
RENDANHEYI PLATFORM GOVERNANCE: THE HAIER CASE

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: How does Rendanheyi convert digital connectivity into employee initiative, cross-boundary coordination and organisational value creation?

Motivation: Digital transformation research explains how digital technologies reshape strategy, while platform and strategic HRM research examine governance and people systems. However, these literatures rarely show how an indigenous management model converts user data into authority, resource allocation, incentives and collaboration. Building on Teece (2007), Gawer (2014) and Strohmeier (2020), this study addresses the puzzle that similar digital investments produce different organisational outcomes. Existing accounts of Rendanheyi are also frequently descriptive, leaving its mechanisms, counter-effects and transfer conditions under-specified.

What's New? The paper theorises Rendanheyi as a hybrid platform-governance architecture rather than a cultural slogan or isolated HR practice.

So What? The analysis identifies what firms may learn from Haier without copying institution-specific labels or transferring excessive market risk to employees.

Idea: Digital infrastructure enables four connected mechanisms: dynamic strategic alignment through decentralised authority and HR platforms; order-based human-capital recombination; user-linked incentives; and chain-group governance across internal units and ecosystem partners. Their configuration, rather than any single practice, links employee autonomy to accountable user value creation.

Data: The 2020-2025 case database combines six semi-structured interviews totalling 628 minutes and approximately 148,000 Chinese characters, annual and ESG reports, governance documents, company releases and approximately 157,000 Chinese characters of executive speeches and forum materials.

Tools: A longitudinal embedded single-case design is analysed through Gioia coding, temporal bracketing, process tracing, pattern matching, triangulation and rival-explanation analysis. Evidence is organised from first-order statements to second-order themes and aggregate mechanisms.

Findings: Rendanheyi worked by moving selected decision rights towards market-facing units while retaining platform rules and shared services. Order-based assembly widened talent matching; user-linked rewards redirected attention from supervisors towards attributable user outcomes; and chain-group governance coordinated autonomous actors through recorded commitments and value-sharing rules. The configuration enhanced responsiveness and innovation, but generated pressure, short-termism and attribution disputes when data quality, task divisibility, talent depth or rule legitimacy were weak.

Contribution: The study converts Rendanheyi into an analytically transferable model of digitally enabled hybrid governance with explicit mechanisms and boundary conditions.

KEYWORDS: Digital transformation; management innovation; Rendanheyi; platform governance; dynamic capabilities; user-linked incentives; organisational design.

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is increasingly understood as organisational redesign rather than the installation of digital tools. Data platforms, artificial intelligence and connected products can expose user demand, link dispersed contributors and shorten feedback cycles, but they do not determine who has authority, how talent is allocated, which outcomes are rewarded or how autonomous actors coordinate (Bharadwaj, El Sawy, Pavlou, & Venkatraman, 2013; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). The conversion of digital connectivity into organisational value therefore depends on management architecture.

This challenge is especially visible in large manufacturers. Traditional hierarchies offer scale, role clarity and process control, yet personalised demand and ecosystem solutions require fast cross-functional recombination. Firms must simultaneously decentralise initiative and preserve integration. Platform research explains how rules and interfaces coordinate participants, strategic HRM explains alignment between people systems and strategy, and dynamic capability research explains resource reconfiguration. These perspectives remain insufficiently connected at the level of concrete organisational mechanisms (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Gawer, 2014; Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018).

Haier's Rendanheyi model provides an information-rich setting for examining this problem. The term links people (ren) with user orders or needs (dan) in an integrated relationship (heyi). Since its introduction in 2005, the model has developed from an anti-bureaucratic principle into a digitally supported system involving autonomous micro-enterprises, task-based team formation, user-linked rewards and chain-group collaboration. Yet many accounts treat these practices as an inspirational philosophy or a list of managerial innovations. Such descriptions do not establish how the elements work together, what adverse effects they create or under which conditions they can travel beyond Haier.

This paper asks: how does Rendanheyi convert digital connectivity into employee initiative, cross-boundary coordination and organisational value creation? Using a longitudinal embedded case of Haier Smart Home from 2020 to 2025, the paper develops a mechanism model composed of dynamic strategic alignment, order-based resource recombination, user-linked incentives and chain-group platform governance. The argument is deliberately conditional: Rendanheyi is not presented as a universally superior template, but as a hybrid governance configuration whose effects depend on digital infrastructure, task divisibility, attributable user feedback, talent depth, employee risk tolerance and sustained leadership commitment.

