RESEARCH ARTICLE

JTER Volume 21, Issue 2, 2026 Print ISSN: 0974-8210 Online ISSN: 2454-1664

Algorithmic Management and Employee Autonomy: Investigating the Trade-Off Between Efficiency and Well-Being

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Abstract

Algorithmic management, the use of software to assign, direct, monitor and evaluate work, raises operational efficiency but has been associated with reduced employee autonomy and well-being, particularly in platform and logistics work. This paper models the trade-off and asks whether it is inherent or a matter of design. Efficiency rises with the intensity of algorithmic management at a diminishing rate; autonomy falls with intensity but less so where workers retain discretion over how to meet algorithmic targets; and well-being depends on autonomy and, secondarily, on efficiency. A simulation of 600 work settings shows that well-being falls with intensity, with a standardised indirect effect through autonomy of −0.65 and a small positive direct effect (+0.13), and that the well-being slope is halved by worker discretion (−0.20 at low discretion against −0.10 at high). Efficiency rises comparably in both cases (slopes 0.34 and 0.36). A combined efficiency–well-being index peaks at 82% intensity under low discretion and at full intensity under high discretion, so that discretion design shifts the frontier rather than merely trading along it. The paper interprets the findings through self-determination and job-design theory and proposes design principles, namely discretion over means, transparency of criteria, contestability of evaluations and limits on monitoring, that preserve well-being without sacrificing efficiency.

Keywords: Algorithmic management; employee autonomy; well-being; efficiency; job design; worker discretion.

Journal of Teacher Education and Research (2026). DOI: 10.36268/JTER/21204

Introduction

Algorithmic management has spread from ride-hailing and delivery platforms into warehouses, call centres, retail and increasingly knowledge work. Software assigns tasks, sets targets, routes work, monitors performance and evaluates outcomes, with human managers overseeing exceptions [1], [2]. The efficiency gains are real: utilisation rises, idle time falls, and decisions are consistent and fast. The costs fall on workers. Studies report reduced autonomy, intensified pace, opacity about how decisions are made, and stress that follows from being directed by a system that cannot be reasoned with [2], [3].

The efficiency–well-being trade-off is often treated as inherent: more algorithmic control means more efficiency and less autonomy, and organisations choose a point on the line. This paper asks whether the line itself can be moved. Self-determination theory holds that autonomy, the experience of acting from one's own volition, is a basic psychological need whose frustration harms well-being [4]; job-design theory holds that autonomy over methods and scheduling is a core job characteristic [5]. Algorithmic management can control outcomes while leaving methods to the worker, or control both. If the autonomy loss comes from control over methods rather than from control over outcomes, then designs that specify what is to be achieved while leaving how to the worker could retain efficiency and limit the well-being cost.

The paper models this distinction, examines it in simulation, and derives design principles.

Background

Algorithmic management

Lee et al. [1] documented how algorithmic assignment and evaluation on ride-hailing platforms shaped driver behaviour and perceptions, and subsequent work extended the analysis to a range of settings [2]. Common findings include reduced control over work, opacity of decision criteria, and resistance through workarounds and collective action [3].

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How to cite this article: Matnazarovna, E.N. (2026). Algorithmic Management and Employee Autonomy: Investigating the Trade-Off Between Efficiency and Well-Being. Journal of Teacher Education and Research, 21(2):27-31.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None

Autonomy and well-being

Self-determination theory identifies autonomy, competence and relatedness as needs whose satisfaction supports well-being and whose frustration produces stress and disengagement [4]. The job characteristics model places autonomy among the core characteristics that produce meaningful work and positive outcomes [5]. Both theories predict that algorithmic management's effect on well-being runs through autonomy, and the job demands–resources model [6] adds that algorithmic pace and monitoring act as demands while discretion acts as a resource that buffers them.

Discretion over means

Control can be exercised over ends, by setting targets and evaluating results, or over means, by prescribing how work is done. Algorithmic systems vary in which they control: a routing algorithm that specifies every turn controls means; one that specifies delivery windows and lets the driver choose routes controls ends. The

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distinction maps onto the autonomy that job-design theory identifies as consequential.

