

MODERN
BUSINESS
ETHICS

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MODERN BUSINESS ETHICS

Thomas
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Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2024946150

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5296-7251-0
ISBN 978-1-5296-7250-3 (pbk)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Corbin is a philosopher at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. He received his PhD in philosophy from Macquarie University in 2021, where his research focused on the concept of equity as well as the philosophy of work. His work now spans a range of topics, including technology in the workplace, generative artificial intelligence, the philosophy of management, and contemporary debates in business ethics such as the phenomenon of 'quiet quitting'. He has lectured both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, convening units on a variety of topics including business ethics, the philosophy of work, as well as topics in social and political theory. Today Thomas lives in Victoria with his wife, Samantha, and together they spend their spare time researching Australian cicada species.

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ON TECHNOLOGY

Learning Outcomes

Remote working, hyper-flexible working conditions, roboticization, and artificial intelligence – each of these has been allowed for by new technology and has given a host of benefits both to modern businesses and to workers. However, they have also created new, unique, and concerning ethical challenges. This chapter explores some of the most urgent of these challenges being raised by technology in today's workplace.

This chapter will conclude the textbook by introducing you to the ethical issues raised by technology in the workplace.

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand the debate surrounding the meaning of 'technology' at work.
- Be familiar with the most pressing ethical issues related to workplace technology.
- Understand and apply the tools needed to ethically navigate modern business environments increasingly defined by technological advancements.

INTRODUCTION

Modern businesses are often understood in terms of technology, and for very good reason. Imagine a modern business without technology. Try to picture a workplace without the internet, without computers, without any equipment or tools whatsoever. Go on, give it a try. How did you do? Not too well I imagine.

Technology – whether it be new earthmoving equipment, warehouse automation, or communications software – is vital to modern businesses for one primary reason. That is, because technology improves productivity.

As we know, businesses compete with one another in a marketplace. The more productive a business is, the more competitive it is and therefore the more successful it will be. That's why it is so hard to image a business without technology today. Such a business simply could not compete with the production capabilities of a business using the latest technology.

But, as much as technology has improved production and even improved work for many people (making it safer or easier, for example), technology creates new ethical challenges at work as well as exacerbating existing challenges. For instance, new machinery has replaced human workers in the past, but only in limited sectors. Artificial intelligence threatens jobs at an unprecedented level whilst also creating new ethical concerns surrounding worker privacy, agency, and choice. As the modern workplace becomes increasingly defined by new technologies, ethical challenges old and new are expanding at unprecedented rates. Developing the tools to deal with these challenges is crucial, and the first step in this development is understanding precisely what we mean by 'technology'.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'TECHNOLOGY'?

This question might seem obvious, but it's worth asking. Typically, by 'technology' we mean the point where **science** and **tools** meet.

It is easy to overlook, but tools are remarkably important things. Tools allow us to manipulate our environment, letting us to do things we simply can't do naturally, or allowing us to do things faster, safer, more effectively, or more precisely than we might without tools. Physical tools, like hammers or screwdrivers, allow us to change the world around us in ways we can't replicate ourselves, either to the same degree or as efficiently. Conceptual tools, such as ethical frameworks like deontology or concepts such as agency, allow us to understand and work with ideas and debates in much the same way.

Technology is related to the creation and use of tools, but it isn't just that. Technology refers to the use of knowledge, expertise, or science to develop new and improved tools to meet some specific goal. That goal is typically increased production.

When we use the term **productivity** we are talking about a measure of economic performance calculated by comparing the amount of goods and services generated (outputs) with the amount of resources used (inputs) (Figure 10.1). In other words, productivity can be thought of in terms of a ratio of output over input. The higher the ratio (the more outputs generated and the less inputs needed), the more productive a business is.

$$\text{Productivity} = \frac{\text{Total output}}{\text{Total input}}$$

Figure 10.1 Productivity

Technology at work is not always targeted directly at improving productivity, but whatever it is, it is always something which is (or at least seems to be) an improvement of some kind over a previous state. This is why technology is so often linked with the idea of 'progress'.