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it theorises Rendanheyi as platform governance inside and across the firm, thereby connecting an indigenous Chinese management practice with international organisation theory. Second, it specifies the human-capital and incentive microfoundations through which digital strategy becomes action. Third, it identifies counter-evidence and transfer conditions, clarifying what can be replicated - mechanism logic - and what should not be copied mechanically - institutional labels and extreme internal marketisation.

2 Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 From hierarchy to digitally enabled hybrid governance

Classical industrial management separated conception from execution and used hierarchy to standardise work. Lean production later improved process integration and continuous improvement, but both paradigms were built primarily around relatively stable product and supply-chain architectures. Digital environments increase the frequency with which knowledge, tasks and partners must be recombined. Organisations therefore face a dual requirement: local actors need discretion to respond to users, while interdependent activities require common rules, data and interfaces.

Platform theory offers a useful lens. A platform is not only a technology; it is an architecture that defines participation, interfaces and governance (Tiwana, 2014; Gawer, 2014). Ecosystem research similarly shows that value creation may depend on multiple autonomous actors whose investments must be aligned without full hierarchical ownership (Jacobides et al., 2018). Inside the firm, the same logic can coordinate semi-autonomous business units and project teams. This creates a hybrid form combining hierarchical ownership, market-like selection and platform-based rule coordination.

Rendanheyi fits this hybrid-governance problem. Frontline units receive selected decision, staffing, evaluation and reward rights, but autonomy is bounded by strategic direction, platform standards, data visibility and value-sharing rules. The central theoretical issue is thus not whether hierarchy disappears. It is how authority, market signals and platform rules are recombined.

2.2 Human capital, incentives and dynamic capabilities

Strategic HRM research argues that coherent staffing, development, appraisal and reward systems shape the capabilities and behaviours needed for strategy (Wright & McMahan, 1992; Delery & Doty, 1996; Becker & Gerhart, 1996). Digital HRM extends this domain through platforms, analytics and algorithmic coordination (Bondarouk, Parry, & Furtmueller, 2017; Strohmeier, 2020; Meijerink, Boons, Keegan, & Marler, 2021). However, digital HRM is often framed as functional efficiency, while Rendanheyi treats people systems as part of organisational governance.

Dynamic capability theory explains performance under change through sensing, seizing and reconfiguring (Teece, 2007). Its microfoundations include individual cognition, organisational processes and structures (Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012). Rendanheyi makes these microfoundations observable: platforms make capabilities visible; user opportunities are converted into actionable orders; teams form and dissolve around these orders; and feedback informs subsequent allocation. The relevant resource is not simply a stock of human capital, but an ability to repeatedly recombine it.

Agency and incomplete-contract theories illuminate incentives and control. Conventional employment contracts cannot specify every contribution, especially in innovation and ecosystem work (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Grossman & Hart, 1986; Eisenhardt, 1989a). Rendanheyi attempts to reduce the distance between contribution and reward by inserting user and market signals into internal evaluation. Yet measurement is imperfect, and algorithmic visibility may also intensify control and risk transfer (Kellogg, Valentine, &

Christin, 2020). A credible account must therefore incorporate fairness, attribution and employee well-being rather than assuming that stronger market linkage is always beneficial.

2.3 Mechanism model and propositions

The theoretical synthesis yields four mechanisms. Dynamic strategic alignment redistributes selected decision rights and turns HR functions into platform services. Order-based recombination converts user needs into tasks and matches them with visible capabilities. User-linked incentives internalise external signals and redistribute residual claims. Chain-group governance coordinates internal units and external partners through common rules, recorded commitments and value-sharing arrangements. The mechanisms are complementary: autonomy without governance fragments; allocation without incentives moves people but not attention; and market-linked rewards without capability mobility intensify pressure inside rigid jobs.

Proposition 1. Digital transformation supports organisational value creation when decentralised authority and platformised HR services create dynamic alignment between strategy and market-facing units.

Proposition 2. Order-based assembly and disassembly improve organisational responsiveness when employee capabilities and task opportunities are sufficiently visible and recombinable.

Proposition 3. User-linked incentives strengthen user-oriented behaviour when outcomes are attributable, contribution measures are auditable and distribution rules are perceived as legitimate.

Proposition 4. Chain-group platform governance improves ecosystem coordination when tasks are divisible, interfaces are clear and autonomous actors accept common commitment and value-sharing rules.

