

Redefining HR for Sustainability: Employee well-being, ethics and digital work

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ABSTRACT The fast development of digital technologies has actually changed the essence of the modern working environment, creating digitally driven work places that are becoming central to the organisational operations. Even though the advantages of digital work systems can be proven in terms of flexibility, cross-functionality, and efficiency of operations, they also present a major challenge in the context of employee welfare and work ethics. This paper analyzes the connection between digital work, employee well-being, and ethical practices and specifically the mediating role played by Human Resource Management (HRM) in ensuring sustainable work environments. By taking a conceptual research design based on a comprehensive analysis of secondary data consisting of peer-reviewed academic literature, industry reports, and time-tested theoretical models, the study theorises digital work as a job demand and a job resource as per the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The results show that digital work can bring both benefits, including autonomy and flexibility of the schedule, but also presents challenges of technostress, digital fatigue, work-life imbalance, and data privacy and employee surveillance issues. The paper also highlights the critical nature of HR practices in facilitating these influences by introducing supportive policies, well-being programs, and ethical governance systems in digital spaces. The paper concludes that organisations should make the digital transformation balanced and human, that is, one that incorporates the efficiency of technologies alongside the well-being and moral responsibility of the employees. The suggested framework has both substantive implications to academic scholars and HR practitioners interested in creating sustainable digital workplaces.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Employee Well-being, Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, Technostress, Digital Fatigue, Work-Life Balance.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Digital Transformation

The history of digital transformation has its roots in the 18th century. Digital transformation has radically changed structural and functional aspects of modern organisations. The extensive use of digital resources and the principle of remote work have made the workplace more efficient and flexible in terms of time. Nevertheless, these changes have also brought more pressure to the workplace and made the separation of professional and personal life more complicated among many workers [1]. The anticipation of constant communication and nonstop working performance has become a widespread cause of workplace stress. Additionally, the increase in the use of digital

monitoring systems and data-driven decision-making procedures has raised valid issues regarding personal privacy and fair treatment of the staff [3].

1.2 The Changing Position of HR

The role of Human Resource Management has been significantly changed in response to these changes. In the past, HRM has been largely preoccupied with administrative and transactional duties, but it is currently anticipated that it can play a strategically important role in guiding and facilitating digital change. Highly diverse digitally facilitated HR practices such as employee observation systems, e-learning, e-recruitment, and performance analytics have quickly taken root into organisational lives [11]. In addition to providing quantifiable efficiency benefits, these tools also present significant substantive concerns regarding procedural fairness, employee welfare, and ethical management of digital systems [5].

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite the clear benefits of digital work, an increasing amount of evidence suggests that it has negative effects on workers. The demands of 24/7 connectivity, work overload and an unspoken rule of 24/7 availability often lead to work life imbalance and increased stress [6][8]. At the same time, the use of employee monitoring technologies and the growing popularity of the use of algorithms in the decision-making process have spawned significant ethical issues related to privacy, trust in the organisation, and transparency [13]. This research aims to look at these issues in a holistic manner and to understand how HRM can be a productive mediating variable.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Digital Work and Employment Relationships

The digital workplaces are essentially transforming the very concept of the relations of employment, which allows them more operational leeway but at the same time increases the scope of control by the managers [4]. The available literature on employee welfare regarding the digital environment presents a multifaceted and paradoxical image: some of the studies show the improved job satisfaction as a result of the increased autonomy, whereas others record the high levels of burnout due to the stress-induced by technology factors [2]. The ethical issues especially those of data privacy and the non-transparency of algorithmic systems have become areas of scholarly and practitioner interest [5]. Moreover, the widespread adoption of the hybrid and remote working patterns, facilitated by digital technologies, has already triggered significant shifts in job descriptions, patterns of communication, and the overall organisational design.

2.2 The Well-Being of Employees on Digital Work

The scholarly sources have always found that there is a two-fold effect of digital work in the well-being of the employees. Although the flexibility provided by digital arrangements is one of the most common factors that employees have been found to be satisfied with, they have also reported various negative effects such as having to work longer hours, some experiencing visual fatigue due to extended time on the screen, and being unable to psychologically shut down their work duties. This conflict highlights the need to have balanced and carefully planned digital work practices [2]. The problem of technostress has become an especially urgent issue in the work environments that are characterized by the high use of digital resources and communication tools, and the prolonged exposure to digital communication devices and platforms is broadly reported to cause fatigue and reduced working-life balance [6]. This difficulty has been especially intensified

in the post-COVID-19 environment, as remote working models have further disrupted the frame dividing professional and personal spheres [8][10].