Key Thinker 10.1 Adam Smith

Adam Smith was a Scottish philosopher and economist who was, just like us, interested in the two topics of modern businesses and ethics. In 1776 Smith published one of the most important books ever written, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, and the key question he asked in it was what made a modern business different to a business that operated, for instance, 500 years ago? We can ask the same question on the difference between our modern businesses today and those 250 years ago when Smith lived, and we might well arrive at the same answer he gave: productivity. The key difference is that modern businesses are more productive today than in the past. Smith thinks there are two reasons for this difference, two related things which allow for this increase in productivity. First, the division of labour into more specialized roles and, second, the use of technology to assist workers in those roles. For example, think of a blacksmith. The blacksmith makes anything people need as long as it is made of iron; horseshoes, garden rakes, boat anchors, nails, and everything in between. If, however, we divide the blacksmith's varied tasks into distinct jobs, one job only making horseshoes and another only boat anchors for example, the workers doing those jobs not only become more skilled and efficient at their specific task, they also understand the task well enough to develop new technology to even further increase their productivity. The more jobs are divided, the more specialized technology emerges, the more productive businesses become.

- Smith, Adam, *The Wealth of Nations*. Harriman House, 2007.

If we look back to the history of modern industry, all the major stages in its evolution have been linked to technology and the increase in productivity it allowed for. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, technological advancements using steam transformed the way manufacturing was conducted. This led to the 'industrial revolution', which marked the shift from manufacturing work being done primarily by hand to being done primarily by machine. The use of machinery, particularly steam engine powered machinery, increased production drastically and this had an immediate economic effect, driving growth and starting the modern capitalist economy. In the twentieth century, technological advances in electricity and communications had a similar impact on productivity, and then in the 1970s computer technology came onto the scene and transformed the world once more. These are the three main stages, or revolutions, in the history of modern industry, each defined by technology and each resulting in increasing returns in productivity. Today, many people argue that we are in the middle of yet another evolution, known as Industry 4.0 or the 'fourth industrial revolution', this time defined by digital technology. The most important of these technologies is artificial intelligence or AI. Throughout modern industrial history, major technological advances – from steam power to electricity to computers – have driven revolutionary increases in productivity

and economic transformation. Today's emerging Industry 4.0, centred especially on artificial intelligence and digital technologies, appears poised to continue this pattern of technology-driven industrial evolution.

However, there is a controversy about just how we should understand technology in relation to progress. For one thing, the ultimate goal of technology at work, let's say simply increased production for the sake of ease, is not the only outcome of technology. Technology also creates waste, unwanted and unintended by-products, and depletes resources. It can also take people's jobs away from them.

You might have heard the term 'luddite' used to describe someone who doesn't use or understand technology, but did you know that the Luddites were a real group of people? In the nineteenth century, English textile workers found their jobs threatened by new technology which could do their work faster and more efficiently than a human could. These textile workers saw not only their jobs and livelihoods being threatened, but also all their skills and knowledge going to waste. So, many of them formed a secret organization, termed the 'Luddites' after their leader Ned Ludd, and took matters into their own hands by destroying the machinery taking their jobs. Today, artificial intelligence threatens to do precisely the same thing these machines did to textile workers, taking away jobs and making skills redundant. But, where textile machinery can only do one job, artificial intelligence can do many jobs, and so although technological unemployment is not a new concern, it is one of far greater magnitude today than ever before. In a famous 2013 study (later re-stated in 2015), Frey and Osborne predicted that 47 per cent of jobs in America would be at risk of technological replacement in the next two decades. That is an alarming figure, and others, such as Bowles (2014) made even higher predictions, arguing that 54 per cent of all jobs (U.S. and Europe) are under threat.

These concerns regarding technology have made many theorists critical of the understanding of technology as a mere neutral instrument to aid or assist work. Andrew Feenberg is one such scholar, who argues that there are different ways to define technology and each of these ways has substantial outcomes for our views on the ethics of technology in the workplace. In broad terms, this debate centres on the central question of whether we can understand technology as 'neutral'.

Key Thinker 10.2 Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger was a twentieth-century German philosopher whose works had an enormous influence on European philosophy. He had a great interest in how 'work' was best understood, and his biggest contribution to this study was through his thinking regarding modern technology. Heidegger argued that technology should be understood instrumentally and with regard to what he called 'a challenging' (or in German, '*Herausfordern*'). By 'challenging' Heidegger means that through technology humans challenge (or make an 'unreasonable demand') upon nature. Technology, in other words,

exists to exploit resources. Heidegger believes this is a truly *modern* part of work, something which didn't exist in the pre-modern era. He argues that this distinction between pre-modern and modern work can be seen in the difference between traditional farming practices and modern mechanized agriculture. Without modern technology, farmers worked *with* the land, but today modern technology allows humans to challenge it, no longer cultivating but extracting.

