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Algorithmic Management as a New Managerial Control Logic: Rethinking Autonomy, Performance Measurement, and Employee Accountability

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Abstract

Algorithmic management refers to the use of algorithmic systems to direct, monitor, evaluate, reward, and discipline workers. It has become especially visible in platform-mediated work, where task allocation, pricing, performance scoring, and access to work are increasingly organized through digital systems. Its influence, however, is no longer confined to gig work, because similar logics of monitoring, ranking, prediction, and automated evaluation are spreading into conventional organizations. The central problem addressed in this article is that management theory has not yet fully treated algorithmic management as a distinct managerial control logic. Much existing work explains algorithms as technological tools that intensify established forms of supervision, measurement, or coordination. This interpretation is useful but incomplete because it underestimates how algorithmic systems alter the basic architecture of control itself. The objective of this article is to develop a theory-driven account of algorithmic management as a new control logic. The article argues that algorithmic management reconfigures three core dimensions of work: employee autonomy, performance measurement, and accountability. It therefore requires a theoretical model that explains not only what algorithms do to workers, but how algorithmic systems reorganize the relations among workers, managers, data, and responsibility. The article distinguishes algorithmic management from traditional managerial control, explains the autonomy paradox created by algorithmic systems, analyses the density of digital performance measurement, and theorises the displacement of accountability in algorithmically managed work. It proposes a model linking algorithmic control intensity, autonomy suppression, performance measurement density, and accountability displacement. The central conclusion is that algorithmic management is not a neutral managerial technology but a distinctive control logic that demands new theoretical and practical responses.

Keywords Algorithmic management, Control logic, Employee autonomy, Performance measurement, Employee accountability, Theory development

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Introduction

Algorithmic management has moved from a specialist concern in platform labour research to a central issue in management and organization studies. Early analyses of online labour platforms showed that algorithms could allocate tasks, rank workers, structure prices, and govern

access to future work without continuous human supervision [1]. Subsequent research has demonstrated that these systems are not confined to ride-hailing or food delivery but represent a broader shift in how organizations coordinate labour through data, prediction, and automated evaluation [2]. This article begins from the premise that algorithmic management must therefore be understood as

a managerial control logic rather than merely as a technological support system.

The theoretical puzzle is that algorithmic management often appears to expand autonomy while simultaneously narrowing it. Platform workers may choose when to log in, which tasks to accept, or how long to remain active, yet their choices are shaped by opaque ranking systems, dynamic pricing, acceptance thresholds, and reputational scores [3]. This combination of surface flexibility and deep behavioural constraint has been described across gig work settings, where workers experience autonomy as conditional, monitored, and reversible [4]. The resulting contradiction is not incidental but central to the control logic of algorithmic management.

A second puzzle concerns performance measurement. Traditional managerial control often relied on supervisors, formal procedures, periodic appraisal, or output targets, whereas algorithmic systems can generate continuous traces of movement, speed, availability, responsiveness, customer ratings, and compliance [5]. These data streams make performance appear more objective, but they also expand the range of behaviours that can be quantified and judged [6]. Algorithmic management therefore changes not only how performance is measured but also what counts as performance in the first place.

A third puzzle concerns accountability. When algorithmic systems allocate tasks, evaluate workers, or trigger sanctions, responsibility becomes distributed across software designers, platform operators, organizational managers, customers, and workers themselves [7]. Yet workers often bear the consequences of algorithmic decisions while lacking access to the criteria, data, or appeal mechanisms needed to contest them [8]. The aim of this article is to theorise these tensions by reconceptualising algorithmic management as a distinct control logic that reorganizes autonomy, performance measurement, and employee accountability.

Theoretical Background

Classical organizational control theory distinguishes among forms of control based on direct supervision, technical systems, formal rules, output measures, and shared norms. Algorithmic management draws from all these traditions but cannot be reduced to any one of them, because it combines automated direction, real-time monitoring,

evaluative scoring, and behavioural nudging within the same infrastructure [1]. In this respect, algorithms act not only as tools of coordination but as mechanisms through which managerial authority is embedded into digital systems [2]. Theoretical development is therefore needed to explain how control becomes simultaneously technical, informational, and normative.

