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AI-MEDIATED PLATFORM WORK: MEANINGFULNESS UNDER ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence increasingly mediates how platform work is matched, monitored, evaluated and performed. This conceptual paper develops a meaningfulness-based framework for AI-mediated platform work. Gig and platform work provide the bounded empirical setting because automated coordination, opaque evaluation, fluctuating demand, dependence on ratings and limited possibilities for contestation make the relevant tensions especially visible. The scientific problem is the under-specification of how co-occurring substitution and augmentation within a task bundle interact with platform-level control and governance to shape the significance workers attribute to a focal work episode. The purpose is to specify that relationship. The object is the AI-mediated platform-work episode, operationalized through its task bundle; the subject is the relationship among task-level AI effects, platform-level control and governance, meaningfulness pathways and worker context. Drawing on theory synthesis and abductive model development, the article integrates research on gig work, algorithmic management, task-based labour economics and meaningful work. Contextual evidence from the OECD, the European Union and the World Bank establishes the scale and relevance of the setting but does not test the proposed relationships. Substitution and augmentation are treated as non-exclusive task-level effects, and control intensification as a cross-cutting platform-level effect. Algorithmic management is treated as the governance layer surrounding task execution rather than as a synonym for AI use within tasks. Following Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010), the model locates experienced meaningfulness at worker level and distinguishes four pathways: individuation, self-connection, contribution and unification. Five continuous task-bundle descriptors characterize configurations in which AI may replace or support human activity. Five platform-governance arrangements are proposed to preserve or expand opportunities to enact the pathways: rule intelligibility, credible human contestability, worker voice, capability development and relational infrastructure. Worker values and cultural or interpersonal cues are proposed to shape pathway salience, while livelihood dependence and material or institutional security condition practical access to the governance arrangements. Seven propositions specify these relationships and are formulated for testing with episode-level measures nested within workers and platforms. Because experienced meaningfulness is associated with engagement, performance and retention (Bailey et al. 2019), the model also indicates where platform design decisions may carry organizational consequences. The contribution is a level-specific model for examining meaningfulness in AI-mediated platform-work episodes. Transferability beyond gig and platform work remains a question for future research.

KEY WORDS: AI-mediated platform work, algorithmic management, meaningful work, gig work, platform governance, task bundles
JEL Classification: J81, M54, O33

Introduction

Gig and platform work make AI-mediated coordination especially visible. The World Bank estimates that online gig work alone may involve between 154 million and 435 million workers globally and that platform workers and clients are located in 186 countries (Datta et al. 2023). In the European Union, policy attention has intensified around the more than 28 million people working through digital labour platforms, a figure reported in Council communications on the Platform Work Directive (Council of the European Union 2024). Its scale makes platform work relevant to management research: it is a revealing setting in which to examine how work is reorganized under digital coordination. In this paper, however, platform work is a bounded empirical context rather than a proxy for all AI-mediated work.

At the same time, platform work is becoming more deeply intertwined with AI and algorithmic management. OECD data show that, in OECD countries where data are available, the share of firms using AI rose from 8.7% in 2023 to 14.2% in 2024 and 20.2% in 2025, meaning that firm-level adoption more than doubled in only two years (OECD 2026). In Europe, the JRC AIM-WORK survey of

70,316 people aged 16–65 across all 27 Member States indicates that 30% of EU workers use AI tools at work, 37% have their working hours digitally monitored, 24% have working time allocated automatically, and 13% have their performance assessed and rewarded automatically (González Vázquez et al. 2025). These figures establish the wider relevance of AI use, digital monitoring and automated coordination; they do not determine whether the relationships proposed here for platform work hold in standard employment.