- Heidegger, Martin, *The Question Concerning Technology*. Edited by William Lovitt. Harper & Row, 1977.

In other words, most people understand technology as an instrument which improves or allows for some element of work. This improvement may be an improvement for the company which invests in the technology, but it can also have improvements for workers. Technology can eliminate those jobs which are dirty, dangerous, and dull. It can also make work safer, more flexible, and increase job satisfaction. But technology might also take away some of the 'goods of work' that many of us already currently have. For example, one of the goods that many people find in work is community. Many people find their closest friends, and even romantic partners, at work. Work is not merely somewhere you do a job and get paid, it's where you meet people and get to know them intimately. It's important to recognize that companies don't spend money on technology just for fun, they do it for a reason. Typically, though not always, that reason relates to productivity. More than any other area of modern technology, artificial Intelligence is making the biggest promises regarding increased productivity.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The term **artificial intelligence** refers to technology which is capable of learning. Related terms are 'smart machines' and 'machine learning technologies'. These terms are broad and intentionally cover a wide variety of technologies, ranging from driverless vehicles to laboratory data analysis programs. The unifying factor behind these otherwise diverse technologies labelled as 'AI', is that the technology is capable of adapting and improving its function without direct human interference.

AI is introduced in workplaces for increased efficiency in some technical aspect of the work process, or it is introduced explicitly with the aim of replacing human workers and thereby reducing labour costs. Whatever the reasons, a key condition of its success is that it can replicate and improve upon the outcomes achieved by human workers. The first and most pressing ethical challenge of AI is, therefore, technological unemployment or the large-scale redundancy of human workers in the face of AI replacements.

Technological unemployment is an issue that has captivated imaginations for more than a decade. Debates about the impact of AI on employment revolve around its predicted quantitative impact, how much AI is likely to lead to machines replacing humans in work. This issue, however, depends on an understanding of the types of work activities AI is likely to perform, which in turn relies on assumptions about the skills involved in the tasks making up different types of jobs.

In much of the literature in the social sciences, notably in labour economics, management and the sociology of work, discussions centre on the methods to accurately capture macro-economic trends and micro-economic issues (see typically Autor et al., 2003) but not on the concepts themselves. This seems problematic. To understand the impact of AI on work, one should not overlook the empirical complexity and conceptual slipperiness of a concept like 'skill'. Attewell (1990) shows well the range of possible meanings, and how the intuitive appeal of a notion like 'unskilled' work in fact is anything but evident – how evaluation of 'skilfulness' can shift depending on the perspective taken. Industrial sociologists demonstrate through grounded case studies that intuitive assumptions about 'routine work' can be deceptive (Pfeiffer, 2016). Researchers in education question the conceptual validity of the concept, particularly after it expanded with the shift from industrial to post-Fordist frameworks where a whole array of communicative, social and emotional abilities, as well as personal attributes such as work commitment, were added to traditional craft knowledge (Clarke & Winch, 2006).

It is well established that previous waves of automation, propelled by advances in information and communication technology, were biased in favour of workers with higher skills, replacing lower-skill workers and assisting workers with pre-existing complex skill sets (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011; Göransson & Josefson, 2012; Buera et al., 2015). For instance, the rise of computer-aided design revolutionized engineering and architecture by enhancing the productivity of skilled professionals, while automated teller machines reduced the demand for bank tellers and algorithmic trading empowered financial analysts while diminishing the role of floor traders on stock exchanges. Classical work in labour economics on the differentiated impact of innovation has led to sophisticated econometric models to formalize 'skill-biased technological change' (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020), which provide economic descriptions of the premium that technological innovation gives workers with higher skill, in terms of wage increase and the very availability of jobs. The question is whether the established tenets of labour economics remain true for AI.

AI works by processing large amounts of data to identify patterns (Van Rijmenam, 2019). It does this particularly well when there are set parameters to the data and set aims for the patterns. Because of this, AI technology is particularly efficient in task-oriented, routine environments where large amounts of data can be analysed to identify patterns, make decisions based on those patterns, and produce solutions or efficiency dividends, for instance within banking and finance industries (Neufeind et al., 2018; De Vries et al., 2020). For these reasons, there seems to be a case for interpreting the effect of AI along the same lines as the previous wave of automation through computerisation. That is to say, AI will replace large numbers of jobs and routine work which is often

manually conducted and which requires low expertise, hospitality and tourism being typical examples (Huang et al., 2021). There are several factors, however, that complicate this picture significantly.

