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Research Article

# AI-Driven Work Environments and Employee Well-Being: A Managerial Perspective in the Service Sector

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**Abstract:**
From a purely speculative concept, artificial intelligence has evolved into a reality in service organizations across the world, giving rise to questions regarding the implications of this for the workers within those organizations. This paper undertakes an in-depth examination of the influence of AI-based work environments on the well-being of service workers across various dimensions. With its emphasis on the service industry, including hospitality, retail banking, customer-contact organizations, and associated allied industries in the healthcare domain. In conclusion, the study identifies the implications of its findings for management and the scope for future research in the domain.

**Keywords**: artificial intelligence, employee well-being, service sector, human–AI collaboration.



## INTRODUCTION

No other force has shaped the service industry as quickly and thoroughly as the current adoption of artificial intelligence. From AI-mediated scheduling tools used in hotel chains to AI-assisted chatbots used in insurance call centers, AI systems have become the operational core of these industries. The appeal for top management is clear: lower transactional costs, improved performance transparency, and the promise of consistent quality at scale.

Academic literature on AI-mediated management has exploded since 2018, but most studies remain scattered across disciplinary boundaries. Organizational behavior scholars rarely reference algorithmic management theorists, and human resource management scholars rarely reference sociotechnical design theorists. More importantly, there is little evidence-based managerial guidance on AI-mediated management. This paper attempts to fill this gap. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on AI-mediated management by addressing three interrelated questions: How does the AI-mediated work environment impact the well-being of employees in the service sector? How do these effects operate? And how can managers and organizations moderate these effects while retaining the benefits?

Answering these questions is important for both ethical and pragmatic reasons. From an ethical perspective, organizations have a duty of care towards human subjects whose lives are affected by organizational structures. From a pragmatic perspective, there is now a significant body of evidence demonstrating links between employee well-being and service quality, employee motivation to go beyond minimum standards of performance, and employee retention as opposed to turnover—exactly the areas where AI promises to make a positive impact. Indeed, a poor management of AI deployment risks undermining the productivity benefits that AI promises to deliver.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section will outline the theoretical approaches taken in the analysis. There then follows a discussion on how particular AI applications are shaping service work and their impact on employee well-being across five distinct areas. The paper then goes on to discuss the management and organizational routes for influencing these impacts. Finally, there is a discussion section before concluding with recommendations and suggestions for further

research.

# THEORETICAL GROUNDING

### Job Demands and Job Resources: A Balancing Act

The Job Demands-Resources model, developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), is a highly productive approach for studying occupational well-being as a dynamic state of balance. Demands, including incessant workload, emotionally draining social contacts, and cognitive overload, drain workers' energy and undermine their hardiness. In contrast, job resources, including enriching feedback, authentic autonomy, supportive colleagues, and growth opportunities, restore workers' hardiness. In different configurations, the same device might function as a 'job resource,' reducing tedium and offering information assistance instead of replacing human professional judgment. In this way, the JD-R model focuses on the context and configuration of AI technology rather than its intrinsic properties.

### The Need for Autonomy, Competence, and Connection

Satisfying three basic human psychological needs is necessary for the maintenance of motivation and well-being. These include autonomy, which is the experience of acting in accordance with one's volition rather than being compelled to do so. The experience of autonomy would be significantly compromised in an environment in which an algorithm not only dictates the nature of the work to be done by the logistics worker but also the order in which the work should be done. The experience of competence, which is the experience of being able to deal with challenges as they are encountered, may be compromised in an environment in which the performance standards set by the algorithm are not transparent or in which they are arbitrarily difficult to meet. The experience of relatedness, which is the experience of feeling connected to the people one works with and the people one serves, may be compromised in an environment in which the use of AI replaces face-to-face communication or in which the speed of the work assigned by the algorithm does not allow for the experience of casual interaction with co-workers. The experience of AI in the workplace can be understood in terms of this framework to explain why some employees might experience the technologically advanced workplace as impoverished even if the workload has decreased.

### Technology-Induced Stress: A Conceptual Map

The construct of technostress, first proposed by Brod (1984), describes the psychological toll of adjusting to computerized work life. This construct was extended and developed by Tarafdar et al. (2007) to include multi-dimensionality and considerable sustainability. Five forms of technostress have been identified: techno-overload, where the amount and speed of information generated by technology exceed the employee's capacity to process; techno-invasion, where ubiquitous connectivity leads to an inability to disconnect work and personal life; techno-complexity, which involves the intellectual demands of becoming familiar with a system that is changing faster than the employee can learn; techno-insecurity, where the employee fears becoming technologically obsolescent and thus jeopardizing their livelihood; and techno-uncertainty, where the employee is uncertain about the future of technology and how it will affect their career. These forms of technostress are relevant to the service industry, where employees often have limited prior experience with complex digital technologies, where the workforce is diverse with respect to age and technological familiarity, and where AI is becoming increasingly prevalent.

