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THE EFFECTS OF EMPLOYEE E-READINESS ON THE INTEGRATION OF E-COMMERCE IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Abstract

To assess the impact of employee e-readiness on companies operating in international markets and their adoption of e-commerce, a survey was conducted with a sample of 154 Serbian SME exporters in collaboration with the Serbian Association of Employers at the end of 2024. The online questionnaire examined how employee e-readiness influences SMEs' willingness to engage in exports, particularly through e-commerce. Seven factors of employee e-readiness were identified as independent variables, while eight factors related to e-commerce application in international trade were defined as dependent variables. Business owners and managers, the targeted respondents, evaluated these statements using a Likert scale. The results revealed a significant impact and strong interrelation between the variables, with digital competency and technology adaptability identified as key factors influencing e-commerce adoption in international trade. Additionally, global market access, online marketplaces, and channel access were recognized as crucial factors for international trade success. The findings of this study contribute to the literature on internationalization, network effects, cost efficiency, and institutional frameworks, offering valuable insights for SMEs seeking to leverage e-commerce in the global marketplace.

Key words: international trade, digital era, e-readiness, online commerce, internationalization theory, Serbia.

JEL classification: F153, F02, F44, J24.

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ЕФЕКТИ ДИГИТАЛНЕ ПИСМЕНОСТИ ЗАПОСЛЕНИХ У ИНТЕГРАЦИЈИ ЕЛЕКТРОНСКЕ МЕЂУНАРОДНЕ ТРГОВИНЕ

Апстракт

Да би се проценио утицај дигиталне писмености запослених на компаније које послују на међународним тржиштима и њихово усвајање онлајн трговине, спроведено је теренско истраживање на узорку од 154 српских предузећа- извозника у сарадњи са Удружењем послодаваца Србије 2024. године. За независну варијаблу- дигитална писменост запослених дефинисано је 7 тврдњи, а зависну- примена електронске трговине у међународној трговини 8 тврдњи. Власници и менаџери предузећа, као циљани испитаници, оцењивали су ниво утицаја дефинисаних тврдњи две варијабле једне на другу, коришћењем Ликертове скале. Резултати су показали постојање значајног утицаја и јаке међусобне повезаности варијабли, при чему су дигиталне компетенције запослених и прилагодљивост технологије идентификовани као кључни фактори који утичу на усвајање е-трговине у међународној трговини. Поред тога, приступ глобалном тржишту и каналима продаје су препознати као кључни фактори за успех међународне трговине. Налази ове студије доприносе литератури о области теорије, интернационализације, инситуционализације, теорије умрежавања, нудећи драгоцене увиде предузећима желе да унапреде свој положај на међунаорндим тржиштима послујући онлајн преко унапређења дигиталне писмености запослених.

Кључне речи: међународна трговина, дигитална ера, е-читање, онлајн трговина, теорија интернационализације, Србија

Introduction

In the digital era, international trade has become increasingly vital for economic growth and development. The rise of new technologies, e-commerce, and digital platforms has transformed the way businesses engage in global commerce. Digitalization enables the real-time exchange of data and goods across borders, improving efficiency, transparency, and competitiveness (Špiler et al., 2023; Jevtić et al., 2020; 2024). This allows countries and businesses to offer products and services more cost-effectively while fostering innovation, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, driving advancements across industries worldwide (Ćurčić & Grubor, 2023; Srebro & Jevtić, 2024; Srebro et al., 2024). Overall, international trade in the digital era enhances economic integration, market access, productivity, and sustainable growth. In 2023, developed economies experienced a 2.8% decline in exports, with sharp decreases in Saint Pierre and Miquelon (-76.9%), Andorra (-34.6%), Norway (-30.5%), and Russia (-28.4%). The decline was even greater in developing economies, which fell by 6.2%, amounting to \$10.5 trillion in global export values. Serbia's merchandise exports, however, grew by 6.5% in 2023 (UNCTAD, 2025). Globally, developed economies remained the largest exporters, contributing \$13.3 trillion.

E-commerce plays a pivotal role in bridging geographical gaps and enabling businesses to access international markets. Platforms streamline cross-border transactions, offering secure payment systems, real-time communication, and digital marketing solutions. They allow firms to connect directly with international buyers, manage inventories across borders, and provide localized experiences while scaling operations globally. As e-commerce evolves, it drives the digital transformation of international trade, making it more accessible, cost-effective, and efficient for businesses and consumers alike. Since the early 2000s, online shopping has expanded dramatically, with global users rising from under 100 million to approximately 2.3 billion by 2021. Sales on the top 35 e-commerce platforms increased from \$2.6 trillion in 2019 to over \$4 trillion in 2021. Across 43 developed and developing countries, e-commerce transactions grew from \$17 trillion in 2016 to \$27 trillion in 2022, with international transactions gradually gaining momentum (UNCTAD, 2024).