3 METHOD

3.1 Case design and observation window

A longitudinal embedded single-case design was selected because the research question concerns interdependent mechanisms unfolding across organisational levels (Eisenhardt, 1989b; Yin, 2018). Haier Smart Home is a revelatory case: it is a large global manufacturer with an extended history of Rendanheyi experimentation and extensive public reporting. The embedded units comprise the corporate and HR platforms, industry and regional businesses, micro-enterprises, chain groups and frontline employees.

The principal observation window is 2020-2025. During this period, Haier Smart Home intensified its smart-home, scenario and ecosystem strategy while deepening digital

operations and cross-boundary collaboration. The window also provides continuous annual, ESG and governance documentation and allows interviewees to reconstruct specific mechanism changes rather than only the model's early history.

3.2 Data collection

The database combines interviews, corporate archives and public materials. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with a former HR strategy director, an industry vice-president, a regional general manager, a smart-home micro-enterprise owner, an R&D engineer and an operations manager. Interviews took place between 24 February and 11 March 2026, lasted 95-118 minutes and totalled 628 minutes. They generated approximately 148,000 Chinese characters of transcribed material. Questions covered strategic change, authority, talent matching, user-linked rewards, chain-group collaboration, employee responses, negative cases and boundary conditions. Role codes are used to preserve anonymity.

Table 1: Interview evidence.

Code	Role	Date	Duration
M1	Former HR Strategy Director	24 Feb 2026	102 min
P1	Vice-President, Water Industry	26 Feb 2026	118 min
T1	Regional General Manager	28 Feb 2026	110 min
T2	Micro-enterprise Owner, Smart Home	2 Mar 2026	95 min
E1	R&D Engineer	7 Mar 2026	99 min
E2	Operations Manager	11 Mar 2026	104 min

Archival evidence includes Haier Smart Home annual and ESG reports for 2020-2025, governance materials, company releases and published descriptions of Rendanheyi. Public materials include management speeches and forum transcripts containing approximately 157,000 Chinese characters. Corporate documents establish chronology and formal claims; interviews reveal interpretation and implementation; external academic sources support theoretical comparison. No single source was treated as sufficient evidence for a mechanism.

3.3 Analysis and quality controls

Analysis combined Gioia coding, temporal bracketing, process tracing and pattern matching (Langley, 1999; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). First-order codes retained case language, including decision-right decentralisation, capability labels, opportunity orders, user feedback entering rewards and multiple actors assembling around scenarios. Second-order themes

captured dynamic strategic alignment, resource recombination, market-signal internalisation and platform rule coordination. These themes were aggregated into the four mechanisms.

Process tracing examined sequences from strategic discourse and platform development to changes in authority, employee behaviour and organisational outcomes. Pattern matching compared case evidence with the four propositions. Rival explanations were considered: brand strength, international scale and sector growth may explain company-level results, but they do not explain observed changes in task formation, evaluation attention or collaboration rules. Counter-evidence concerning employee pressure, short-termism, contribution disputes and coordination costs was retained to define limits rather than removed as noise.

Construct validity was strengthened through triangulation among interviews, corporate documents and public sources. A case database and evidence matrices preserved traceability from raw material to first-order concepts, themes and propositions. Quotations were translated into UK English and checked against the Chinese transcript; the manuscript avoids personally identifying information for double-blind review.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Dynamic strategic alignment: autonomy supported by HR platforms

The evidence indicates that Rendanheyi did not begin with isolated incentive reform. It began by changing the relationship among digital strategy, authority and HR support. Haier Smart Home's strategy increasingly moved from individual appliances towards smart-home scenarios, ecosystem services and continuous user interaction. Such opportunities crossed product and functional boundaries, making central approval slower and less informed than decisions taken near the user.

Selected decision, staffing, evaluation and reward rights were therefore shifted towards business units and micro-enterprises. At the same time, HR activities were platformised: capability labels, rules, process records and shared services provided an infrastructure within which autonomous units could act. Interview evidence emphasised that HR did not disappear. Its role moved from deciding for business units towards designing rules, maintaining capability information and enabling matching. This finding supports Proposition 1 and reframes empowerment as accountable decentralisation rather than absence of control.

The counter-effect was an expansion of responsibility. Greater discretion increased the need for commercial judgement, negotiation and tolerance of uncertain income. Where employees lacked these capabilities, autonomy could be experienced as pressure. Dynamic alignment

therefore required training, transparent boundaries and a gradual rather than ceremonial transfer of authority.

