22], the most significant gain among the five indicators. This approach ensures a thorough and unbiased examination of the available evidence, allowing us to identify the most compelling and well-supported data points. We have also taken into account the citation frequency of each data source, prioritizing the most widely referenced and influential studies. This strategy enables us to present a robust and credible assessment of the impact of digitalization on the concrete supply chain, as illustrated in the heat map.

The heat map reveals a matrix of performance indicators against a spectrum of empirical studies, as shown in Figure 2. The range of values presented across the heat map is quantitatively represented by color intensities, with darker hues signifying higher magnitudes. The indicator 'Increase information sharing rate' registers a pronounced peak, while 'Increase inventory turnover rate' displays a relatively homogenous coloration across studies. A temporal gradient is observable in the indicators 'Reduce energy consumption or emission intensity' and 'Increase transport vehicle utilization,' suggesting a potential shift in research attention or effectiveness of strategies over time.

The distribution of colors and their associated values across this matrix reveals the multifaceted and dynamic nature of supply chain research. Inter-study comparisons are facilitated, providing a gestalt overview of the research landscape. The heat map is instrumental in offering a visual distillation of complex data sets, enabling researchers to discern patterns and anomalies that warrant further academic inquiry.

The insights gained from this analysis serve as a foundation for the four case studies presented in the following section, which provide real-world examples of how digital technologies have been successfully implemented to optimize the concrete supply chain in civil engineering projects. The digital transformation in the concrete supply chain is illustrated through these case studies, highlighting the adoption of technologies like IoT, AI, blockchain, and cloud computing for enhanced efficiency and transparency.

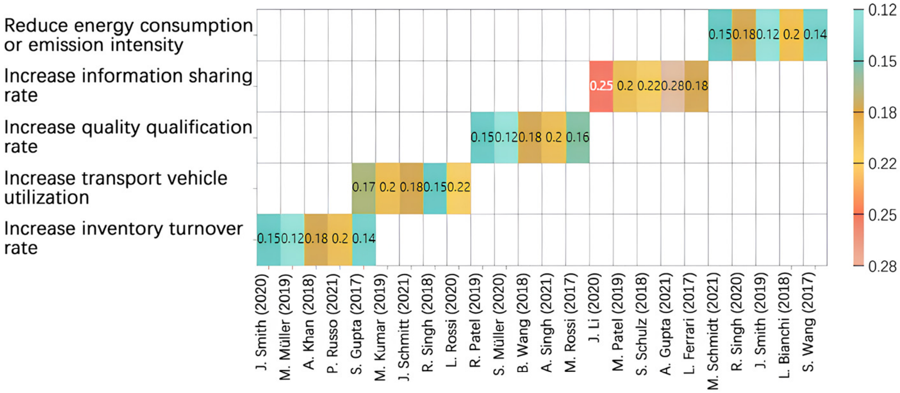

Fig. 2. Effects in digitalization of concrete supply chain

(1) IoT for Fleet Management and Optimization: Cemex's Smart Truck Initiative

One notable example is the implementation of an Internet of Things (IoT) solution by Cemex, a global leader in the building materials industry. Cemex deployed a fleet management system that utilizes GPS tracking, sensors, and real-time data analytics to monitor the location, performance, and maintenance needs of its concrete mixer trucks [23]. By leveraging IoT technology, Cemex was able to optimize route planning, reduce fuel consumption, and improve asset utilization, resulting in significant cost savings and increased operational efficiency [24].

(2) AI-Powered Demand Forecasting and Inventory Management: Heidelberg Cement's Intelligent Supply Chain

Another case study showcases the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in demand forecasting and inventory management. Heidelberg Cement, a prominent player in the concrete industry, implemented an AI-powered demand planning system that analyzes historical sales data, weather patterns, and market trends to generate accurate demand forecasts [12]. The AI solution helped Heidelberg Cement optimize its inventory levels, reducing stockouts and overstocking, and improving customer service levels. The company reported a 15% reduction in inventory costs and a 10% increase in order fulfillment rates after implementing the AI system [13].