2.3 Digital Workplace Ethics

The moral aspects of e-workplaces constitute a fast growing field of research. The use of monitoring tools and data analytics to control employee performance is progressively used in organisations, but when applied without proper protection or disclosure, it can lead to a serious damage of trust in employees [5]. Employees have a right to be notified in an informed manner of the manner in which their personal and professional information is being gathered, stored, and used, and to be assured that they are being treated fairly in the digitally mediated systems. The increasing use of artificial intelligence in HR practices has only escalated the issue of algorithmic accountability, systemic bias, and the lack of a transparent automated decision-making process [11]. This idea of surveillance capitalism by Zuboff can be used to analyze the gathering and analyzing of the data about employees through the prism of its critical interpretation, as it suggests the potential danger of its abuse and the loss of personal autonomy and privacy [13].

The dominating ethical paradigms underline the necessity of instilling the concept of responsibility and fairness within the technological practices of organisations [12]. Organisational justice, staff confidence, and institutional candor has taken a centre stage as a challenge and requirement to organisations that exist in digitally propelled settings [15]. It is the responsibility of organisations to make sure that digital systems are implemented in a way that is efficient, but that is also provable to be fair and ethically based.

2.4 Digital Fatigue and Technostress

Digital fatigue is one of the occupational hazards that are becoming more common, especially among employees working in a remote employment setup who have to spend a long time at the computer. Lack of frequent pauses, increased use of video conferencing sessions, and decreased social interaction with people has all added to the high rates of disengagement and work burnout [8][10]. Organisations are therefore increasingly being pressured to adopt systematic measures that would alleviate such negative impacts and ensure that employees recover. These concerns are closely connected with technostress, which can be defined as the occupational stress due to overuse of digital technologies. As the employees grow more reliant on digital devices, they become vulnerable to growing demands such as the necessity to handle large amounts of data within a short period of time, stay constantly available, and be responsive. These requirements are a proven cause of stress, mental exhaustion, and reduced productivity [6]. Everything was handled through digital labor, and thus, there was no work-life balance. Digital work has contributed significantly to the erosion of the line between professional and personal life. Although remote and hybrid employment provides employees with significant flexibility of their schedules, it has also given rise to what the scholarly community refers to as an always-on culture, one where workers feel under an implicit sense of obligation to be constantly available long after the officially set working hours [9]. This cultural norm is a serious source of chronic stress and compromised meaningful work-life balance. Boundary theory is a conceptual framework that can be used to understand how professional and personal role separation are managed. These boundaries have become more challenging to maintain in the digital work setting, where the demands of the clientele and organisational pressures often push beyond the traditional limits of time and space [8]. The overall effect of this erosion is that there is a quantifiable reduction in the general well being and life satisfaction of employees.

2.5 HR Solutions in Digital Workplaces

HRM is in a unique position to react positively to the issues brought about by digital work environments. Flexible work policies, organised employee well-being programmes, and digital wellness programs are increasingly being used by organisations as ways of managing employee health and engagement [14]. HR activities are also well positioned to see that ethical practices are maintained in matters like employee surveillance, performance reviewing, data management as well as fair treatment [12]. In addition to the implementation of policies, HR can also act as an open and reliable mediator between employee interests and organisational goals. Stress management, digital literacy, and psychological resilience training programmes can also have a great impact on the ability of employees to cope with the current technological change in a constructive manner [15].

3. Research Gap and Objectives

The literature available, though substantial, has mainly investigated the issue of digital work and employee well-being as separate entities, with relatively little academic interest in the interaction of the two and their relation to workplace ethics. This discontinuity is an informative gap within the field, and therefore integrative frameworks are required, which would consider such dimensions together. The current research addresses this gap by exploring digital work, employee welfare, and workplace ethics as a triad, where HRM is the working mediating variable. By doing so, it seeks to give a more comprehensive and practically implementable description of the problems that organisations face in the digital age.

4. Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework that the current study relies on is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, in which digital work is theorised as operating as a resource and a demand at the same time. The mediating variable is the HR practices, which are a balanced force between these conflicting forces and are designed and implemented by the formulation and enforcement of employee-friendly and ethically responsible policies.