### How AI Is Reshaping Service Work

Service work has always been defined by its relational character. Whether one is advising a client, resolving a complaint, welcoming a guest, or supporting a patient, the capacity to read and respond to human emotion in real time is central to what the work is and what gives it meaning. Understanding these dynamics requires examining three distinct but interconnected processes: task automation and role transformation, the rise of algorithmic management, and the possibilities of genuine human-AI collaboration.

### Task Automation and Role Transformation.

The diffusion of AI-based automation technologies is not consistent and is found to be the highest with respect to the processing of structured and rule-based cognitive tasks, including the processing of simple applications, generation of responses to general questions, scheduling, and detection of transactions that do not align with established patterns. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2018) argue that while this type of automation is found to create certain efficiencies, it is not necessarily linked to the creation of better jobs. Rather, the tasks that are left over are those that are the most cognitively and emotionally demanding. In the context of retail banking, Huang and Rust (2018) found that while automation was implemented to alleviate the burden of back-office work, the employees did not necessarily feel relieved. Rather, they experienced increased anxiety about their purpose and their future, given that the organization did not provide a clear and compelling rationale for their work and did not provide a clear sense of how to build the requisite skills to be relevant to the new roles.

### Algorithmic Management and Its Discontents.

The term "algorithmic management," which was first theoretically examined in the study by Lee et al. (2015), is used to

describe the application of data-based management systems in the allocation of tasks, the setting of performance targets, the tracking of outputs, and in some cases, the imposition of sanctions. The extent of the presence of such management in the service sector is wide-ranging. At one end of the scale, gig economy organizations utilize algorithmic management systems in the allocation of workers to customers, the tracking of worker performance after the completion of each task, and the termination of workers with performance ratings below a certain threshold without the involvement of any human manager at any point in the process. At the other end of the scale, more traditional service organizations utilize management information systems displaying real-time performance data for individual employees such as calls taken per hour, customer satisfaction ratings, and time spent idle in ways that powerfully influence employees' work experiences. The study by Veen, Barratt, and Goods (2020) presents an intriguing case study of the ways in which such management-by-metric instigates chronic states of vigilance and the feeling of being under observation with significant negative consequences for psychological well-being. The issue is compounded by the lack of transparency in the operations of such management systems. Workers in such organizations lack detailed knowledge of the ways in which their performance ratings are calculated or the specific criteria used in determining scheduling or compensation decisions. The lack of transparency in such management systems is seen as the source of procedural injustice by Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin (2020), which in turn affects trust, discretionary behavior, and well-being. The answer, as will be seen in the next section, is not the reduction of the role of data in management decisions but the enhancement of transparency in such decisions with more meaningful involvement of managers.

### When Humans and AI Work Well Together.

Not all narratives within this domain speak to encroachment and diminishment. There is an alternative trajectory, one in which AI actually increases human potential, rather than decreasing it. And there are more and more examples of this trajectory playing out. Daugherty & Wilson (2018) have defined this construct as the “collaboration zone,” in which human and intelligent systems collaborate in ways that leverage the unique competencies of each. Thus, in the domain of healthcare support services, for instance, an AI system can efficiently sort referrals and alert urgent cases, allowing human support staff to allocate their focus of attention in areas of greatest need instead of being bogged down by routine paperwork. In the hospitality domain, for instance, AI-driven guest services platforms can efficiently handle routine inquiries, allowing human staff members to allocate their focus of attention in areas that guests value most and staff members themselves find most rewarding. Deloitte’s (2019) study across various service industries found that organizations that intentionally design AI deployment with the augmentation principle in mind, asking themselves not “What can AI do instead of humans?” but “How can AI enhance the effectiveness of our people?” have higher levels of employee engagement and lower voluntary turnover. The key differentiator here is the philosophy of design, which is within the domain of management and organizational leaders.

## EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING: FIVE CRITICAL DIMENSIONS

### Job Satisfaction in an Automated Landscape.

Job satisfaction represents the positive or negative evaluation employees have about their job, which encompasses the job itself and the circumstances in which the job is conducted. Job satisfaction surfaces as one of the more complex consequences linked to the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI). The extant literature offers two contradictory inferences. The nature of the contradiction itself offers some value. If the purpose of the implementation of the technology is to eliminate monotonous tasks and allow for more time to engage in more meaningful tasks, such as client engagement, creative problem-solving, or mentoring other employees, job satisfaction will increase. This represents the augmentation pathway in its strongest form. If the technology represents a control or surveillance function, implying to employees that they are being watched and therefore trusted to conduct the job, job satisfaction will be diminished. The research of Veen et al. (2020), which examined employees in the service sector, and Brawley and Pury (2016), which examined employees in call centers, both support the latter finding. The key determinant is not the presence or absence of AI per se but the employee’s perception of AI in terms of their ability to be meaningful in their work.

### Occupational Stress and the Route to Burnout.

This evolution from AI-influenced working conditions to burnout has been extensively researched and involves several specific mechanisms. Maslach & Leiter (2016) describe six organizational conditions: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values alignment. These conditions cumulatively determine the evolution from chronic stress to burnout. The integration of AI has the potential to affect all six conditions simultaneously. However, this is not necessarily the case. Algorithmically determined work schedules designed to optimize organizational efficiency without consideration of human capacity and desire, such as in retail and logistics work, directly increase workload. This has been demonstrated in the work of Wood et al. (2019). The nature of AI systems in monitoring work and performance undermines the experience of control. This occurs because the use of AI systems generates the illusion of the removal of discretion, even if this discretion has not actually been removed. The reduction of the informal peer community of colleagues who discuss work in the staff room or who mutually support one another accelerates when AI systems mediate the work. The role of the peer community in mitigating the effects of work-related stress was demonstrated in the Lewig & Dollard (2003) study of call center workers. The absence of such support was acutely felt when the quality of work organization was reduced by

the use of AI systems. The longitudinal study of the Indian IT-enabled services sector by Srivastava, Madan, & Nair (2022) demonstrated the burnout symptoms in work involving intensive AI system management were substantially higher than in work involving less AI system management, even when workload was constant.

**Job Insecurity: The Threat That Does Not Need to Materialise.**

One of the most powerful psychological effects of AI in the workplace is job insecurity, and its power does not depend on the objective reality of threat. A study by Probst et al. (2018) showed that the perceived threat of job insecurity is independently related to psychological well-being, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions, irrespective of objective threat. This is highly concerning news for service sector organizations that are actively engaged in AI adoption because perceived threat is ubiquitous even when objective threat is limited or unclear. Perceived threat is exacerbated by the media discussion about AI, as well as the obvious disappearance of certain types of tasks. Ipsos (2023) and PwC (2018) surveys of employee populations in different countries confirmed high perceived anxiety about AI-driven job displacement in the service sector. A key challenge for managers is the need to address employee anxiety without promising something that cannot be delivered – job security – while at the same time being able to engage with their perceived threat in a way that is credible, transparent, and demonstrates through actions like training and development investments that the organization sees their people as an asset worth developing, rather than a cost worth minimizing.

**Work-Life Balance Under Digital Pressure**

Service work's temporal and spatial organization has changed considerably due to the digital connectivity provided by AI technologies. The changes tend to permeate the boundaries of the workday. Real-time performance monitoring systems accessible via mobile devices, AI-based scheduling systems able to automatically reassign shifts with short notice, and the constant nature of communication systems creating the expectation of immediate response not only affect the timing of work but the mental separation from work. The phenomenon has been described by Tarafdar et al. (2007) as techno-invasion. The effects on well-being accumulate over time. Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen, and Fonner (2016) demonstrated the effects of high levels of connectivity demands on work-family conflicts and the difficulty of disengaging mentally from work even during non-working hours. For managers in the service sector who may not have the formal power to design the AI systems used in the organization they work in, the most powerful lever may be the setting and enforcement of behavioral norms in terms of the organization's expectations about the times when the employee should be digitally accessible. The literature in organizational psychology has long emphasized the need for recovery times for performance.

**Autonomy, Dignity, and the Conditions for Psychological Safety.**

Of the well-being outcomes related to algorithmic management, perhaps the erosion of discretion and psychological safety have the most negative long-term implications, given their relationship to the fundamental conditions necessary for learning, innovation, and genuine engagement. Rosenblat & Stark (2016) have already demonstrated, in their research on platform workers, the presence of an autonomy paradox wherein individuals who are technically classified as self-employed and thus ostensibly free to set their own work hours and accept or decline work assignments nevertheless experienced extremely low levels of actual discretion. Wood et al. (2019) have since replicated these findings on a wider range of gig economy platforms. Edmondson (1999) has previously established that psychological safety, defined as the shared belief among members of a social group that raising concerns, admitting mistakes, and suggesting alternatives without fear of punitive measures is acceptable, is necessary for effective team learning. AI systems that automatically generate performance notifications, maintain continuous performance histories, and in some instances make decisions about worker conditions without any managerial intervention can have a very negative impact on psychological safety. Newman, Donohue & Eva (2017) have corroborated, through systematic review, that managerial behavior is one of the strongest predictors of psychological safety wherein managers who visibly protect their teams from punitive AI-generated performance evaluations, who use AI-generated data as a conversation starter rather than an absolute judgment, and who actively solicit dissent have been able to create environments characterized by high psychological safety even in the face of suboptimal technological support.