Studying e-readiness and its impact on e-commerce in international trade is essential, particularly for businesses in developing economies. **E-readiness** refers to the preparedness of individuals, firms, and nations to leverage digital technologies, including internet-based marketing strategies, online retail channels, and digital supply chain solutions. It encompasses digital infrastructure, technological capabilities, employee skills, and regulatory frameworks. High levels of e-readiness enable smoother cross-border transactions, improved logistics, enhanced customer experiences, and greater competitiveness. Conversely, insufficient e-readiness can hinder firms' ability to adapt to fast-paced digital trade environments, limiting their participation in global commerce. Understanding and improving e-readiness is therefore critical for policymakers, business leaders, and researchers seeking to foster effective e-commerce adoption and sustainable growth in the global digital economy.

The purpose of this research is to explore the perspectives of export representatives on the impact of e-readiness, highlighting its significance for the successful implementation of e-commerce in export activities. The study is structured as follows: an introduction outlining the subject matter, a review of the literature, a presentation of materials and methods, a discussion of the findings, and a conclusion, followed by references.

Literature review

To ground the research, the authors examined a range of established theoretical frameworks and conceptual models, including:

- Transaction Cost Theory, which investigates the expenses involved in conducting economic transactions, such as negotiating, monitoring, and enforcing agreements. This theory suggests that firms aim to minimize these costs when determining operational and market strategies, offering insights into how businesses manage transaction costs in cross-border operations, particularly in the context of digital transactions and international regulations (Williamson, 1981).
- Organizational Structure Theory, which emphasizes the role of institutions in guiding the decisions and actions of organizations (Scott, 1995).
- Theory of Relational Dynamics, which examines the dynamics of social and economic networks, highlighting how connections and interactions between

participants foster transactions, generate value, and ultimately influence business performance and success.

- Strategic Asset Framework, which focuses on how a company's unique assets—such as technology, brand equity, customer insights, and logistics infrastructure—contribute to securing competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Applied to e-commerce and global business, this framework explains how firms leverage distinctive strengths to develop effective online strategies and expand internationally.
- Foreign Market Penetration Approaches, which encompass strategies that firms adopt to enter international markets (Root, 1994). Examining these strategic pathways provides insight into their relevance and effectiveness, particularly within the context of e-commerce and global business operations.
- Online Retail Consumption Patterns, which highlight the importance of understanding consumer behavior in e-commerce environments. This knowledge is essential for designing effective marketing strategies and enhancing digital user experiences (Kotler & Keller, 2016).
- Theory of Gradual International Expansion, which explores how firms incrementally enter foreign markets, shaped by internal capabilities, experiential learning, and network ties (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Applied to the digital context, particularly in e-commerce, this framework helps explain how online enterprises develop cross-border strategies and scale their operations globally.
- Connected Digital Environments, which have transformed the business landscape, making it essential to study their structure, network effects, and value co-creation in platform-driven commerce. This perspective provides important insights into strategic operations and challenges within digital ecosystems and is further enriched by regional academic perspectives (Parker et al., 2016; Jevtić & Srebro, 2024; Miškić et al., 2025; Popović & Jevtić, 2020; Radović et al., 2017; Vrbanac et al., 2023).

In the context of e-commerce, these frameworks collectively offer a solid foundation for analyzing international business dynamics and understanding the strategic, organizational, and technological factors that influence global online trade.

Methodology

To assess the impact of employee e-readiness on companies engaging in or intending to engage in international trade through online retail, a sample of 154 Serbian SME exporters was surveyed via an online questionnaire conducted at the end of 2024, in collaboration with the Serbian Association of Employers. Seven factors of employee e-readiness, serving as the independent variable (P), were identified: Cross-Border Communication Skills, Cybersecurity Awareness, Digital Competency and Technology Adaptability, E-Commerce Platform Management, Regulatory Compliance Knowledge, Analytical, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making Skills, and Supply Chain and Logistics Efficiency. Additionally, eight factors representing the application of e-commerce in international trade, defined as the dependent variable (Q), were identified: Reduction in

Trade Barriers, Increased Speed and Efficiency, Automation of Trade Processes, Data-Driven Decision Making, Improved Customer Engagement, Supply Chain Transparency, Access to Global Markets and Online Marketplaces, and Enhanced Payment Solutions. The study aims to investigate whether employee e-readiness (P) significantly influences e-commerce application in international trade (Q). The research hypotheses are:

- H0: Employee E-Readiness for E-Commerce Adoption (P), does not affect the International Trade in digital era (Q).
- Ha: Employee E-Readiness for E-Commerce Adoption (P), affects the International Trade in digital era (Q)