(3) Blockchain for Traceability and Transparency: Holcim's Material Provenance Platform

The use of blockchain technology for enhancing traceability and transparency in the concrete supply chain is exemplified by the case of Holcim, a leading supplier of cement and aggregates. Holcim partnered with IBM to develop a blockchain-based platform that tracks the provenance and quality of raw materials used in concrete production [7]. By creating an immutable record of each transaction, from the sourcing of materials to the delivery of the final product, Holcim was able to improve the transparency and accountability of its supply chain. The blockchain solution also facilitated compliance with sustainability and safety regulations, as the origin and quality of materials could be easily verified [19].

(4) Cloud Computing for Supply Chain Integration and Collaboration: LafargeHolcim's Digital Transformation Journey

Cloud computing has also played a significant role in the digital transformation of the concrete supply chain. LafargeHolcim, a multinational building materials company, migrated its supply chain management systems to a cloud-based platform to enhance collaboration, scalability, and data accessibility [25]. The cloud solution enabled LafargeHolcim to integrate its global operations, streamline processes, and improve data sharing among stakeholders. The company reported a 20% reduction in supply chain costs and a 15% improvement in delivery performance after adopting the cloud platform [26].

These case studies showcase tangible benefits such as cost reduction, productivity increase, and customer satisfaction enhancement through digital technology implementation. Despite the challenges, these examples provide a roadmap for other firms in the sector to follow for successful digital transformation.

5 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Technological Integration and Financial Barriers

Integrating digital technologies with existing systems in the concrete supply chain is challenging due to legacy systems' incompatibility and inflexibility [24]. Deploying advanced technologies requires substantial upgrades in network connectivity, computing capabilities, and data security[24]. Addressing these challenges necessitates investment in new hardware, software, and networking, along with efforts to ensure system compatibility, scalability, and interoperability[26]. The high implementation costs and ongoing expenses of adopting digital technologies pose significant economic and financial hurdles, and demonstrating ROI is difficult[13]. Companies should develop a clear business case, explore collaborative funding models, leverage government incentives, and build consensus among supply chain stakeholders.

5.2 Workforce Transformation and Organizational Resistance

The digital transformation introduces workforce skill gaps, particularly in new technologies. Addressing these gaps requires investing in employee training, revising recruitment strategies, and managing the transition through clear communication, promoting continuous learning, and providing upskilling opportunities. Successfully navigating this transformation demands a holistic strategy that emphasizes training, talent acquisition, and adaptive leadership. Overcoming organizational resistance necessitates leadership to communicate benefits, engage employees, provide training, and redesign structures and processes.

5.3 Data Security, Privacy, and Regulatory Compliance

The digitalization of the concrete supply chain raises significant data security and privacy challenges. Increased reliance on technology makes systems vulnerable to cyberattacks, risking exposure of sensitive information[7][19]. Companies must implement robust cybersecurity protocols, conduct regular security assessments[7][19], and comply with data privacy laws. The digital transformation also involves navigating complex regulatory and compliance requirements, including data privacy and security, standardization, and interoperability. Companies must work closely with regulators, industry associations, and technology providers to develop standards, invest in compliance management, and address legal implications.

6 CONCLUSION

In the context of civil engineering, the digital transformation of the concrete supply chain has the potential to significantly enhance the efficiency and sustainability of construction projects, ultimately contributing to the advancement of the built environment. This review has investigated the integration of advanced technologies such as IoT, AI, big data analytics, cloud computing, and blockchain, emphasizing their capacity to revolutionize supply chain operations. Industry case studies illustrate the concrete benefits of adopting digital solutions, including cost reduction, enhanced asset utilization, and increased customer satisfaction.

The journey to successful digital transformation in the civil engineering domain, is accompanied by various challenges, including technological integration, data security and privacy concerns, workforce skill gaps, economic barriers, regulatory compliance, and organizational resistance. Surmounting these hurdles necessitates strategic investments, collaborative efforts, and a comprehensive approach that addresses technological, organizational, and cultural aspects.

The concrete supply chain's future depends on the successful adoption and integration of digital technologies. Companies that proactively embrace this transformation and navigate the associated challenges will be well-positioned to realize the advantages of increased efficiency, agility, and competitiveness. Subsequent research should concentrate on developing industry-specific frameworks and best practices for digital technology implementation, addressing interoperability and standardization issues, and exploring innovative solutions to overcome the identified challenges. By leveraging the potential of digital technologies and fostering a culture of innovation and continuous improvement, the concrete industry can drive the development of smart, sustainable, and resilient infrastructure, ultimately contributing to a more efficient, resilient, and sustainable future for civil engineering projects.

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