First, a detailed look at what professionals actually do challenges the assumption that work that appears more complex or requiring higher skills is necessarily equivalent with non-routine work. A significant portion of professional work in fact involves routine activities (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) such that, even if some 'higher' cognitive components are involved (memorization, or complex judgement, or evaluation), 'higher skill' jobs are themselves open to automation by AI. In legal practice, for instance, Susskind's own area of expertise, PerfTech.AI's 'Artificial Law Clerk' promises vastly increased accuracy and productivity and overall reduced costs.

Second, the most obvious aspect of AI-based automation is the capacity of machines to operate autonomously, to 'learn' rather than function solely on pre-set patterns. As a result, labour economists, for example Acemoglu and Restrepo (2018), highlight AI's relationship to 'high skill automation', which compounds the exposure to automation of 'higher skill' jobs. The Susskinds' related prediction of 'the end of professions' is corroborated by a number of reports (for instance Manyika et al., 2017). In the area of medical diagnosis for instance, a number of AI systems (VizAI, PathAI, Buoy Health, Enlitic) are already operating, that complement, and in the future might fully replace, human specialists in symptoms diagnosis and treatment advice.

Third, many entry-level and manual jobs are in fact not routine and, therefore, not easily codifiable. Some basic skill jobs are thus uniquely immune. This rests upon the famous Moravec Paradox which 'refers to the striking fact that high-level reasoning requires very little computation, while low-level sensorimotor skills require enormous computational resources' (Van de Gevel and Noussair, 2013, 14). Some skills which come naturally to human beings require massive amounts of computational power to replicate and consequently, 'it will be hardest for new technology to replace the tasks and jobs that workers in the lower skill level occupations perform, such as security staff, cleaners, gardeners, receptionists, chefs, and the like' (Gries and Naudé, 2018, 4).

Finally, human skills can be complemented rather than copied by automated processes, with machines taking charge of the routine aspects of the job. For instance, in the context of legal work, JP Morgan Chase uses an AI program called COIN which interprets commercial loan agreements and saves an estimated 360,000 work hours per year (Son, 2017). And human work can complement machine work, particularly in cases where low-skill tasks continue to be fulfilled by humans, in the service of automated processes, for instance in warehouse work. Zhang et al. (2021, 4) observed that 'human workers' ability to avoid errors was greatly augmented by AI applications, while the capabilities of AI applications were constantly strengthened based on feedback from human workers'. In cases such as these, human work continues to be performed by humans, not because it is difficult to automate, but because humans are better at it, or cheaper to employ, than machines.

Case Study 10.1 Amazon Mechanical Turk

The Mechanical Turk was an eighteenth-century device which appeared to be an automatic chess playing machine. The machine would play a human opponent, recognize their moves, and respond correctly as a good chess player would. Effectively, it appeared to be the first chess computer! But it wasn't. In reality, under the machine was a human being, who would move a series of levers around and make it *appear* that the machine was doing the work. The end result appeared to be that of technological wonder, but it actually relied upon old-fashioned human labour.

Unlike in the eighteenth century, intelligent machines do exist today and are already used extensively in businesses around the world. However, AI is not perfect and there are many things which only humans can do. There are also many things that humans can still do much more efficiently than AI. These are the 'gaps' of AI, the areas of artificial intelligence which rely upon human work much like the Mechanical Turk, which relied upon the human inside it.

We are not the first ones to see the similarities between algorithmic technology and the Mechanical Turk. Amazon has in fact created a platform called 'Amazon Mechanical Turk', an online, on-demand crowdsourcing workforce recruiting system which companies use to access human labour to complement or complete the tasks of their AI systems. These tasks are called 'microtasks' and they are small, discrete units of work that require human intelligence but can be completed quickly and remotely. Common examples include image or video labelling and content moderation, text transcription and translation verification, data cleaning and verification, the analysis of social media posts, and survey participation and user testing.

The platform allows companies to leverage human intelligence in a scalable way, particularly for tasks where AI falls short. For instance, while AI can detect objects in images, humans are often needed to provide nuanced context or identify subtle differences that machines might miss. Similarly, while AI can generate text translations, human workers can verify and refine these translations to ensure cultural appropriateness and natural language flow.

This hybrid approach, combining AI with human intelligence, mirrors the original Mechanical Turk in an interesting way. Just as the chess-playing automaton concealed human expertise within a mechanical facade, modern AI systems often rely on hidden human labour to function effectively. The key difference is that today's arrangement is transparent – companies openly acknowledge their use of human workers to supplement AI capabilities.