## THE MANAGER'S ROLE: WHAT CAN ACTUALLY BE DONE

**Openness and Participation from the Start.**

Perhaps the most consistent finding across the increasingly large body of literature on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and well-being is the significance of the way in which AI systems are implemented in the organization. Parent-Rocheleau & Parker (2022) provided a synthesis of the existing literature on algorithmic management and demonstrated the clear link between the perceptions of procedural fairness and well-being. They showed that "employees who were able to understand the decision-making processes of AI systems, who had access to mechanisms to signal mistakes or raise concerns, and who were involved in the design of the AI system reported substantially higher levels of well-being than those who were not." The clear implication of this literature for organizational managers is the importance of prioritizing the design approach of participation in the implementation of AI systems. Participation in the design does not mean that the worker has veto power over the decision to use the technology. Rather, it means that they must be consulted and provided with clear explanations. Pignoni (2022) describes several studies in the service sector in which the integration of worker representatives into the

specification and piloting of AI systems was associated with more satisfactory design and worker reception. The key message for organizational managers from this literature is not to treat the implementation of the AI system as simply a "change management" challenge in which worker concerns are seen as "communications challenges" to be overcome.

**Leadership That Humanises a Technological Environment.**

Leadership style has also been seen as a moderator in the relationship between working conditions and well-being outcomes, with this moderating effect being seen as significant in technology-intensive environments. Transformational leadership, with its focus on inspiring a shared vision, addressing individual development needs, and fostering intellectual involvement in challenges, has shown its capability in buffering the adverse effects on well-being from technological disruption by sustaining the perception of meaning and growth potential in the face of significant uncertainty (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This contrasts with the transactional approach, in which AI-generated metrics form the principal management interface and the manager's function is essentially to act in response to algorithmic indicators. In this case, the distinction is obvious and instructive. Servant leadership, in which the conventional hierarchy is overturned and managerial focus is directed at eliminating barriers and improving the abilities of those being served, has also been suggested as being particularly appropriate for the AI-mediated service environment in its capacity for countering the impersonal nature of algorithmic oversight with a highly personalized managerial relationship (Liden et al., 2008). Empirical evidence for these propositions is beginning to emerge, with Tursunbayeva et al. (2022) discovering that transformational leadership was seen as having a significant moderating effect on the relationship between AI monitoring intensity and burnout rates in a multi-sector service study.

## MAKING TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT A SERIOUS PRIORITY

One organisational factor has consistently differentiated those employers managing the impact of AI-driven organisational transformation well from those managing it less well: investment in human capability development. Those employers developing comprehensive learning architectures, which facilitate fluency in the use of AI technologies, comprehension of the ways in which these technologies contribute to decision-making processes, and the development of cognitive and interpersonal skills that are transferable across changing task requirements, have reported enhanced well-being, reduced turnover, and organisational performance in study after study examined by the World Economic Forum (2020). As with the business case for this form of investment, so too with the equity case: those facing the greatest challenges in terms of capability development in response to accelerating AI deployment are those in the most precarious labour market position: routine service workers, older workers who did not benefit from digital technology in youth, and those with fewer formal educational qualifications (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017). Managers engaging in advocacy for and implementation of training programmes specifically targeting these groups are addressing the well-being issue head-on, but in doing so, they are also engaging in something even more fundamental: they are actively demonstrating that the organisation's commitment to its workforce is not merely rhetorical. Training programmes addressing both technical and psychosocial dimensions of AI deployment, in ways that facilitate awareness of technostress, develop resilience, and provide space for collective discussion of the meaning of organisational change, appear especially impactful in terms of sustaining well-being.