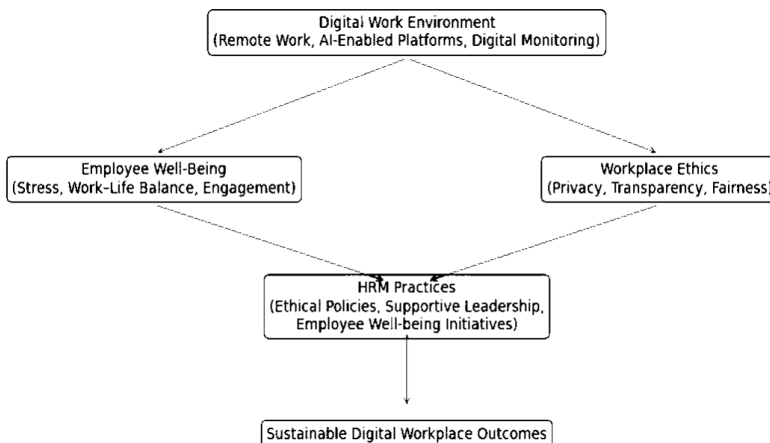


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of digital work, ethics, and employee-wellbeing

4.1 The JD-R Model

JD-R model presents an effective explanatory model of how various job characteristics can affect the well-being of employees and the performance of an organisation. In this model, job demands

are conceptualised as those elements of work which demand a long-term physical or mental effort and which involve workload, time pressure, and emotional demands [2]. On the contrary, job resources can be defined as the elements of work that help to attain goals, mitigate the effects of job demands, and trigger personal growth and development. The model assumes that the lack of balance between demands and resources has a harmful impact on well-being, and a sufficient supply of resources contributes to the productive involvement and psychological prosperity [2]. One can work digitally with a JD-R Lens. When applied to the digital work setting, technology acts as demand and resource. Digital tools are proven to increase operational efficiency, speed up communication, and support flexible work schedules that are considered in this aspect meaningful job resources [7]. At the same time, though, sustained connectivity, extreme dependence on digital infrastructure, and the growing cognitive loads of information-intensive work are core contributors of technostress and work burnout [6]. The remote work environment further increases these dynamics by blurring the line between work and personal life, which further increases job demands and limits the time to recover [8].

4.2 HRM as Mediator

In this context, HRM plays a pivotal mediating position, whereby it is able to balance the digital job requirements and the resources available. HR strategies such as digital wellness programmes, flexible working policies, and formal support mechanisms are framed as resources that reduce demand that cushions employees against the negative impact of digital work [14]. By matching organisational objectives and needs of the employees, HR establishes the environment of favourable and sustainable work. HR practices play a significant role in the development of resilient and humane digital workplaces through the active suppression of excess demands, encouragement of ethical behavior, and the enrichment of work resources [12][15].

4.3 Ethics as an Integrative Dimension

Moral governance is an essential and uncompromising aspect of the suggested model. The active involvement of artificial intelligence and digital monitoring technologies in the organisational systems has raised urgent issues concerning transparency, fairness, and the responsible approach towards the employees [11]. Ethical HR practice can therefore be seen as a normative guiding process, and it must make sure that digital tools are used in a manner that is in line with the principles of procedural justice, employee dignity, and organisational accountability [13].

5. Methodology

The conceptual research design used in this study is based on a comprehensive and thorough review of the secondary data sources. This research methodology is adequately appropriate to the objective of the study, i.e. synthesising the already known information about digital work, employee well-being, and workplace ethics and developing an integrative theoretical framework on an HRM basis. The secondary data that guided this research were selected based on a wide selection of source materials, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, industry reports, and developed internet based academic databases. The research gives preference to the literature on areas of human resource management, organisational behaviour, information systems and business ethics [7]. A systematic selection process was used to make the literature included relevant and scholarly rigorous with preference given to recent and widely referenced literature. Classical theoretical models, especially the JD-R model were included to offer a strong and developed theoretical basis [2]. The method of analysis is the qualitative synthesis of the literature, as a result of which the main themes, conceptual associations, and important gaps were identified and incorporated. The paper explores the effect of digital work on employee well-being

and ethical practice and how HRM acts as a mediating factor in the relationships. Based on the findings of various academic traditions, the research develops a conceptual framework that explains how these variables are interconnected. The research recognizes the weaknesses of its use of secondary data. The lack of primary data collection excludes the possibility of empirical validation of the suggested relationships. It is thus recommended that future researchers should make the framework undergo intensive empirical evaluation via quantitative survey, qualitative interviews or mixed-method case studies.