The survey targeted business owners and managers, who provided their assessments on five statements (1 – Extremely improbable, 2 – Unfavorable, 3 – Inconclusive, 4 – Plausible, and 5 – Almost certain) related to two predefined research variables. The focus was on employee e-readiness factors influencing SME export propensity, with particular emphasis on e-commerce implementation (as defined in Table 1). The study employs correlation and regression analyses to derive the final results. Based on these analyses, specific claims were formulated regarding employee e-readiness for e-commerce adoption in international trade. (Table 1):

Table 1. Values of respondents' attitudes for statements (variables P and Q)

	Claims	Mean	Std Dev
P	Independent variable: Employee E-Readiness for E-Commerce Adoption		
P1.	Employees should possess proficiency in international business communication, digital correspondence, and customer engagement across different cultures and languages.	4.3441558442	0.5759887223
P2.	Employees are required to possess knowledge of data protection, secure online transactions, and compliance with cybersecurity standards in global trade.	4.3636363636	0.5695793864
P3.	Employees must have readiness to embrace new digital systems, update skills, and adopt innovative e-commerce technologies.	4.525974026	0.6973155993
P4.	Employees should be able to operate and manage e-commerce platforms, including product listings, online payments, and customer service.	4.1948051948	0.8407740137
P5.	Employees should have an understanding of international trade laws, digital taxation, and e-commerce regulations across different markets.	4.4480519481	0.723482932
P6.	Employees must have capability to interpret online sales data, customer behavior, and market trends to improve e-commerce strategies.	4.2532467532	0.662355554
P7.	Employees must have knowledge of digital supply chain management, cross-border shipping, and fulfillment processes.	4.4155844156	0.7813286714
Q	Dependent variable: International Trade in the Time of Digitalization		
Q1.	Reduction in trade barriers refers to the lowering or elimination of tariffs, customs duties, and regulatory restrictions that hinder international commerce.	3.9545454545	0.5156493348
Q2.	Digital technologies streamline trade processes, allowing for faster transactions, better communication, and real-time tracking of shipments, what reduces the time needed for cross-border trade and improves operational efficiency	4.1623376623	0.5419738703

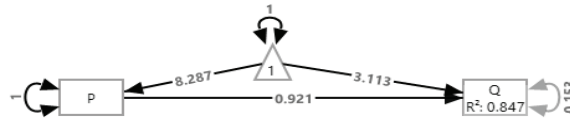
Q3.	Automation tools such as AI, machine learning, and blockchain technology are transforming supply chain management, customs procedures, and payment systems.	4.3311688312	0.5369387303
Q4.	Data analytics empowers businesses to make informed decisions in pricing, inventory management, and market expansion.	4.3636363636	0.50898055
Q5.	Tech-based resources enhance communication with international customers, allowing businesses to cater to diverse needs and improve customer satisfaction.	4.6233766234	0.627037042
Q6.	Digitalization provides visibility and transparency across supply chains, helping businesses track the origin of materials, monitor logistics, and ensure compliance with international regulations and standards.	42402597403	0.8007773577
Q7.	The digital revolution, through blockchain simplifies regulatory compliance and cross-border transactions by automating customs procedures, reducing paperwork, and facilitating smoother trade flows.	4.7597402597	0.4436213837
Q8.	Digital payment systems such as cryptocurrencies, digital wallets, E-invoicing, and online banking solutions transaction.facilitate secure and efficient cross-border payments, reducing currency exchange barriers and minimizing	4.4935064935	0.5629840343

Source: Authors

Results

Category **P3** exhibits the highest mean value, accompanied by a slightly higher standard deviation compared to the other categories, indicating that although the average level is high, the data are more dispersed. In contrast, **P4** has the lowest mean and the highest standard deviation, suggesting substantial variability and lower consistency within this category. Categories **P1**, **P2**, and **P7** display similar mean values and standard deviations, implying relatively uniform and stable distributions. Overall, the results indicate notable differences in both average values and variability across categories, with **P3** demonstrating the highest average performance, while **P4** shows the lowest mean alongside the greatest dispersion. Among the **Q** categories, **Q7** records the highest mean and the lowest standard deviation, indicating consistently high and uniform outcomes. **Q5** also exhibits a relatively high mean but with greater variability, suggesting more dispersed or inconsistent results. **Q1** has the lowest mean value; however, its relatively small standard deviation indicates that the data are consistent, albeit at a lower level compared to other categories. Notably, **Q7** has the highest mean across all categories in both tables, while **Q6** shows the highest standard deviation among the **Q** variables, reflecting the greatest variability. As illustrated in Figure 1, the evaluation of the conceptual framework model reveals a strong explanatory power. The R^2 value of 0.847375 indicates that approximately 84.74% of the variation in (**Q**) is explained by changes in (**P**). Furthermore, the high association between the variables is confirmed by the correlation coefficient, with (**P**) accounting for 0.92053 of the variation in (**Q**), demonstrating a very strong positive relationship.