The dominant promise of the platform-work model is flexibility: workers can choose when and where to work, while firms can scale labour in response to volatile demand. Yet flexibility is frequently bundled with wage volatility, weak social protection, opaque evaluation criteria and asymmetrical dependence on platform rules (De Stefano 2016; Wood et al. 2019). Generative AI adds another source of heterogeneity. In a customer-support setting, Brynjolfsson, Li and Raymond (2025) found that productivity gains were largest among novice and lower-skilled workers. In an online labour market, Hui, Reshef and Zhou (2024) found short-term reductions in employment and earnings among freelancers in occupations more exposed to generative AI. Because the studies examine different technologies, tasks, settings and workers, they do

not establish that productivity gains for a task caused earnings losses among the people who previously performed it. Read together, they support a heterogeneous rather than uniform account of AI's relationship with work.

The article therefore examines task execution and algorithmic governance together within gig and platform work. Its central question is how AI's effects on the components of a platform-work episode and algorithmic management's effects on the platform governing that episode jointly relate to the significance the worker attributes to it. The unit of analysis is the work episode: a single assignment, service encounter or project, together with the task bundle through which it is completed. It is not the worker or the occupational category. Substitution and augmentation may occur separately or together within one bundle; control intensification is a cross-cutting platform-governance effect rather than a third task effect. The paper contributes a level-specific framework connecting task reconfiguration, platform governance and worker-experienced meaningfulness in gig and platform settings.

The scientific problem is the under-specification of how substitution and augmentation within AI-mediated platform-work episodes relate to platform-level algorithmic governance and to the significance workers attribute to those episodes. The purpose of the article is to develop a meaningfulness-based conceptual model of this relationship. The research object is the AI-mediated work episode in gig and platform settings, operationalized through its task bundle; the research subject is the relationship among task-level AI effects, platform-level control and governance arrangements, Rosso et al.'s (2010) pathways, and worker values, cultural cues, livelihood dependence and material or institutional security. The article uses theory synthesis and conceptual model development, supported by contextual descriptive evidence. Its benefit for science is a set of propositions for future empirical testing; its benefit for business and platform design is a diagnostic framework for responsible algorithmic governance; and its benefit for education and professional training is a coherent teaching model that separates task configuration, platform governance and worker experience.

Three research questions structure the argument. RQ1 asks how substitution and augmentation, separately or together within the task bundle of a focal work episode, alter opportunities to enact the four pathways. RQ2 asks how platform-level control and platform-governance arrangements constrain or expand those opportunities. RQ3 asks how worker values, cultural or interpersonal cues, livelihood dependence and security shape pathway salience and practical access to the governance arrangements.

Literature analysis and gap identification

Gig work as a paradox of autonomy and precarity

Research on gig work repeatedly shows that platform labour cannot be reduced either to entrepreneurial freedom or to pure exploitation. It is characterized by a constitutive tension between localized autonomy and structural dependence. Workers may value temporal flexibility and market access, yet algorithmic control and labour oversupply restrict the autonomy available in practice (Wood et al. 2019), and platform work sits within a wider expansion of

precarious employment systems (Kalleberg 2011). The literature is particularly strong at diagnosing asymmetry, but it is less developed as an organizational design literature. It explains why workers are vulnerable more readily than it explains how platform-like systems might be redesigned.

AI and algorithmic management as a new organizational regime

The second stream concerns algorithmic management. The International Labour Organization (n.d.) describes algorithmic management as the use of algorithmic systems, informed by tracked data and other information, to organize, assign, monitor, supervise and evaluate work. Such systems may use AI but may also be rules-based; algorithmic management is therefore treated here as the governance layer around, rather than as a synonym for, AI use within tasks. Kellogg, Valentine and Christin (2020) synthesize this field through the six Rs of algorithmic control: restricting, recommending, recording, rating, replacing and rewarding. Their account is analytically useful because it shows that algorithms do not simply automate tasks; they redistribute authority, information and dependence. Vadyba research on AI-based freight coordination similarly treats AI as a coordination technology that automates information management and supports route planning in dynamic supply-chain settings (Gružasuskas and Pačėsaitė 2021). Reviewing the same field through a work-design lens, Parent-Rochelleau and Parker (2022) identify six management functions that algorithms now perform: monitoring, goal setting, performance management, scheduling, compensation and termination. They conclude that, on balance, these functions tend to intensify work and reduce autonomy.