However, this model raises important questions about labour practices and the future of work. Critics argue that microwork platforms can lead to worker exploitation through low wages and lack of benefits. Supporters counter that the platform provides flexible employment opportunities and access to global labour markets. These debates highlight the complex relationship between human and machine intelligence in the modern economy, and the ongoing challenge of ensuring fair compensation for human contributions to AI systems.

The Amazon Mechanical Turk case illustrates how, despite significant advances in AI technology, human intelligence remains essential to many business processes. Rather than completely replacing human workers, AI often creates new forms of human-machine

collaboration, where each contributes their unique strengths to achieve better results than either could alone.

This case study raises some questions for further discussion and reflection:

- 1 Reflect on what you think 'meaningful work' is.
- 2 Do you think platform work could count as meaningful for workers?
- 3 Have you experienced AI integration within workforces? What were the benefits and harms you noticed?
- 4 Reflecting on the case, how does transparency about the role of human labour change your perception of AI-driven services or products you regularly use?

ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT

Algorithmic management is the use of algorithms to manage workers, completing tasks such as hiring staff, allocating jobs, managing workloads and roles, and even firing workers in much the same way that human managers do. Algorithms are particularly good at this, as they are often better than humans at making predictions and allocating known resources to relevant tasks. However, by taking the human out of the worker/manager relationship, we raise new ethical challenges that are not easy to deal with. For instance, when workers do a task, they normally understand what the task is and why it is happening, and if they don't they can simply ask their manager. This is important – although we often take it for granted – as it gives us agency as workers, ensuring we don't simply become (or feel like) mindless cogs in a much bigger wheel outside of our control or understanding. After all, for many people work is only meaningful if there are good reasons to do it. However, when your boss is an algorithm, whose decision-making happens in a 'black box' completely separate from you and your understanding, individual agency quickly evaporates leaving behind an entirely new kind of workplace and work experience.

Case Study 10.2 Algorithmic Bias

Algorithms are essentially computer codes, so they seem like they would be objective, unburdened by any bias which can impact human decision-making. However, many studies have shown that algorithms can and do show prejudice against certain racial groups or gender identities.

Many of these studies emerged following Anupam Chander's important 2017 work 'The racist algorithm?'. However even as early as 2013 there were studies which raised concerns with 'targeted advertising' using individual metrics. Sweeney, for example, showed that Googling first names commonly used by Black people resulted in a 25 per cent increase in advertisements for 'criminal record searches' compared to Googling

(Continued)

'white identifying names'. Similarly, a 2018 article published in *Nature* showed that Google Translate, when translating from Spanish into English, often altered sentences about women into claims about men, giving the translation as 'he wrote' or 'he said' rather than 'she wrote' or 'she said'.

Why would algorithms be discriminatory in this way? To understand the answer to this, we first need to understand how algorithms actually work.

Many algorithms employ customer experience survey responses as decision-making data. For example, Uber uses a 'star' rating system, which asks customers to rank their driver from 1–5 stars based on their experience. If a driver gets a low average star review (typically 4 or below) they may have their account 'deactivated'. A driver may be able to have their account reactivated, for example by completing training courses at their own expense. Many other platforms use similar rating systems which result in some workers being given priority over others based on their rating, ultimately resulting in more or less work and greater or lesser income.

However, this system is at risk of being influenced by customer bias, either conscious or unconscious, and arguably, this creates a hidden form of *employment discrimination*.

This case study raises some questions for further discussion and reflection:

- 1 Reflecting on your own digital interactions, can you think of other contexts where algorithmic bias might impact your or others' lives without being immediately obvious?
- 2 How might awareness of algorithmic bias influence your trust in AI-based recommendations or decisions in everyday life?
- 3 From an ethical standpoint, who bears responsibility when an algorithm discriminates against certain groups – the creators of the algorithm, the businesses using it, or both?

The term algorithmic management was coined by Lee et al. in a 2015 paper 'Working with machines: The impact of algorithmic and data-driven management on human workers'. The paper focuses its attention on the ridesharing companies Uber and Lyft and it developed the term 'algorithmic management' in order to explore how 'human jobs are assigned, optimized, and evaluated through algorithms and tracked data'. After identifying the use and extent of algorithmic management, the authors raised the importance of dealing with 'ethical questions about the trend in new technology that sacrifices individual control for the sake of overall system efficiency'. Since then, algorithmic management has increasingly become implemented in workplaces around the world and ethical questions such as these have become all the more pressing.