Labour process theory is especially useful because it directs attention to how control systems reorganize the relation between managerial authority and worker discretion. Research on platform labour shows that algorithmic systems can intensify managerial control while avoiding the visible presence of a human supervisor [9]. Workers may experience this as a form of concealed management, where instructions appear as app prompts, incentives, warnings, rankings, or access restrictions rather than direct commands [10]. This makes algorithmic management a particularly important case for rethinking control under digital capitalism.

At the same time, algorithmic control differs from older technical control because it is adaptive, scalable, and data-driven. Industrial machinery constrained work through physical arrangements, while algorithmic systems modify work through continuous feedback, automated classification, and predictive intervention [5]. The same system can allocate tasks, measure compliance, compare workers, and impose consequences across large populations of employees or contractors [11]. This creates a mode of control that is both decentralized in operation and centralized in design.

The three theoretical dimensions developed in this article are autonomy, performance measurement, and accountability. Autonomy matters because algorithmic systems often convert self-direction into bounded choice within parameters set by the system [12]. Performance measurement matters because algorithmic systems transform work into continuous streams of comparable data [13]. Accountability matters because decisions produced through algorithmic infrastructures can obscure who is responsible for outcomes, errors, sanctions, or harms [14].

Algorithmic Management as Control Logic

Algorithmic management can be defined as the use of algorithmic systems to assign, monitor, evaluate, reward,

and sanction worker behaviour. This definition emphasizes that algorithmic management is not limited to surveillance or analytics but includes the full cycle through which managerial direction is enacted [15]. In platform settings, matching systems determine who receives work, rating systems influence future access, and automated rules discipline deviations from expected behaviour [5]. In conventional organizations, similar tools are increasingly used to schedule labour, assess productivity, monitor compliance, and guide managerial decisions [2].

The distinctive feature of algorithmic management is that managerial control becomes embedded in computational infrastructures. Rather than relying primarily on supervisors who observe, interpret, and intervene, organizations can use systems that classify behaviour in real time and trigger automated responses [1]. This shifts control from episodic human judgment toward continuous algorithmic evaluation, although human managers may still design, authorize, or legitimate the system [16]. As a result, control becomes less visible as command but more pervasive as data-mediated constraint.

Algorithmic management also depends on opacity and asymmetry. Workers are often required to respond to system outputs without knowing how ratings, rankings, incentives, or penalties are generated [8]. This opacity does not eliminate agency, because workers may adapt, resist, game, or reinterpret algorithmic systems [14]. However, it changes the conditions of agency by requiring workers to act within an environment where the rules of evaluation are only partially knowable.

Algorithmic management therefore differs from traditional managerial control because it combines technical automation, behavioural measurement, predictive classification, and disciplinary consequences in a single control architecture. **Table 1** contrasts algorithmic management with traditional managerial control logics. The comparison shows that algorithmic management is not simply a stronger version of bureaucratic or technical control but a hybrid logic organized around data extraction, automated evaluation, and scalable behavioural steering [7].

Table 1. Algorithmic Management versus Traditional Managerial Control: Dimensions, Mechanisms, and Underlying Assumptions

Dimension	Traditional managerial control	Algorithmic management control	Theoretical implications
Primary control agent	Human supervisor, manager, bureaucratic rule system, or organizational hierarchy	Algorithmic system designed and authorized by organizational or platform actors	Managerial authority becomes embedded in technical infrastructure rather than expressed through hierarchical supervision
Mode of direction	Instructions, procedures, schedules, targets, and managerial feedback	Automated task allocation, prompts, nudges, rankings, dynamic pricing, and access rules	Direction becomes continuous, data-mediated, and often experienced as system requirements rather than managerial commands
Monitoring mechanism	Periodic supervision, reports, appraisal, audits, and output review	Real-time behavioural tracking, location data, response times, ratings, acceptance rates, and system logs	Monitoring expands from observable outputs to granular behavioural traces
Performance logic	Evaluation based on supervisor judgment, formal criteria, output targets, or peer comparison	Continuous scoring, predictive ranking, automated classification, and customer-mediated metrics	Performance becomes constantly updated data profile rather than a periodic assessment
Worker autonomy	Bounded by rules, hierarchy, occupational	Bounded by algorithmic parameters, opaque	Autonomy shifts from substantive discretion