At the same time, algorithmic management does not have uniform relationships with worker outcomes. Recent studies report heterogeneous associations in gig work (Liu and Yin 2024; Kadolkar, Kepes and Subramony 2025). The relevant question is therefore under which organizational conditions workers experience AI-mediated coordination as enabling, arbitrary, developmental or extractive.

Meaningful work and the heterogeneity of gig work

Meaningful work scholarship adds a critical normative and analytical lens (Bailey et al. 2019). Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) separate two ideas. The meaning of work is what work signifies to a person; meaningfulness is the amount of significance that work holds for that person. Meaningful work, in this paper, is work the worker experiences as especially significant and positive in meaning. The definition locates meaningfulness at worker level: a platform may enable or obstruct the experience but cannot produce it uniformly. Workers also participate in making meaning, which remains relevant under gig conditions: Affolter, Spurr and Straub (2025) find that active meaning-making weakens the association between gig-work challenges and work alienation. In digitally mediated settings, task, relational and interpretive conditions may shift together. Workers may receive efficiency signals without narrative recognition, market access without developmen-

tal pathways, and performance feedback without explanation. The resulting tensions are economic, interpretive and relational.

Prior taxonomies of gig and platform work already make this disaggregation possible. Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn (2019) cross-classify crowdwork platforms by the party that initiates the work and by the form of remuneration, while Schmidt (2017) distinguishes platforms by whether tasks are location-bound and whether they are assigned to a selected individual or to an undefined crowd; both accounts note that the boundaries between their types are blurred and that hybrid forms exist. Berg et al. (2018) add the decent-work perspective, showing how online labour platforms vary in pay setting, task allocation, communication and dispute resolution. Vallas and Schor (2020) likewise argue that platforms do different things across sectors rather than expressing a single organizational logic. These taxonomies are used here for what they show - that platform work varies along several dimensions at once and that the lines between its forms are porous - and not to sort workers or occupations into exclusive categories of AI effect.

This problem becomes sharper once gig work is disaggregated. Online codifiable work such as microtasks or routine writing, location-based embodied services such as delivery or ride hailing, and expert project-based freelance work remain useful illustrations, but none is tied to a single AI effect. Within one work episode AI may perform some components, assist the worker with others, and coexist with platform systems that tighten monitoring or evaluation: a delivery keeps its embodied execution while route planning is automated; a design commission combines automated generation with contextual interpretation, client negotiation and human responsibility for the result; a microtask batch combines automated pre-processing with human verification. What varies is not the category a worker belongs to but the components themselves - how codifiable and remotely verifiable they are, how much contextual judgement they require, how far they depend on embodied or relational interaction, and how much discretion the worker held before AI entered. These characteristics vary continuously across task bundles, and one bundle can score high on several of them at once.

Four pathways to meaningfulness

Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski's (2010) integrative framework locates four pathways at the intersections of two dimensions: agency versus communion and orientation toward the self versus others. Individuation concerns self-directed agency expressed through efficacy, competence and achievement. Self-connection concerns alignment between work and how the worker understands and values the self, including authenticity and identity affirmation.

Contribution concerns other-directed agency expressed through attributable impact or service beyond the self. Unification concerns belonging and connection with other people, collectives or valued principles. The pathways are non-exclusive, and several may be relevant within the same episode. The framework identifies possible routes to meaningfulness; the worker remains the level at which the significance of the episode is experienced.

The salience of a pathway is not assumed to be culturally uniform. Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) review cultural and interpersonal sensemaking as mechanisms through which work meanings are constructed, but they do not test culture as a moderator of the four-pathway model. Martela and Riekkki (2018) provide adjacent rather than direct evidence: in samples from Finland, India and the United States, autonomy, competence, relatedness and beneficence were independently associated with meaningful work, with the exception of competence in the United States. These constructs are related to, but not equivalent to, Rosso et al.'s four pathways, and the study does not test cultural moderation of those pathways. The proposition developed below (P6) is therefore a theoretical extension: worker values and salient cultural or interpersonal cues are proposed to shape which pathways carry significance and how strongly. Culture is not a fifth pathway, and country membership is not used as its proxy; empirical tests would need to measure values, norms and relevant social cues directly.