Management by AI is, by definition, about removing the human element from the decision-making process. A number of human relations management experts view this with scepticism (Duggan et al., 2020). The machinic objectivity of AI-based management processes has the effect of creating a screen between worker and organization, and

between worker and management. The company appears to be absolved of its responsibilities, removing existing avenues through which workers understand these responsibilities and demand that they are met.

Human beings are not particularly good at reasoning about the future, at least we are not as good as computers can be. Part of the reason computers are better than we are in making predictions is that they are far better at pattern recognition. In order to work effectively at recognizing these patterns, algorithms require significant amounts of worker data, and this makes worker monitoring necessary. Technology such as the software program 'Status today' monitors staff behaviour at all times of the working day, collecting data on everything from the staff members' communications to their minute-by-minute file alterations. This provides companies with an unprecedented view of their staff, and raises significant concerns about the ethics of worker surveillance.

PRIVACY/SURVEILLANCE

Modern technology places a unique demand on information, on the need for data, because so much modern technology runs on data. In some cases, this data is about workers. Algorithmic management systems, for example, demand data about workers in order to function, in order to be able to effectively allocate tasks, monitor performance, and improve efficiency. This need for worker data, however, must be balanced with a concern for worker privacy.

Key Concept 10.1 Worker Privacy

Worker privacy is often protected legally. However, it is important to ask what is *actually* being protected by these laws. Often it is worker data that is being protected from being shared outside an organization. For example, in Australia worker privacy demands that personal information about workers, such as biographical information, not be made publicly available. But is the privacy of your biographical information *all* that matters to you as a worker? What else matters to you?

- www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/workplace-privacy
- www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/the-privacy-act/rights-and-responsibilities

Breaches of privacy touch on a fundamental human right, but they also represent a strong leverage tool for managers, with which they can exert control and undermine autonomy (Shapiro, 2018). Surveillance can lead to increased pressure on workers to perform, taking away moments of respite, as is well documented in warehouse (De Lombaert et al., 2024) and platform work (Newlands, 2021). This can have severe and

long-term impact on well-being. Algorithmic control of the work process takes away the dimensions of personal intervention, choice and even of creativity .

Key Thinker 10.3 Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault was a twentieth-century French philosopher and historian whose work remains influential in many disciplines, notably management and organizational studies. Foucault's interest in 'power' offers us useful tools for thinking not only about the way power is exercised over workers but also the way workers resist that power. More importantly to our present topic, Foucault also wrote about the relation between work, production, and surveillance. He discusses surveillance in terms of a 'disciplinary gaze', by which he means the explicit observation of workers which exists specifically to increase production. This observation is not only on the workers' outputs, but on themselves as workers, their skills, their behaviour, their attitude and their enthusiasm or lack thereof. Workers know they are being observed, and they internalize this fact which forces them to work harder and longer. Foucault believes that the connection between production and surveillance is a primarily modern phenomenon. He writes in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), 'As the machinery of production became larger and more complex, as the number of workers and the division of labour increased, supervision became ever more necessary and more difficult. It became a special function, which had nevertheless to form an integral part of the production process, to run parallel to it throughout its entire length.' Put simply, for modern businesses, surveillance has become an indispensable part of the machinery of production. If this is true, and it's true that surveillance can cause harm to workers, then Foucault presents us with a vital – but difficult – ethical challenge!

The unique need and ability of modern technology to extract data has consequences for traditional work environments, but it also makes possible entirely new business models. The most common of these today is platform work.

PLATFORM WORK

Platform work is employment organized on an online matching service – known as a 'platform' – which allows for the connection of labour with capital. An algorithm acts as a link to these companies with workers, who are paid for their labour for the individual service. Well-known companies organized by platform work include ridesharing services such as Uber and delivery services such as Deliveroo.

Platform work appears to offer a host of benefits, including:

- Greater flexibility for both businesses and workers
- Higher worker income

- Greater efficiency
- Increased worker autonomy
- Fewer barriers to employment
- Low overhead costs

However, each of these, particularly from the perspective of the worker, must be carefully examined.

Workers do of course have greater flexibility when they can choose their own hours, and this flexibility can grant a valuable feeling of freedom. However, like any business model, the supply of work is limited by the demand. For food delivery platforms, the primary work hours are dictated by the amount of food orders received, which are not uniformly spread over time. Most people order food for dinner, less so breakfast or lunch, and different days of the week have higher and lower demand.