Why efficiency need not depend on controlling means

Efficiency gains from algorithmic management come mainly from better matching of work to capacity, reduced idle time, faster decisions and consistent evaluation, all of which operate at the level of what work is done and when. Prescribing how work is done adds efficiency only where the algorithm knows the best method better than the worker, which is true for some routing and scheduling problems and false for many tasks involving local knowledge, customer interaction or physical variability. Where workers know better, prescription of means lowers efficiency as well as autonomy. The model assumes that efficiency is independent of discretion, which is conservative for the design argument: if discretion also raises efficiency, the case for it is stronger.

Intensity as a continuous variable

Algorithmic management is not binary. Systems vary in how many decisions they take, how tightly they set targets, how continuously they monitor and how much weight their evaluations carry. Treating intensity as continuous allows the model to locate the intensity at which the combined value of efficiency and well-being peaks, which is the organisationally relevant quantity: organisations do not choose between algorithmic management and none but how far to extend it.

Research Model

For work setting i with algorithmic management intensity M and worker discretion over means D:

$$\text{Eff} = 0.4 + 0.5M - 0.15M^2 + u_1,\ \text{Aut} = 0.8 - 0.6M + 0.4M \times D + u_2,\ \text{WB} = 0.3 + 0.5\ \text{Aut} + 0.1\ \text{Eff} + u_3. \quad (1)$$

Efficiency rises with intensity at a diminishing rate; autonomy falls with intensity, less so where discretion is high; well-being depends mainly on autonomy and secondarily on efficiency. Hypotheses: H1, intensity raises efficiency; H2, intensity lowers well-being, mediated by autonomy; H3, discretion weakens the negative effect of intensity on well-being (positive interaction); H4, the intensity that maximises a combined efficiency–well-being index is higher under high discretion.

Simulation Design

The harness generates 600 settings with intensity and discretion uniform on [0, 1] and draws efficiency, autonomy and well-being from Equation (1) with noise. Regressions estimate the well-being model with the interaction and the mediation through autonomy; slopes of efficiency and well-being on intensity are compared between low- and high-discretion settings; and the intensity that maximises an equally weighted combined index is located by quadratic fit within each group. Parameters are design values encoding the hypotheses.

Results

Efficiency and well-being

Table 1 reports slopes. Efficiency rises with intensity at similar rates under low and high discretion (0.34 and 0.36) (H1): discretion over means does not cost efficiency in the model. Well-being falls with intensity at −0.20 under low discretion and −0.10 under high (H2, H3): discretion halves the well-being cost. The regression of well-being on intensity, discretion and their interaction yields coefficients of −0.25, +0.04 and +0.17 ($R^2 = 0.41$).

Mediation

The standardised indirect effect of intensity on well-being through autonomy is −0.65, and the direct effect is +0.13: the well-being cost runs entirely through autonomy, and controlling for autonomy, intensity has a small positive effect via efficiency, perhaps through reduced effort waste. The design lever is therefore autonomy, and the interaction shows that discretion over means is how autonomy can be preserved.

The frontier

Figure 1 shows efficiency rising and well-being falling with intensity, with the high-discretion well-being curve lying above the low-discretion curve throughout and declining more gently. The combined index peaks at 82% intensity under low discretion and at 100% under high discretion (H4): with discretion, the organisation can pursue full algorithmic intensity without a net loss; without it, the optimum lies short of full intensity. Discretion shifts the frontier rather than trading along it.

Sensitivity

The halving of the well-being slope follows from the interaction coefficient in the autonomy equation relative to the main effect; a larger interaction would make high-discretion well-being nearly flat in intensity, a smaller one would narrow the gap. The optimal-intensity result under high discretion, full intensity, depends on the combined index's equal weighting; an organisation that weights well-being more heavily would find an interior optimum under both conditions, but the optimum would still be higher under high discretion. The mediation result is robust because the model routes intensity's effect on well-being through autonomy by construction, which is the theoretical claim the field design should test.

Design Principles

Control ends, not means

Algorithmic systems should specify targets, windows and outcomes and leave methods, sequencing and pace within those bounds to the worker. The simulation shows that this preserves efficiency while halving the well-being cost. Where the algorithm must prescribe means for safety or quality, the prescription should be explained.