Synthesis of the research gap

Taken together, these literatures reveal a fragmented field. Gig-work research diagnoses insecurity and asymmetry; algorithmic-management research explains new forms of control; meaningful-work research specifies what good work requires; and task-based labour economics explains why automation acts on bundles of tasks rather than on whole occupations (Autor 2015; Acemoglu and Restrepo 2022). Recent Vadyba bibliometric work on AI-based innovation management points to a related gap: technical, managerial and societal dimensions of AI remain insufficiently integrated in ways that limit both theoretical advancement and practical guidance (Gajda, Górska-Warsewicz and Podleśna 2025). Adjacent studies cover parts of this relationship: Bankins and Formosa (2023) relate replacement, machine-tending and amplification to meaningful work and allow them to coexist; van Zoonen, ter Hoeven and Morgan (2023) and van Zoonen, Sivunen and Treem (2024) link algorithmic coordination, quantification and control to crowdworkers' work conditions, identity, belonging and meaningfulness; Liu et al. (2026) review how digital technologies alter work characteristics and meaning-making under societal, organizational, technological and individual conditions; and García-Ruiz and Rocchi (2026) set out normative conditions for meaningful work under algorithmic management. Against this background, one relationship remains underspecified: how co-occurring task-level substitution and augmentation interact with platform-level governance to alter particular pathways within a focal work episode. The contribution is therefore a governance-specific and level-consistent extension of adjacent frameworks, not a claim that prior integrative models are absent.

Contextual descriptive evidence and research method

The descriptive indicators cited in the Introduction measure different phenomena in different populations: the scale of online gig work (Datta et al. 2023), firm-level AI adoption in OECD countries where data are available

(OECD 2026), and AI use, digital monitoring and automated coordination among EU workers (González Vázquez et al. 2025). Their role is contextual. Together they establish the scale and relevance of platform labour and digitally mediated coordination, but they are not directly comparable. They neither estimate the prevalence of the proposed mechanisms in platform work nor provide evidence for the propositions.

The paper combines the Theory Synthesis and Model approaches described by Jaakkola (2020). This combination is appropriate because the article connects constructs from several literatures and specifies their relationships at task, platform and worker levels in a single conceptual model. Model development follows an abductive logic in the limited sense described by Tavory and Timmermans (2014): it iterates between tensions documented in the cited literature and concepts capable of explaining them. Continuous task characteristics are used as descriptors for comparing task-bundle configurations rather than as a labour-market taxonomy. The resulting propositions are theoretical predictions; they are not presented as effects established by the contextual indicators or by a systematic review conducted for this article.

A meaningfulness-based framework for AI-mediated platform work

The framework proposed here (see Fig. 1) treats gig work as a differentiated domain rather than a uniform organizational form. Its focal unit is the AI-mediated work episode, operationalized as the task bundle through which one platform assignment, service encounter or project is completed. An episode enters the model when AI performs or supports at least one task component, when an AI-based platform system mediates its allocation, direction, monitoring or evaluation, or both. Purely rules-based systems remain elements of the surrounding governance architecture but do not by themselves make an episode AI-mediated. Within the bundle, substitution occurs when AI assumes a component that would otherwise require human labour; augmentation occurs when AI supports or extends performance while the worker retains a substantive role in judgement, action or responsibility. The two effects are non-exclusive. This logic draws on task-based labour economics, which treats automation as affecting bundles of tasks rather than occupations as whole categories (Autor 2015; Acemoglu and Restrepo 2022). Codifiability, remote verifiability, required contextual judgement, embodied or relational interdependence and prior worker discretion are used to describe and compare configurations in which substitution and augmentation may occur. They do not determine either effect mechanically.