	norms, and managerial discretion	thresholds, incentive structures, and platform-defined options	controlled choice within system-defined boundaries
Accountability structure	Responsibility attributed to managers, employees, teams, or formal procedures	Responsibility diffused among algorithms, designers, platforms, managers, customers, and workers	Accountability becomes displaced and harder to contest when decisions are technically mediated
Visibility of control	Often visible through hierarchy, supervision, rules, and formal appraisal	Often obscured through interface design, automated decisions, and opaque data processing	Control becomes less personally visible but more infrastructurally pervasive
Underlying assumption	Workers must be coordinated, supervised, motivated, or disciplined through managerial systems	Workers must be continuously rendered measurable, comparable, predictable, and optimizable	The worker is reconstructed as a data-generating subject of algorithmic evaluation

Figure 1 illustrates how algorithmic management converts managerial promises of flexibility, efficiency, objectivity, and scalability into mechanisms of algorithmic control and their consequences for autonomy, performance, and accountability.

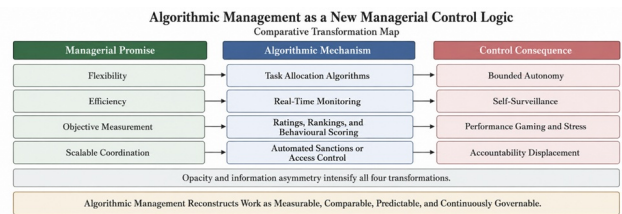


Figure 1. From Managerial Promise to Algorithmic Control

Consequence: How Algorithmic Management Reconfigures Autonomy, Performance Measurement, and Accountability

Employee Autonomy under Algorithmic Systems

Employee autonomy under algorithmic management is best understood as a paradox rather than as a simple loss of discretion. Platform firms frequently frame work as flexible, entrepreneurial, and self-directed, yet the conditions under which workers exercise choice are structured by algorithmic allocation, ranking, and incentive systems [3]. Workers may decide when to work, but algorithms often shape where they go, which tasks appear, how much they earn, and whether they remain visible to future demand [4]. Autonomy is therefore transformed from substantive control over work into constrained navigation within algorithmically defined options.

This paradox is especially visible in platform food delivery and ride-hailing, where workers appear formally independent but remain subject to continuous behavioural steering. Research on dynamic pricing and demand management shows that workers are encouraged to make “choices” under conditions shaped by informational asymmetry, uncertain incentives, and shifting platform rules [17]. Place-based and time-based algorithmic controls further limit discretion by organizing when and where work becomes economically viable [18]. The result is not the disappearance of autonomy but its reconstruction as conditional responsiveness to algorithmic signals.

Algorithmic management also redefines autonomy by making workers responsible for adapting to systems they cannot fully understand. Studies of food delivery work show that couriers must interpret opaque allocation rules, anticipate penalties, and adjust behaviour to maintain access to income [19]. In Chinese platform work, algorithmic systems similarly govern labour through timing, route expectations, service standards, and ranking pressures [20]. These cases suggest that algorithmic autonomy is not freedom from management but freedom to optimize oneself within a managerial environment that has already defined the acceptable range of action.

The concept of the algorithmic cage captures this transformation. Unlike a bureaucratic cage built from formal rules, the algorithmic cage is built from rankings, thresholds, scores, nudges, and uncertain consequences

that make workers govern themselves in anticipation of system reactions [14]. Workers may resist by gaming ratings, multi-apping, delaying compliance, or collectively contesting platform rules, but these practices usually occur inside the same data-driven environment that constrains them [21]. Algorithmic autonomy is therefore ambivalent because it produces both tactical agency and structural dependence.

Performance Measurement and Digital Monitoring

Performance measurement under algorithmic management is marked by the expansion of what can be observed, recorded, compared, and acted upon. Traditional appraisal systems usually captured selected outputs or supervisor judgments, whereas algorithmic systems can continuously collect data on location, speed, responsiveness, customer ratings, task acceptance, cancellation patterns, and behavioural regularity [6]. This creates a dense measurement environment in which workers are evaluated not only for outcomes but also for the micro-processes through which outcomes are produced [5]. Performance becomes less an episodic judgment and more a continuously updated digital profile.