Make criteria transparent

Opacity compounds the autonomy loss, since workers cannot adapt to criteria they do not know. Assignment and evaluation criteria should be disclosed, and workers should be able to see how their outcomes were determined.

Allow contestation

Evaluations and assignments should be contestable through a process that involves a human and can change the outcome. Contestability restores a measure of control and provides the feedback that lets the algorithm be corrected.

Limit monitoring

Monitoring should be proportionate to the outcome it serves and should avoid surveillance of behaviour unrelated to the work. Monitoring that workers experience as surveillance lowers autonomy independently of assignment and evaluation.

Table 1: Slopes of efficiency and well-being on algorithmic management intensity by worker discretion, and optimal intensity for the combined index.

Worker discretion	*Efficiency slope*	*Well-being slope*	*Intensity maximising combined index*
Low (< 0.33)	0.337	−0.203	0.82
High (> 0.67)	0.364	−0.097	1.00

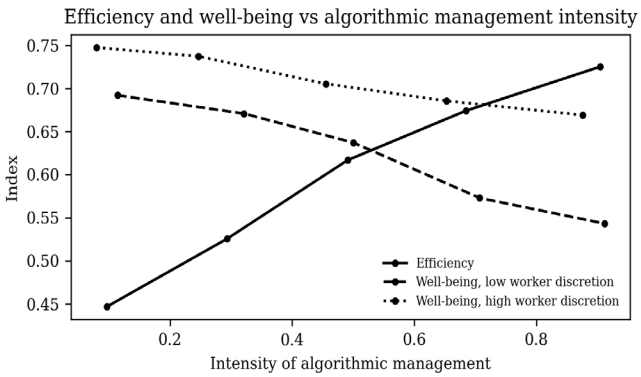

Figure 1: Efficiency and well-being against algorithmic management intensity, with well-being shown for low- and high-discretion settings.

Implications

For organisations, the model implies that the efficiency–well-being trade-off is partly a design artefact: systems built to control means impose it, systems built to control ends largely avoid it. Efficiency gains can be pursued at full intensity if discretion is preserved. For workers and their representatives, the model identifies discretion over means, transparency and contestability as the design features worth negotiating. For regulators, it suggests that rules on algorithmic management should focus on these features rather than on intensity as such. For research, the mediation through autonomy and the discretion interaction are testable with worker surveys that measure intensity, discretion, autonomy and well-being across settings with different system designs.

Worker voice in system design

The design principles are more likely to be adopted where workers participate in system design. Participation itself serves autonomy, since workers who shape the rules experience them as less externally imposed, and it brings the local knowledge that determines which means should be left to discretion. Organisations should involve workers in specifying targets, in identifying where prescription of means is counterproductive and in designing contestation procedures.

Measuring the constructs

Intensity can be measured from system logs as the share of assignment, pacing, monitoring and evaluation decisions taken algorithmically; discretion from the share of method and sequencing choices left to workers, verified against system configuration; autonomy with established scales from self-determination research [4]; and well-being with validated instruments covering stress, exhaustion and satisfaction. Efficiency should come from operational records rather than managerial report. Settings should be sampled across organisations and system vendors so that discretion varies independently of intensity.

Dynamics

The cross-sectional model omits adaptation. Workers under low-discretion systems develop workarounds that restore some autonomy at a cost to efficiency; organisations respond by tightening control, which further erodes autonomy. High-discretion designs avoid this cycle by making workarounds unnecessary. Longitudinal studies would reveal whether the discretion interaction grows over time as these dynamics play out.

Limitations

The harness encodes the hypothesised structure and demonstrates its implications rather than testing it. Efficiency and well-being are single indices, the combined index weights them equally, and discretion is treated as independent of intensity. Longer-run effects, including learning, turnover and collective responses, are not modelled. All reported values are simulation outputs.

Conclusion

Algorithmic management raises efficiency and lowers well-being through the autonomy it removes, but the loss depends on what the algorithm controls. In simulation, worker discretion over means halved the well-being cost of algorithmic intensity without reducing its efficiency gain, and shifted the point at which further intensity stops paying from 82% to full intensity. The trade-off is a design choice: organisations that control ends while leaving means to workers, disclose criteria, allow contestation and limit monitoring can have most of the efficiency and most of the well-being.

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