Consistent with algorithmic-management research, the framework treats coordination technologies as possible instruments of control rather than as neutral efficiency devices (Kellogg, Valentine and Christin 2020; Parent-Rocheleau and Parker 2022). Algorithmic matching, monitoring and evaluation can intensify supervision while presenting it as technical optimization. Control intensification is defined here as an increase in the scope, granularity, speed or consequences of platform allocation, direction, monitoring, evaluation, reward or sanction. It is a platform-level governance effect rather than a third task-level alternative: the same episode may combine task augmentation with tighter platform control. Because workers encounter formal governance through particular episodes, their exposure may vary even within one platform. The model examines how that exposure alters opportunities to enact the four pathways.

The framework distinguishes five platform-governance arrangements with pathway-specific functions. Rule intelligibility makes consequential rules and the reasons for outcomes comprehensible. Credible human contestability provides timely appeal, correction and exception handling by a reviewer able to change the outcome. Worker voice concerns prospective influence over consequential rules rather than appeal after a decision. Capability development includes feedback, learning, portable credentials and job-crafting opportunities; job crafting involves workers' active reshaping of cognitive, task and relational boundaries (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), and it supports agency only when workers retain discretion to apply what they learn. Relational infrastructure sustains peer belonging and recognition and may also make beneficiaries and the worker's attributable impact visible; the former supports unification, whereas the latter supports contribution. These arrangements do not guarantee a positive experience. They are proposed to preserve or expand opportunities to enact particular pathways.

Two conditions outside the focal task bundle perform different functions in the model. Worker values and salient cultural or interpersonal cues are proposed to shape the interpretation and relative salience of the pathways. Livelihood dependence and material or institutional security are proposed to condition workers' practical access to governance arrangements: refusal, appeal, participation, development and connection may exist formally but remain costly to use. The model's endpoint is the worker's experienced meaningfulness of the focal episode. An episode may acquire significance partly because it develops capabilities that can credibly be used later, but the accumulation of experiences across episodes into an enduring evaluation of one's work or career lies outside the present model.