In terms of efficiency, the data suggests that companies do receive an employment dividend from using platform workers. However, some have concerns that these efficiencies are gained by outsourcing existing inefficiencies to workers. For example, let's consider Uber, the ridesharing platform. If Uber hired drivers as traditional workers, being paid an hourly rate, then their downtime (the time that they aren't driving a passenger) would be an inefficiency that would increase their costs. By paying drivers only for the driving time they actually receive payment for, they can be seen to outsource that downtime to the driver, who now simply has that time as unpaid time during their day. However, in some cases it might be worth it for drivers, as they might end up being paid more than they would in traditional employment.

In terms of income, many workers do find that they make more money per month as platform workers than they would make in a traditional workplace. However, while traditional workplaces are legally obligated to limit the number of hours someone works per day, platform workers are not covered by similar laws. Platform workers are often considered 'self-employed' which means the company paying for their services does not have the same obligations to them as they would to one of their own employees. So, although it is true that platform workers often find themselves making more money, they also often find themselves working substantially more hours. They also do not get paid sick or holiday leave, they do not get paid training or support, nor insurance or benefits. So, although the final number on their bank balance may be higher, it does not always tell the whole story.

WORKING FROM HOME

Even for those in 'traditional employment', modern technology often drastically changes the experiences of work. One of the most obvious ways this is happening is through technologies' ability to weaken the historically strict physical boundary of the 'workplace'.

Ethics of Remote Work Transition

Let's imagine that you work in an office you love. You have workmates who have become your close friends and who help you become a better, more skilled worker. You go into work enthusiastically every day, you work hard, and you look forward to lunch and getting a chance to hang out with your pals. These pals of yours are also experts in your field, who take your job very seriously and who help you improve your understanding and assist in solving problems.

So far so great. But you have just found out that your company wants to move to a fully *home office-based* organization.

On one hand, you don't have to commute anymore, you don't have to dress up (as much anyway), and you have much more flexibility and control over your work-life balance. And, if you have issues with work, you can always email or video conference with your colleagues. On the other hand, you lose your close relationship with your friends, and collaborations and knowledge sharing will become more challenging.

Most people would think something unfortunate might have happened here. But, do you think something *unethical* has happened? Why?

Working from home, at least in terms of the large-scale way it is conducted today, is a recent phenomenon largely driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, people around the world needed to work from home. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, around 40 per cent of working Australians regularly worked from home in August of 2021, some sectors were even higher than this, with 64 per cent of 'managers and professionals' regularly working from home. These numbers are far higher than pre-pandemic levels, but even before the pandemic working from home was becoming increasingly common, steadily increasing by about 1 per cent nationwide per year. So although COVID expanded this trend, for example by forcing people who did not previously have home office arrangements to quickly develop them, this trend was already progressing towards a more 'location flexible' working norm. There are reasons for this trend, but the leading one is new technology.

Working from home before the internet, before emails and video conferencing, was limited to a very small sector of the workforce. As technology has improved, that sector has enlarged considerably. This technological shift has created both opportunities and challenges for workers. On one hand, remote work technology has given people unprecedented flexibility in choosing where to live, freeing many from the need to reside near urban business centres and potentially allowing them to live in more affordable areas or closer to family. Some workers have even become 'digital nomads', working while travelling or living in different countries.

However, the same technologies that enable remote work have also blurred the traditional boundaries between work and personal life. The constant connectivity provided

by smartphones and laptops can make it difficult to ‘switch off’ from work. Many remote workers report checking emails outside of traditional work hours or feeling pressure to remain available well into the evening. Studies have shown that remote workers often work longer hours than their office-based counterparts, partly because the time saved on commuting is frequently absorbed by additional work rather than leisure activities.

This erosion of work–life boundaries has sparked important discussions about digital well-being and the need for new organizational policies that protect workers’ right to disconnect. Some countries, like France, have even implemented ‘right to disconnect’ laws that limit after-hours work communications. As remote work continues to evolve, finding ways to harness its benefits while mitigating these challenges will be crucial for both workers and organizations.

CONCLUSION

The rapid advancement of workplace technology presents us with both unprecedented opportunities and complex ethical challenges. As we’ve explored throughout this chapter, technologies like AI, algorithmic management systems, and remote work platforms have fundamentally transformed how we work, where we work, and even what it means to work in the modern era. These technologies have delivered remarkable improvements in productivity, efficiency, and flexibility – the very qualities that businesses have historically sought to enhance through technological innovation. Remote work technologies have freed many workers from geographical constraints, while AI and automation have eliminated many dangerous and repetitive tasks.