The apparent objectivity of algorithmic measurement is theoretically problematic because the choice of what to measure is itself a managerial and political decision. Rating systems, response metrics, and productivity dashboards do not neutrally reflect work; they define which behaviours are made visible and which forms of effort are ignored [1]. Workers may therefore orient themselves toward measurable indicators even when those indicators only partially represent service quality, professional judgment, or relational labour [12]. In this sense, algorithmic performance measurement does not merely evaluate work but actively reconstructs work around measurable signals.

Digital monitoring also affects worker subjectivity. Research on technostress among Uber drivers shows that algorithmic control can produce strain when workers feel constantly monitored, evaluated, and pressured by system-generated expectations [22]. Algorithmic HRM studies similarly indicate that workers may experience control as impersonal and intrusive, especially when app-based systems regulate performance without meaningful dialogue or contextual interpretation [23]. These findings suggest that measurement density can generate behavioural

compliance while weakening trust, identification, and perceived fairness.

The consequences of algorithmic performance measurement extend beyond individual stress because they reshape organizational norms about what counts as good work. Table 2 summarises the features and consequences of performance measurement under algorithmic management. The table emphasizes that digital monitoring systems transform performance into a calculative field where workers are expected to remain measurable, responsive, and optimizable [24]. This creates a form of digital Taylorism that is not limited to task decomposition but extends to real-time behavioural comparison and self-optimization.

Table 2. Performance Measurement and Digital Monitoring in Algorithmic Management: Techniques, Data Sources, and Effects on Work

Measurement feature	Typical data source	Algorithmic technique	Immediate management use
Real-time activity tracking	GPS location, login status, task duration, route movement, response time	Continuous monitoring and behavioural logging	Allocate work, detect delay, compare productivity, identify deviations
Rating-based evaluation	Customer scores, review comments, complaint records, acceptance indicators	Reputational scoring and ranking	Filter access to future work, prioritize high-rated workers, trigger warnings
Behavioural compliance metrics	Acceptance rates, cancellation rates, punctuality, task completion sequences	Threshold detection and automated alerts	Discipline non-compliance, reduce perceived unreliability, standardize conduct

Predictive performance classification	Historical work records, availability patterns, service outcomes, comparative benchmarks	Predictive ranking and risk classification	Forecasting work reliability, target interventions, optimising labour allocation
Biometric or intensive monitoring	Wearables, keystroke data, productivity software, movement sensors, attention indicators	Sensor analytics and automated productivity inference	Measuring effort, fatigue, pace, attentiveness
Dashboard-based comparison	Aggregated productivity scores, rankings, visual metrics, team comparisons	Benchmarking and performance visualization	Encouraging competition, identifying outliers, justifying management decisions
Automated sanction triggers	Rule violations, score drops, complaint thresholds, inactivity patterns	Automated warning, suspension, or deactivation systems	Enforcing standards, scaling violations, limiting management intervention
Self-optimization feedback	Earnings projections, demand heat maps, performance tips, behavioural prompts	Recommendation and nudging systems	Shaping worker decisions while preserving the appearance of choice

Accountability becomes unstable when algorithmic systems participate in managerial decision-making. In traditional organizations, responsibility can often be traced to supervisors, rules, procedures, or formal decision makers, even when accountability remains contested. Under algorithmic management, decisions emerge from interactions among data inputs, model design, platform strategy, customer feedback, managerial interpretation, and worker behaviour [7]. This produces an accountability gap because the party most affected by a decision is often least able to inspect or challenge the process behind it.

Workers commonly encounter algorithmic decisions as facts rather than as contestable managerial judgments. In opaque evaluation systems, workers may receive lower rankings, fewer tasks, warnings, or deactivation without knowing whether the outcome resulted from customer ratings, behavioural thresholds, technical error, or managerial policy [8]. This opacity encourages anticipatory compliance because workers attempt to satisfy imagined rules in order to avoid uncertain sanctions [14]. Accountability is thereby displaced downward, as workers must manage the risks of a system they do not control.