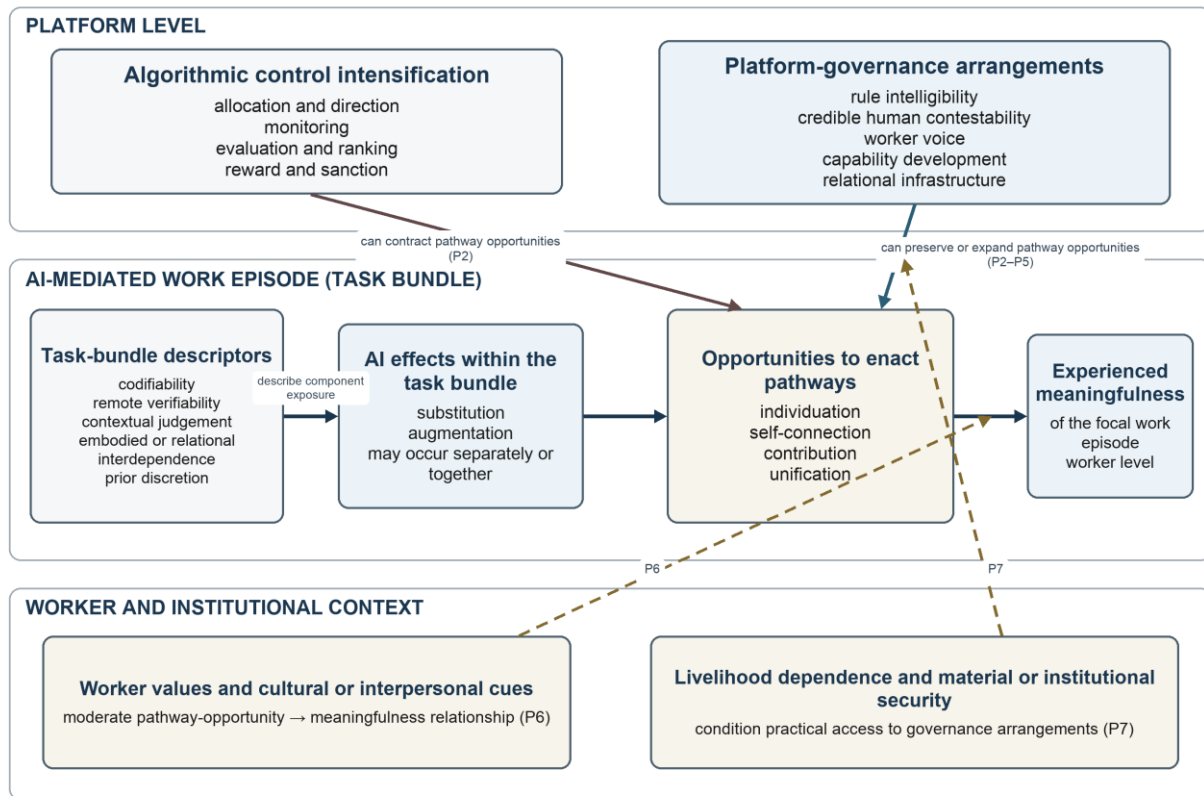


Fig. 1. Task, governance and contextual conditions of meaningfulness in AI-mediated platform work

Propositions

The framework yields seven propositions specifying relationships for future empirical testing. P1 connects task reconfiguration to changes in pathway opportunities; P2–P5 connect platform governance to those opportunities; P6 addresses pathway salience; and P7 addresses practical access to governance arrangements.

P1. Changes in opportunities to enact the four pathways mediate the relationship between AI-related task reconfiguration and experienced meaningfulness. Relative to a prior or functionally comparable task configuration, reconfiguration is positively associated with the meaningfulness of a focal episode when it expands opportunities for efficacy and competence enactment (individuation), identity-aligned action (self-connection), attributable impact (contribution), or human and collective connection (unification), and negatively associated when it contracts those opportunities. Because substitution and augmentation may occur separately or together, neither has a uniformly positive or negative association independent of the resulting pathway changes. When changes across pathways diverge, their relationship with experienced meaningfulness depends on pathway salience as specified in P6.

P2. Greater episode-specific exposure to platform-level control intensification is negatively associated with experienced meaningfulness to the extent that it contracts opportunities to enact one or more pathways. This negative association is weaker when the rules and reasons underlying consequential decisions are intelligible and workers have access to credible, timely human contestability. These arrangements most directly preserve agency and efficacy but do not imply that control can affect only individuation.

P3. Worker participation in setting or revising consequential platform rules is positively associated with opportunities for individuation and, when participation is collective, unification, provided that worker input can alter the rules or their implementation. Mechanisms that merely collect views without the capacity to influence decisions are not expected to have the same relationship.

P4. Capability-development and job-crafting opportunities are positively associated with individuation and self-connection when workers retain discretion to apply and demonstrate what they learn within the focal task bundle or perceive the acquired capability as credibly portable to subsequent work.

P5. Relational infrastructure that enables credible peer interaction, support and recognition is positively associated with opportunities for unification, whereas credible visibility of beneficiaries and of the worker's attributable impact is positively associated with opportunities for contribution.

P6. The positive association between an opportunity to enact a pathway and the experienced meaningfulness of a focal episode is stronger when that pathway is congruent with the worker's values and salient cultural or interpersonal cues. The proposition concerns directly measured values, norms and social cues rather than deterministic differences between countries.

P7. High livelihood dependence combined with weak material or institutional security weakens the extent to which formally available governance arrangements translate into usable opportunities for voice, contestability, development and connection, because refusal, exit or appeal carries a higher practical cost. Stronger material or institutional security attenuates this constraint. This condition

concerns practical access to governance arrangements rather than pathway salience.