However, these benefits come with significant ethical considerations that we cannot afford to ignore. The rise of algorithmic management has raised crucial questions about worker agency and autonomy, as employees increasingly find themselves managed by opaque systems they neither fully understand nor can meaningfully interact with. Worker surveillance, while potentially beneficial for productivity, threatens privacy and can create psychologically harmful work environments. Meanwhile, the emergence of platform work, while offering flexibility and opportunities, has begun to reshape traditional employment relationships in ways that may undermine worker protections and benefits that took decades to establish.

Perhaps most pressingly, AI’s potential to automate not just routine tasks but also highly skilled professional work challenges our traditional understanding of technological unemployment. Unlike previous waves of automation that primarily affected manual and routine jobs, AI’s impact cuts across skill levels and industry sectors, forcing us to reconsider how we prepare for and adapt to technological change in the workplace.

As we look to the future, it becomes clear that the key challenge is not to resist technological change – such resistance would be both futile and counterproductive – but rather to shape how these technologies are implemented and regulated in ways that

preserve human dignity, agency, and well-being. This requires careful consideration of how we can harness the productivity and efficiency benefits of new technologies while protecting workers' rights, privacy, and job security. It also demands that we think critically about how to ensure that the benefits of technological advancement are distributed equitably across society, rather than concentrating advantages among a select few while leaving others behind.

The ethical challenges posed by workplace technology will likely only grow more complex as innovation continues to accelerate. Success in navigating these challenges will require ongoing dialogue between workers, employers, technologists, and policy-makers to develop frameworks that balance technological progress with human needs and values. As we continue to reshape our workplaces through technology, we must remember that the ultimate goal should be to enhance, rather than diminish, the human experience of work.

Further Reading

If you are interested in reading further on the key ideas of this chapter, perhaps check out the following references:

- Deranty, J. P., & Corbin, T. (2024). Artificial intelligence and work: A critical review of recent research from the social sciences. *AI & Society*, 39(2), 675–691.
- Jarota, M. (2023). Artificial intelligence in the work process. A reflection on the proposed European Union regulations on artificial intelligence from an occupational health and safety perspective. *Computer Law & Security Review*, 49: 105825.
- Frey, C. B., & Osborne, M. (2015). *Technology at work: The future of innovation and employment*. Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford, and Citi GPS.
- Autor, D. H. (2015). Why are there still so many jobs? The history and future of workplace automation. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29(3), 3–30.
- Bessen, J. (2019). Automation and jobs: When technology boosts employment. *Economic Policy*, 34(100), 589–626.

End of Chapter Questions

- 1 The chapter discusses different ways of understanding technology in the workplace. Compare and contrast the 'instrumental' view of technology with Heidegger's concept of technology as 'challenging'. How might these different understandings affect our approach to implementing new workplace technologies?
- 2 Using examples from the chapter, explain how artificial intelligence differs from previous waves of workplace automation. Why might this difference be significant for the future of professional and skilled labour?

- 3 Consider the case study of Amazon Mechanical Turk. What does this example reveal about the relationship between human labour and artificial intelligence? How might this challenge popular narratives about AI completely replacing human workers?
- 4 The chapter introduces Foucault's concept of the 'disciplinary gaze' in relation to workplace surveillance. How does this theoretical framework help us understand the ethical implications of modern workplace monitoring technologies?
- 5 Analyse the ethical tensions between algorithmic management's promise of increased efficiency and its impact on worker agency. What specific challenges arise when human managers are replaced by algorithmic systems?
- 6 The chapter presents several benefits and drawbacks of platform work. Critically evaluate these competing claims and discuss whether platform work represents a net positive or negative development for workers in the modern economy.
- 7 Drawing on the chapter's discussion of worker privacy, examine the ethical balance between an organization's need for data to improve efficiency and workers' right to privacy. How might this balance be achieved in practice?
- 8 Consider the Luddites example from the chapter. How do historical responses to technological unemployment compare to contemporary concerns about AI automation? What lessons might we learn from this historical parallel?
- 9 Evaluate the chapter's discussion of remote work technologies. How do these technologies challenge traditional understandings of the workplace, and what ethical implications arise from the blurring of work-life boundaries?