4.2 Order-based recombination: from positions to opportunity teams

The second mechanism was expressed in the practice commonly translated as 'assembly and disassembly by order'. User needs, market opportunities and business problems were converted into identifiable tasks. Digital platforms made those opportunities visible and supported matching with employee capabilities. Teams could cross departments, form around an order and subsequently dissolve or reconfigure when the task changed.

Interviewees distinguished this mechanism from conventional project management. In a traditional project, managers usually select members from existing departments and employees retain a stable positional identity. Under order-based recombination, a broader opportunity pool and visible capability profiles increased self-selection and cross-boundary mobility. An operations manager explained that employees gained access to more varied projects, but also had to demonstrate contribution rather than rely on their previous job title. The mechanism therefore converted individual human capital into a repeatedly recombinable organisational resource.

The principal outcomes were faster matching, a wider combination of expertise and improved responsiveness to user scenarios. However, the mechanism was weakest when capability data were incomplete, critical skills were scarce or repeated short assignments discouraged long-term learning. Proposition 2 is supported conditionally: digital matching creates a microfoundation of dynamic capability only when the organisation has a sufficiently deep talent pool and protects capability development alongside immediate delivery.

4.3 User-linked incentives: market signals inside the employment relationship

The third mechanism embedded user and market outcomes in internal performance and reward systems. The expression 'user pays' does not mean that customers literally transfer salaries to employees. It describes a designed linkage among user feedback, order performance, value contribution and internal distribution. Digital records made more frequent feedback possible and reduced exclusive dependence on supervisory appraisal.

A business-level interviewee reported that evaluation increasingly asked whether users genuinely recognised the result, rather than only whether an internally assigned task had been completed. This shifted attention from pleasing the immediate supervisor towards producing an attributable user outcome. It also encouraged collaboration because product, R&D, service and channel contributors often depended on one another to generate a complete scenario solution.

The mechanism altered agency relations by inserting the user and the platform between managers and employees. A portion of residual value could be shared with teams, but responsibility for poor outcomes also moved closer to those teams. This created a motivational benefit and a governance risk. User signals are noisy, contributions are interdependent and short-term indicators can crowd out learning or difficult long-cycle work. Proposition 3 is supported only where data are auditable, attribution is contestable and distribution combines user outcomes with team contribution and longer-term capability measures.

4.4 Chain-group governance: coordinating an internal-external ecosystem

Smart-home scenarios cannot be delivered by a single department. They require products, software, logistics, installation, service and external ecosystem partners to contribute to a common user experience. Chain-group arrangements connected these actors around a scenario or order. Coordination relied on common objectives, recorded commitments, process visibility, contribution evaluation and agreed value-sharing rules.

This arrangement created a hybrid organisational form. Hierarchy remained important for ownership, strategic boundaries, standards and dispute authority. Market-like mechanisms selected contributors and linked returns to results. Platform governance supplied interfaces and rules across internal and external boundaries. A micro-enterprise owner described the task as combining internal products, service resources and external capabilities because the user demanded an integrated experience rather than a single appliance.

Chain-group governance enhanced access to complementary resources and reduced the need for repeated vertical escalation. Nevertheless, it also generated negotiation costs and disputes where the value of a shared result could not be decomposed. Autonomous units could optimise their own order at the expense of the overall scenario. Proposition 4 is therefore supported when tasks and responsibilities are sufficiently divisible, platform rules are legitimate and the organisation provides mechanisms for appeal, arbitration and joint investment.

4.5 Integrated mechanism and boundary conditions

The four mechanisms formed a sequence and a configuration. Dynamic alignment supplied strategic direction and authority. Order-based recombination supplied adaptable capability. User-linked incentives supplied behavioural energy. Chain-group governance supplied coordination boundaries. Removing one element weakened the others: decentralisation without common rules fragmented the firm; incentives without recombination increased

pressure inside fixed structures; and digital talent markets without user-linked objectives risked optimising internal mobility rather than external value.

Table 2: Mechanism configuration, outcomes and failure risks.