The accountability problem is intensified by the legitimacy claims attached to algorithms. Algorithmic control can appear legitimate because it is framed as efficient, objective, data-driven, and consistent across workers [11]. Yet legitimacy is fragile when workers perceive systems as unfair, intrusive, or impossible to contest [25]. The critical issue is therefore not simply whether algorithmic systems make accurate decisions but whether organizations provide explainable, appealable, and accountable structures around those decisions.

Accountability displacement also has political consequences. Studies of platform labour show that workers develop resistance strategies when algorithmic systems impose costs while hiding the locus of decision-making authority [21]. These strategies include collective contestation, tactical non-compliance, reputational management, and attempts to reverse-engineer system rules [10]. Such resistance shows that accountability is not only a formal governance issue but also a lived struggle over who has the right to define, judge, and sanction work.

Accountability in Algorithmically Managed Work

Proposed Theoretical Model

The proposed theoretical model conceptualises algorithmic management through four interrelated constructs: algorithmic control intensity, autonomy suppression, performance measurement density, and accountability displacement. Algorithmic control intensity refers to the extent to which algorithms direct task allocation, monitor conduct, evaluate performance, and trigger rewards or sanctions [15]. Autonomy suppression captures the reduction of substantive discretion even when workers retain surface-level choices over time, location, or task acceptance [3]. Performance measurement density refers to the breadth, frequency, and granularity of data used to evaluate work [13].

The model proposes that algorithmic control intensity increases performance measurement density because stronger algorithmic control requires more continuous data extraction. As organizations rely on automated systems to govern work, they must render worker behaviour increasingly visible, comparable, and classifiable [5]. This relationship explains why algorithmic management often expands from task allocation into monitoring, scoring, ranking, and prediction [2]. Measurement density is therefore not a secondary effect but a necessary infrastructure of algorithmic control.

The model further proposes that performance measurement density mediates the relationship between algorithmic control intensity and autonomy suppression. Workers lose substantive autonomy not only because algorithms issue instructions but because dense measurement systems make deviations detectable, comparable, and sanctionable [12]. Even when workers retain formal discretion, the anticipation of scoring, ranking, or access consequences narrows the practical range of acceptable action [22]. This explains why workers may feel controlled even when no human supervisor is visibly present.

Finally, the model proposes that accountability displacement moderates the consequences of autonomy suppression and measurement density. When workers perceive that algorithmic decisions are opaque, unappealable, or attributed to “the system,” the negative effects of control on stress, trust, and perceived fairness are likely to intensify [8]. **Table 3** presents the proposed theoretical model linking autonomy, performance measurement, and accountability. The model also includes feedback loops through worker adaptation, resistance, and managerial recalibration, reflecting evidence that

algorithmic control is contested rather than mechanically imposed [26].

Table 3. Proposed Theoretical Model of Algorithmic Management: Autonomy Tensions, Measurement Intensity, and Accountability Displacement

Model construct	Conceptual definition	Core mechanism	Expected worker experience
Algorithmic control intensity	Degree to which algorithmic systems direct, monitor, evaluate, reward, or sanction work	Automated task allocation, ranking, nudging, access control, and disciplinary triggers	Work feels governed by system signals rather than negotiated human judgment
Performance measurement density	Breadth, frequency, granularity, and actionability of data collected about workers	Continuous tracking, customer ratings, behavioural logs, predictive scoring, dashboards	Workers become highly visible, comparable, and pressured to self-optimize
Autonomy suppression	Reduction of substantive discretion despite the presence of surface-level choice	Algorithmic parameters define feasible choices, penalties, incentives, and opportunity access	Workers experience reduced flexibility and conditional autonomy, increasing riskiness
Accountability displacement	Downward shifting or diffusion of responsibility for algorithmic decisions	Managers, platforms, developers, customers, and algorithms share unclear responsibility	Workers feel consequences without clear explanation or appeal