6. Discussion

6.1. Positive outcomes of digital work

Online work has proved to be more efficient and flexible in organisations. The introduction of digital technologies makes it possible to make employees work remotely, collaborate successfully across geographical borders, and obtain the ability to receive information in real-time, which altogether leads to higher productivity, a more agile decision-making process, and better intra-organisational communication [7]. On the side of the employee, there are significant advantages of digital working, as there is a sense of choice and self-management of tasks. Jobs can be designed to fit people and situations, thus making them more satisfied with their work and intrinsically engaged [14]. Also, the presence of online learning resources and professional growth applications facilitates the ongoing skill training and allows employees to be responsive to changing organisational needs. It should be noted though that these advantages heavily depend on the quality of implementation, as well as the existence of proper managerial support.

6.2 Adverse Effects: Stress, Burnout and Work Overload

Although it has clear advantages, digital work also creates a set of circumstances that prove detrimental to the well being of the employees. The emergence of technostress as a result of being always connected, the influx of information, and an organisational desire to respond quickly is one of the most important and best-reported problems in digitally intensive workplaces [6]. Employees often complain of being overloaded by the incessant stream of digital messages, which has negative effects on mental processing and long-term productivity. Work-life imbalance is also worsened by the culture of being always-on, which defines most of the digital workplaces. Employees are faced with deep challenges to psychologically dissociate themselves with work which often leads to long working hours and permanent high levels of stress [8]. This continued blurring of the line between professional and personal realm is a major source of burnout, emotional fatigue, and low job satisfaction. Remote working can also produce feelings of social loneliness and lack of collegiality, and the consequences can be potentially harmful to employee motivation and psychological health. The overall challenges affirm the necessity of organisations making intentional and continuous care regarding the design and governance of digital work practices.

6.3 Digital Workplace Ethical Challenges

The ever-increasing pace of digital technologies penetrating organisational life has brought into view a set of ethically problematic issues. The use of the monitoring systems and predictive analytics and artificial intelligence to manage performance has become more of a normal phenomenon; although these measures might increase the effectiveness of the operations supervision, they also raise some valid issues about personal privacy, transparency in the institution, and fairness [5]. The employees who feel that they are under constant watch might lose the confidence they have in the organisation and feel that their autonomy has been invaded.

These issues are further aggravated by the lack of clear and accessible communication on how data on employees is gathered, stored, and utilised [13]. In addition, algorithmic decision-making systems that are poorly audited or poorly constructed can incorporate and reinforce systemic bias, and this has implications in terms of the fair treatment of employees [11]. These ethical dilemmas have serious organisational cultural and employee engagement consequences. They highlight the essential role of creating solid ethical guidelines and maintaining the uniformity of transparency in any digitally mediated HR practices.

6.4 The HR in the Digital Work Management

HRM is at a vanguard position that cannot be replaced in response to the challenges of digital working environments. Being the strategic liaison between organisational goals and employee well-being, HR is in a unique position to formulate and enact the policies that encourage a balanced, fair, and sustainable working environment. HR can use the practices of flexible work, establish strict behavioural standards regarding working hours and connectivity expectations, and actively promote disengagement with work during non-working hours in terms of demand reduction [14]. In terms of resource improvement, HR will be able to offer specific training programmes, create the relevant digital tools, and establish the support systems that employees will require to cope with their professional tasks and handle them in a sustainable way. HR also has the primary institutional responsibility of supporting the ethical integrity of digital work practices. HR is also vital in fostering organisational trust and incorporating a procedural fairness culture by establishing and implementing clear policies about employee surveillance and data utilisation [12]. Awareness programs to the employees and open channels of communication serve to further enforce ethical standards and ensure the creation of a culture of responsibility across the organisation.

6.5 Incorporating Well-Being and Ethics into Sustainable Workplace

The results of the given research indicate that there is a strong and mutually supportive interaction between employee well-being and workplace ethics in the digital setting. Companies that focus on technological efficiency without taking into consideration human-oriented ideals may face enduring problems such as worker dissatisfaction, high turnover as well as reduced productivity in the long term. The achievement of a sustainable digital workplace requires a deliberate and well-balanced approach, one in which technology is used as an employee empowerment tool, as opposed to a control mechanism. HRM plays a key role in attaining this balance as it is the organisational capability that can best suit digital strategies with employee requirements and current ethical norms. Through integrated and systematic incorporation of well-being initiatives alongside ethical governance, organisations are able to create a favourable and trust-based work environment that leads to increased employee engagement, performance and organisational resilience in the long term [15].