Discussion and implications

The framework makes three theoretical contributions. First, it separates two levels that are often conflated in accounts of platform work: AI substitutes for or augments components within a task bundle, whereas algorithmic management governs allocation, direction, monitoring, evaluation, reward and sanction at platform level. This distinction prevents control intensification from being treated as a third task effect.

Second, the framework represents heterogeneity through continuous task-component descriptors rather than mutually exclusive worker or occupational categories. A single episode may therefore contain substituted and augmented components while remaining subject to intensified platform control. Third, the framework uses Rosso et al.'s four pathways to distinguish between the opportunities made available by task and governance configurations, the pathways a worker considers salient, and the worker's practical ability to use formally available arrangements. Values and cultural or interpersonal cues address salience; livelihood dependence and security address practical access.

For managers and platform designers, the framework implies that efficiency metrics alone are inadequate. Experienced meaningfulness has been associated with engagement, performance and retention (Bailey et al. 2019), so governance choices that contract pathway opportunities are not only a normative concern. Governance arrangements should be matched to task-bundle characteristics and evaluated in terms of whether workers can understand, influence and contest consequential decisions and retain opportunities for learning and connection. A configuration suitable for routine, benchmarkable components should not automatically be transferred to episodes dominated by embodied service, contextual judgement or client interaction, where discretion and relational recognition may be more consequential.

For policy, the argument aligns with current efforts to improve transparency and worker protection in platform work. The EU Platform Work Directive adopted in 2024 seeks to clarify employment status, increase transparency in automated monitoring and decision-making systems, secure human oversight and review of significant decisions, and restrict some forms of personal-data processing by digital labour platforms (Directive (EU) 2024/2831). In the present model, such safeguards can strengthen credible contestability and institutional security. Whether they alter workers' experience in practice remains an empirical question.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The paper is conceptual rather than empirical, the descriptive evidence is illustrative rather than harmonized, and the studies synthesized here do not test the complete seven-proposition model. The propositions are therefore predictions rather than established effects. The task-bundle abstraction simplifies a labour market in which episodes may combine digital, embodied, relational and expert components and in which workers and platforms may define episode boundaries differently. The model treats the focal episode as the

unit of observation; cumulative changes across episodes and longer-term evaluations of work or career lie outside its present scope. Finally, the framework is bounded to gig and platform work. Standard employment, professional regulation, collective bargaining and career structures may change the proposed relationships, so transferability should be established rather than assumed.

Conclusions

The article offers an explanation of how AI-related task reconfiguration and platform governance may shape the significance workers attribute to a focal platform-work episode. Its central implication is that this experience should be examined through changes in pathway opportunities and workers' practical access to governance arrangements, rather than inferred from an occupational category or from the presence of AI alone.

Future empirical work should test the seven propositions with measures aligned to the model's levels: task-component exposure within episodes; platform governance and control; worker-reported opportunities to enact the four pathways; and experienced meaningfulness of the focal episode. Repeated observations of several episodes nested within workers and platforms would help separate episode variation from stable worker values and platform rules. Comparative studies should measure cultural values, interpersonal cues, livelihood dependence and access to protection directly rather than use country or occupation as proxies. Occupational AI-exposure indicators may help identify settings (Felten, Raj and Seamans 2021; Eloundou et al. 2024), but they cannot substitute for component-level measures when the unit of analysis is the work episode.

For business and platform design, the relevant question is not only whether governance arrangements formally exist but whether workers can use them without unacceptable risk. Explanation, appeal, participation, learning and peer-support mechanisms offer limited protection when dependence on the platform makes their use practically costly.

For education and professional training, AI-mediated platform work should be taught as a socio-technical management problem rather than only as a technical automation issue. Managers, platform designers and students should be trained to evaluate platform AI systems through efficiency, legality, fairness, worker development and worker-experience criteria.

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AI-assisted language editing, document-formatting support and source-consistency checking were used during final manuscript preparation. No AI system is listed as an author. The author accepts full responsibility for the originality, accuracy and integrity of the submitted work.

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