Worker adaptation	Individual or collective adjustment to algorithmic systems	Gaming, multi-apping, anticipatory compliance, selective resistance, reverse-engineering	Workers re...
Managerial recalibration	Organizational adjustment of algorithmic rules, thresholds, and governance practices	Revision of metrics, appeals, transparency, monitoring intensity, or incentive design	Control r... become r... legitimat... more restr... dependin... design ch...
Accountability repair	Institutional mechanisms that make algorithmic decisions explainable and contestable	Appeals, human review, audit trails, worker voice, transparent criteria	Workers ... procedu... clarity a... limited... recours...
Control legitimacy	Perceived acceptability of algorithmic direction and evaluation	Fairness, transparency, accuracy, voice, proportionality, and contextual judgment	Workers ... more like... comply w... systems... understand... and... contesta...

Figure 2 presents the proposed theoretical model of algorithmic management as a distinct managerial control logic that links algorithmic control intensity to autonomy suppression, performance measurement density, and accountability displacement.

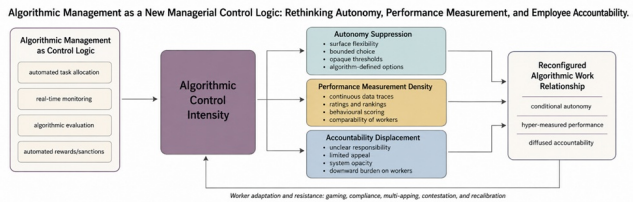


Figure 2. Algorithmic Management as a New Managerial Control Logic: A Theoretical Model Linking Control Intensity, Autonomy Suppression, Measurement Density, and Accountability Displacement

Research Propositions

The first proposition derived from the model is that algorithmic control intensity is positively associated with performance measurement density and negatively associated with perceived substantive autonomy. This proposition follows from evidence that algorithmic management depends on real-time data, automated evaluation, and scalable behavioural steering [1]. It also extends research showing that workers may retain formal flexibility while experiencing reduced discretion over meaningful aspects of work [3]. Future studies can test this proposition by comparing workplaces where algorithms merely support managerial decisions with workplaces where algorithms allocate, evaluate, and discipline work directly.

The second proposition is that performance measurement density mediates the relationship between algorithmic control intensity and worker stress, self-surveillance, and behavioural conformity. Research on technostress and app-based HRM suggests that continuous monitoring increases pressure because workers must remain responsive to opaque and changing evaluative criteria [22]. Recent scale-development work also provides a foundation for measuring algorithmic management as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than as a single exposure variable [13]. Empirical studies could therefore examine whether the psychological effects of algorithmic control are stronger when monitoring is more granular, more frequent, and more directly tied to sanctions.

The third proposition is that accountability displacement moderates the relationship between autonomy suppression and worker resistance. When workers perceive algorithmic decisions as opaque or unfair, they are more likely to engage in anticipatory compliance, gaming, tactical resistance, or collective contestation [14]. Emerging research on the politics of algorithmic management indicates that control systems are shaped through conflict over participation, explanation, and decision authority [26]. Future work should also examine how newer organizational applications of algorithmic management alter these dynamics beyond platform labour, because the rise of algorithmic management has implications for work and organizations more broadly [27].

Conclusion

This article has argued that algorithmic management should be understood as a new managerial control logic rather than as a technological extension of traditional supervision. Its novelty lies in the integration of automated direction, continuous measurement, opaque evaluation, and scalable discipline. These features reconfigure the relationship between workers, managers, data systems, and organizational authority.

The article's central theoretical contribution is the proposed model linking algorithmic control intensity, autonomy suppression, performance measurement density, and accountability displacement. The model explains why algorithmic management can promise flexibility while narrowing substantive discretion, why digital performance measurement becomes increasingly dense, and why responsibility for algorithmic decisions is often displaced downward onto workers. It also positions worker adaptation and resistance as feedback mechanisms that shape the future development of algorithmic control.

For management scholarship, the implication is that algorithmic management must be studied as a contested and evolving form of control. For practice, the implication is that organizations cannot treat algorithmic systems as neutral tools for efficiency while ignoring their effects on autonomy, fairness, and accountability. More accountable

and human-centred systems require transparency, appeal mechanisms, worker voice, contextual judgment, and explicit responsibility for decisions made through algorithmic infrastructures.

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