**BUILDING AN ETHICAL AND ACCOUNTABLE AI CULTURE**

The organizational culture in which artificial intelligence (AI) is embedded is an essential factor to consider in terms of how it sets the stage for how its influence on employees will play out over time. Organizations in which there is an overt approach to positioning AI as an empowerment tool for workers, as opposed to an approach centered more on cost reduction, create an organizational culture in which AI is more likely to be perceived as an enabling tool as opposed to a threat to workers (Schein & Schein, 2017). However, such an approach needs to be complemented with organizational governance to give it substance. The guidelines for trustworthy AI published by the European Union's High-Level Expert Group on AI (2019) emphasize transparency, accountability, fairness, and effective human oversight as non-negotiables for any approach to AI. What does this mean for service sector managers? Several key disciplines are relevant to operationalizing these principles, such as undertaking impact assessments prior to the deployment of AI systems with an influence on workers, establishing clear lines of human accountability for AI system outputs, as opposed to accepting algorithmic outputs as non-challengeable, and establishing accessible routes through which workers can question algorithmic outputs perceived as unfair or incorrect. Cheng and Hackett's (2021) study of financial services sector organizations found perceived organizational commitment to ethical AI governance to be significantly and positively related to workers' trust in AI systems, psychological safety at work, and well-being.

## DISCUSSION

In sum, all of the evidence reviewed within this study points to contingency, rather than inevitability, in terms of outcome. Artificial intelligence does not make service work better or worse, but it does alter the structural circumstances within which service work is conducted, creating both risk and opportunity. The nature of its effect appears to be determined by human, and specifically managerial, agency. One of the tensions which is worth further consideration is the tension between efficiency and occupational meaning. Service work organizations implement artificial intelligence to make service work more efficient and to reduce costs, both of which are legitimate goals. However, service work is relational in nature, with

warmth of genuine human interest, flexibility of seasoned experience, and the ability to respond to both spoken and unspoken cues all constituting, and often constituting an element of, service quality rather than being tangential to it. If artificial intelligence is implemented with efficiency as its sole goal, it has the effect of eroding these relational elements, creating work which is efficient but experientially impoverished. Maslach and Leiter's (2016) review of antecedents to burnout would predict such an outcome with great certainty, as high efficiency combined with low meaning is a very reliable precursor to emotional exhaustion. Those who are able to pursue both goals, appreciating both what artificial intelligence can achieve in terms of efficiency and what it can achieve in terms of occupational experience, are more likely to be able to identify configurations which can accommodate both.

A second tension is between the need for data-driven performance management at the organizational level and the need for individual autonomy and the conditions that support psychological safety. These tensions are not necessarily irresolvable; however, they require management effort. AI can offer detailed information about performance but cannot offer the interpretation of that information, the acknowledgment of individual conditions, or the collaborative goal-setting required to turn performance data from an anxiety generator into an agent of development. The former is the task of managers; however, in the era of AI management, there is the very real danger that such activity is marginalized. Resisting such a trend is perhaps the most significant management task of the current era.

The third dimension is equity. The negative effects of AI management change are not distributed equally throughout the organization. Workers in routine service roles, workers with lower levels of digital literacy, older workers with steeper learning curves, and workers in more precarious employment contracts will carry disproportionate burdens of anxiety, upskilling pressures, and reputation risk in the context of algorithmic performance management. Managers focused solely on overall well-being will overlook the equity issue; however, they will soon realize the significant organizational costs in the form of high turnover rates, disengagement, and reputation damage in these segments of the workforce. True concern about employee well-being in the AI management era requires consideration of the segments of the workforce that will be more exposed to the effects of AI management.

## CONCLUSION

This article aims to outline the channels through which AI-based work environments affect employee well-being in the service industry, examine the processes underlying these effects, and evaluate the management and organizational practices that can offset potential risks while harnessing opportunities. The effects of AI on employee well-being are not determined by AI technology per se but are shaped by human choices related to AI technology.

Four interrelated areas are identified as critical. Firstly, employees need to be engaged in AI technology development and implementation instead of viewing AI technology as given. Second, to take leadership positions that emphasize human development and relational connectedness, as well as to intentionally counteract the depersonalizing effects of algorithmic oversight. Third, to commit significant and equitable resources to learning and development, with particular focus on those workers who are undergoing the most difficult transitions. Fourth, to develop governance models wherein AI accountability is tangible, with transparency to system functionality, mechanisms for challenging, and ongoing human oversight of consequential decision-making processes. Several gaps in the evidence base, which are noteworthy, should be recognized. The majority of studies to date are cross-sectional, which makes it difficult to draw causality. Longitudinal studies, which monitor well-being over the entire process of AI adoption, would be highly valuable. The literature to date has also been relatively limited in its focus on more visible manifestations of algorithmic management, such as platform work, call centers, and retail environments. The more nuanced ways in which AI impacts professional service work is an understudied area. The literature is also limited with respect to cultural and national comparisons, which is an important consideration since the contextual framework for AI adoption, employment legislation, union representation, and managerial style varies significantly and is likely to influence the processes under examination.

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