Mechanism	Core organisational change	Proximal outcome	Main failure risk
Dynamic strategic alignment	Decision rights move towards market-facing units; HR becomes a rule, data and service platform	Faster strategy execution and local initiative	Responsibility overload; symbolic decentralisation
Order-based recombination	Capabilities and opportunities become visible; teams form across boundaries	Faster matching and broader expertise combinations	Thin talent pools; fragmented learning
User-linked incentives	User and market signals enter appraisal and distribution	User orientation and accountable entrepreneurship	Noisy attribution; short-termism; income volatility
Chain-group governance	Internal units and external partners coordinate through platform commitments and value-sharing rules	Scenario innovation and ecosystem coordination	Negotiation costs; local optimisation; distribution disputes

Cross-case transfer depends on at least six conditions identified through negative evidence: reliable digital infrastructure; tasks and business units that can be decomposed; user feedback that can be traced to teams; a sufficiently diverse talent and partner pool; long-term leadership commitment; and employees able and willing to accept entrepreneurial responsibility. These conditions explain why the transferable object is a design logic, not a vocabulary. Firms can adopt capability visibility, task matching, user-informed evaluation and platform rules without reproducing Haier's exact unit names or compensation intensity.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical contributions

First, the study advances platform research by showing that platform governance can operate as an intra-organisational and inter-organisational architecture. Rendanheyi combines corporate ownership and strategic control with market-like matching and rule-based coordination. It therefore sits between pure hierarchy and an external market, extending platform theory beyond technology businesses and complementor ecosystems.

Second, the paper provides human-capital microfoundations for dynamic capabilities. Sensing is supported by user interaction and digital visibility; seizing occurs when

opportunities become orders and teams commit resources; reconfiguration occurs when people and organisational boundaries change around subsequent orders. The mechanism makes the abstract instruction to 'reconfigure resources' observable as capability labelling, opportunity ordering and team recombination.

Third, the study extends strategic and digital HRM. HRM is not merely aligned with a predetermined strategy or digitised for efficiency. It participates in strategic execution by redesigning authority, allocation, incentives and governance. This suggests that digital HRM should be evaluated not only by automation or analytics adoption, but by whether it creates a coherent organisational architecture.

Fourth, the study qualifies agency and incomplete-contract reasoning. User-linked data can reduce some information asymmetry and share residual value with teams, but cannot eliminate measurement ambiguity. Digital traceability may empower employees and simultaneously intensify control. A legitimate system therefore requires voice, appeal and protection against uninsurable individual risk.

5.2 Managerial implications

Managers should diagnose the organisational bottleneck before imitating a visible practice. Where strategy remains centrally controlled, launching an internal talent market will not create genuine opportunity. Where user outcomes are difficult to attribute, aggressively linking pay to user data may create gaming and perceived injustice. Where ecosystem work is limited, chain-group structures may add coordination layers rather than remove them.

Implementation should proceed in stages. Firms can begin by making capabilities and opportunities visible, testing limited decision-right decentralisation and creating transparent contribution records. Incentive experiments should use team-level outcomes, quality and learning measures, income safeguards and appeal procedures. Platform governance should define participation, data access, commitment, rule-change and dispute-resolution rights. The aim is not to imitate maximum internal marketisation, but to construct an appropriate balance among autonomy, integration and employee sustainability.

The case also suggests a distinction between replicable and non-replicable elements. Replicable elements include dynamic alignment between digital strategy and HRM, transparent task-capability matching, user signals in evaluation and platform rules for cross-actor collaboration. Elements that should not be copied mechanically include the formal language of 'three rights', forced order competition without talent depth, direct equivalence between user ratings and pay, and chain-group structures without a real scenario ecosystem.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The study explains mechanisms but does not estimate population-level effects. Haier is unusually large, digitally mature and experienced in organisational experimentation; the findings cannot be transferred without attention to context. The six interviews provide role diversity but not exhaustive representation, and corporate documents may emphasise favourable outcomes. Direct access to platform behaviour, contribution and compensation data was limited. Future research should compare firms with different institutional and technological conditions, examine employee well-being and inequality, and test whether the four-mechanism configuration predicts performance using longitudinal multi-firm data. Cross-cultural studies should also distinguish universal governance problems from Haier-specific terminology and history.

6 CONCLUSION

Rendanheyi is best understood not as a slogan that removes managers, but as a digitally enabled hybrid governance architecture. In Haier Smart Home, decentralised authority and HR platforms created dynamic strategic alignment; order-based assembly recombined human capital; user-linked incentives redirected behaviour towards external outcomes; and chain-group governance coordinated internal and external contributors. These mechanisms jointly connected digital strategy with organisational value creation. They also produced tensions involving pressure, short-termism, attribution and coordination. The implication for management innovation is therefore conditional and practical: firms should replicate the underlying design logic only where infrastructure, task structure, talent depth, feedback quality, leadership commitment and employee safeguards can support it.

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