7. Implications

7.1 Managerial Implications

The research results of this work have significant practical implications on the managers and HR professionals in charge of designing and managing digital work environments. It is recommended that organisations should seek a calculated balance between organisational efficiency and the welfare of its employees by enforcing the policy of flexible working, by explicitly defining hours of work, and by actively encouraging psychological separation of work and non-formal working hours [8]. Managers are also advised to invest in organized digital wellness programmes and to

equip employees with data they need to cope with technostress and digital fatigue positively [6]. Digital competency, time management, and occupational stress management training programs will probably positively change the adaptability of employees and their performance results. The second key is also the creation of open and clear feedback systems and mechanisms which help organisations to detect and address the changing concerns of their employees in timely and positive ways. Another implication is on ethics of stewardship of digital systems. Managers must exercise a professional and organisational duty of ensuring that the practices of employee monitoring are transparent, proportionate, and clearly communicated. Transparency on the objectives and limits of data gathering and use is core to the establishment of good employment relations and their maintenance [12].

7.2 Policy Implications

On the organisational and the general policy level, the extensive guidelines that will govern the digital working practices and provide the protection of the rights of employees with a substantial worth are urgently needed. The policies that tackle the data privacy, the extent, and the proportionality of the employee monitoring processes, and the ethical utilization of AI-based HR tools need to be formulated and enforced on a regular basis [11]. The formalisation of work-life balance supporting policies in digital settings is another case that can be argued. The release of the so-called right to disconnect measures that do not allow organisations to expect their employees to respond to work communications during hours that are not included in the working schedule can be viewed as one of the practical and increasingly popular mechanisms of alleviating the dangers of chronic stress and ensuring the well-being of their employees. The systematic implementation of ethical standards and accountability principles into organisational policy frameworks should be done with a specific focus on the governance of data-driven decision-making systems whose transparency and predisposition to bias remain continuous threats to organisational justice [13].

7.3 Academic Implications

The research has a substantive contribution to the current body of literature, as it provides an integrative conceptual framework that unites digital work, employee well-being, and workplace ethics. It builds upon the existing use of the JD-R model by explicitly applying ethical aspects and HRM activities in the digital work setting [2], thus expanding the theoretical space in both of these overlapping fields. It is also found that the study opens up an obvious agenda to be followed in further empirical research. It is hoped that researchers will put the suggested framework through systematic empirical testing in a variety of industries, organisational types and geographical and cultural settings, in a bid to produce more specific and context-sensitive information. The new topics that should receive long-term academic consideration are artificial intelligence in HR decision-making, digital surveillance and its impact on employee autonomy, and how employees will view fairness and justice in algorithmically controlled working environments. These areas will need strict research to bring further to the field of sustainable and ethically viable digital work.

8. Conclusion

The digital transformation has produced a radical and long-term redesign of the contemporary workplace, transforming the very nature of terms within which organisations act and employees exercise their professional functions. Although digital work gives a lot of benefits such as the increase of flexibility, better communication and increased productivity it also presents some serious and well-reported challenges concerning the health of employees and professional ethics. The consideration of such issues as technostress, work-life balance, as well as matters related to data privacy and digital surveillance have gained a certain significance in the modern workplace

in the digital sphere. This paper shows that digital work is both a job demand and a job resource, and it creates a dualistic and complicated effect on employees. The JD-R model is used to offer a rational and theoretically sound approach to the analysis of these dynamics. One of the key results is that without proper organisational support systems, the negative impact of digital work can significantly exceed the positive one. The key academic contribution of the paper is that it has defined and explained the crucial mediating position of HRM in the management of digital workplaces. By minimising the unnecessary job demands, maximising job resources, and facilitating ethical governance, HR practices are placed as the organisational activity most likely to generate balanced, supportive and sustainable digital work environments. The operational base of this mediating role is the use of flexible policies, employee welfare programs and open digital governance practices. The research also confirms that ethical considerations such as fairness, accountability and transparency are non-negotiable aspects of digital work practice. These principles are not desirable supplements to efficiency but are elements of the trust on which the employee engagement in the long term is founded. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its conceptual orientation as well as its use of secondary data. Future studies ought to seek an empirical validation of the suggested framework in a variety of organisational and cultural settings, and explore new topics, including AI-driven HR systems, digital monitoring, and algorithmic fairness among employees. To conclude, organisations that are serious about long-term sustainability amid the digital age should be prepared to adopt a truly human-focused approach to the digital transformation, one that considers the welfare of employees and ethical accountability as the core element of technological strategy. This kind of orientation does not only represent a normative aspiration but a pragmatic requirement in the construction of resilient and sustainable workplaces.

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