Figure 1. Standard system model contribution quantities for (PQ)



Source: Authors

The p-value, as shown in Table 2, stands at $[F(1,152)=843.9066, p<0.0001]$.

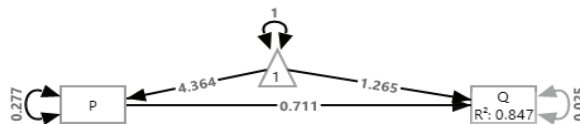
Table 2. ANOVA vor variable (Q)

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	1	21.557945	21.5579	843.9066
Error	152	3.882903	0.0255	Prob > F
C. Total	153	25.440848		<0.0001

Source: Authors

The findings validate the alternative hypothesis (H_a), indicating that (P) influences (Q). The assessed average for (P) is, 4,364. The dispersion of values for (P) is quantified at 0.277, and the extent of fluctuation in (Q) equals 0.025 (F.2).

Figure 2. Irregular input magnitudes for (PQ)



Source: Authors

Based on the data from (Figure 2), Equations 1 and 2 articulate the functional relationship among the variables:

$$y = 1.265437 + 0.710562 \cdot x \quad (1)$$

or

$$(Q) = 1.265437 + 0.710562 \cdot (P) \quad (2)$$

Discussion

The empirical findings support the alternative hypothesis (H_a), confirming that employee e-readiness for e-commerce adoption (P) has a statistically significant and positive effect on international trade performance in the digital era (Q). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0), which assumes no relationship between employee e-readiness and international trade outcomes, is rejected. The mean value of P (4.364) indicates a relatively high level of employee preparedness for e-commerce adoption, suggesting

that employees possess the necessary digital skills, technological awareness, and organizational readiness to engage in digital trade processes. The observed dispersion of P (0.277) reflects moderate heterogeneity among employees, which is consistent with previous studies emphasizing unequal digital skill distribution within firms and across sectors. In contrast, the low variability in Q (0.025) indicates a stable international trade outcome, suggesting that improvements in digital readiness translate into consistent trade performance gains. The estimated regression results reveal a strong and positive linear relationship between P and Q, demonstrating that higher levels of employee e-readiness significantly enhance firms' ability to participate in international trade through digital platforms. This finding aligns with earlier research showing that human capital readiness is a key enabling factor for successful e-commerce adoption and cross-border digital trade (Kraemer et al., 2006; Molla & Licker, 2005). Similar empirical evidence is reported by Zhu and Kraemer (2005), who found that organizational and human e-readiness significantly improve e-business assimilation and firm performance in global markets. Likewise, Huy et al. (2012) demonstrated that employee digital competence and organizational readiness positively influence export performance through e-commerce channels. More recent studies confirm that workforce digital readiness enhances firms' integration into international digital value chains, particularly in emerging and transitional economies (UNCTAD, 2021; WTO, 2020). Overall, the results validate the proposed theoretical framework and reinforce the view that employee e-readiness is a critical determinant of international trade competitiveness in the digital era. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the role of human and organizational digital capabilities as foundational drivers of e-commerce-enabled international trade.

Conclusion

The authors of the study have examined various conceptual frameworks and paradigms that establish a robust foundation for the research. These frameworks provide structured approaches to understanding the research variables and their interrelationships, guiding the analysis and interpretation of the findings. In summary, digitalization has revolutionized international trade by enhancing accessibility, reducing barriers, improving efficiency, and providing businesses with the tools for competition. E-commerce began emerging as a key facilitator of international commerce, spurred by the expansion of internet connectivity and the development of secure online payment system (Dedjanski, Jevtić & Grozdanić, 2024; Vučković & Čučković, 2024). Findings support the strong correlation between e-readiness, ecommerce and international trade, as well as factors contributed to the importance of online commerce to global trade digitalization. Employee E-readiness for E-commerce adoption in international trade have to include the development of cross-border communication skills, technology adaptability, knowledge on e-commerce platform management, regulatory compliance, and supply chain and logistic efficiency. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how changes in employee e-readiness influence international trade performance over time, capturing learning and organizational adaptation effects. Further studies may also investigate the moderating role of institutional quality, digital

infrastructure, and regulatory environments, particularly in developing and transition economies (Molla & Licker, 2005; UNCTAD, 2021; WTO, 2020). Expanding the framework to include advanced digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and blockchain would deepen understanding of employee readiness for intelligent trade systems (OECD, 2021). Comparative cross-country and cross-sectoral analyses could additionally refine e-readiness measurement frameworks and enhance their applicability across diverse economic contexts.

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