CASE 05

Algorithmic Management

Should AI Control Gig Workers' Pay and Work Opportunities?

STUDENT HANDOUT — ENGLISH

REAL-WORLD CONTEXT

Digital labour platforms increasingly use algorithms to allocate work, evaluate performance, set incentives and manage workers at scale. These systems can improve efficiency and make real-time decisions, but they can also exercise substantial control over workers who may not know how decisions are made or how to challenge them. This raises questions about fairness, transparency, autonomy, responsibility and the distribution of risks between platforms and workers.

The Case

A Hong Kong food-delivery platform uses an AI-based management system to organise thousands of delivery workers. Workers are classified as independent contractors and can choose when to log in.

Once logged in, however, the system continuously monitors factors such as delivery speed, order acceptance rate, customer ratings, rejected orders, GPS location, peak-hour availability and cancellations. The algorithm uses these data to determine which workers receive the most desirable orders, who receives bonuses, how workers are ranked, and whether a worker may be temporarily suspended from the platform.

The company argues that the system improves efficiency, rewards reliable workers and allows the platform to respond quickly to changing demand. Because all workers are evaluated by the same algorithm, the company also claims the process is fair and objective.

Some workers disagree. They say they do not know how the algorithm weighs different factors, cannot easily correct inaccurate data, and may be penalised for circumstances outside their control, such as restaurant delays, bad weather or traffic. A low ranking can reduce future work opportunities and income. Although workers are called independent contractors, many depend heavily on the platform for their livelihood and have little ability to negotiate how the system operates.

CORE QUESTION

Should an AI system be allowed to determine gig workers' access to orders, rewards and possible suspension without meaningful explanation and human review? Defend your judgment using evidence from the case and seriously consider a strong position different from your own.

Choose a Learning / Assessment Task

- Class discussion: Which part of the platform's system is most ethically significant? What additional fact might change your judgment?
- Short reflection (250–350 words): Decide whether this form of algorithmic management is acceptable. Give reasons, address one strong counterargument and state any safeguards you would require.
- Structured argument (500–700 words): Present the strongest case for and against AI-based management of gig workers, then defend your own judgment.
- Small-group debate: One group defends the platform's system; another argues that worker protections should limit algorithmic control. Write an individual final judgment afterward.
- Policy task: Propose a fair algorithmic-management policy covering transparency, data accuracy, appeals, human review, performance metrics and sanctions.

Before You Decide

Ask yourself: Is using the same algorithm for everyone necessarily fair? How much control can a platform exercise before "flexible work" becomes managed work? Who should bear the risks when an algorithm makes a harmful or inaccurate decision? What values from your worldview shape your answer?

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CASE 05

演算法管理

AI 應否控制零工工作者的收入與工作機會？

學生講義 — 繁體中文

現實背景

數碼勞工平台愈來愈多利用演算法分配工作、評估表現、設定獎勵及大規模管理工作者。這些系統可以提高效率，亦能即時作出決定；但它們同時可能對工作者產生相當大的控制，而工作者未必知道決定如何作出，也未必容易提出質疑。這帶來公平、透明、自主、責任，以及平台與工作者之間如何分擔風險等倫理問題。

個案

香港一家外賣速遞平台使用 AI 管理系統，安排數以千計的送遞員工作。送遞員被界定為獨立承包者，可以自行決定何時登入平台工作。

然而，一旦登入，系統便會持續監察多項資料，包括送餐速度、接單率、顧客評分、拒單次數、GPS 位置、繁忙時段是否上線，以及取消訂單的情況。演算法利用這些資料決定哪些送遞員可獲得較理想的訂單、誰可得到獎金、工作者的排名，以及某人是否可能被暫停使用平台。

公司認為，這套系統能提高效率、獎勵可靠的工作者，並讓平台快速回應需求變化。由於所有工作者都由同一套演算法評估，公司亦聲稱制度公平而客觀。

部分工作者卻不同意。他們指出，自己不知道演算法如何衡量各項因素，也不容易更正錯誤資料；有時更會因餐廳延誤、惡劣天氣或交通情況等非自己能控制的因素而被扣分。排名偏低可能直接減少日後獲得訂單的機會和收入。雖然工作者被稱為獨立承包者，但不少人高度依賴平台維持生計，也幾乎沒有能力與平台商議系統如何運作。

核心問題

在沒有充分解釋和有意義的人工作覆核下，AI 系統是否應獲准決定零工工作者取得訂單、獎勵及被暫停工作的機會？請運用個案資料為你的判斷提出理據，並認真回應一個與你立場不同的有力論點。

選擇一項學習／評核任務

- 課堂討論：平台制度中哪一部分最具倫理重要性？加入甚麼新資料可能令你改變判斷？
- 短文反思（250–350 字）：判斷這種演算法管理是否可接受，提出理由、回應一個有力反方論點，並說明你要求的保障。
- 結構化論證（500–700 字）：分別提出支持及反對 AI 管理零工工作者的最有力理據，然後為自己的判斷辯護。
- 小組辯論：一組為平台制度辯護，另一組主張工作者保障應限制演算法控制。辯論後各自寫出最終判斷。
- 政策任務：為平台設計一套公平的演算法管理政策，涵蓋透明度、資料準確性、上訴、人工作覆核、表現指標及懲罰。

作出判斷前

想一想：所有人使用同一套演算法，是否就一定公平？平台對工作者有多大控制時，「彈性工作」會變成實質上的管理工作？當演算法作出有害或錯誤決定時，風險應由誰承擔？你的世界觀中哪些核心價值正在塑造你的答案？

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CASE 05

Algorithmic Management

FACILITATOR GUIDE — ENGLISH

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

AI is increasingly used not only to assist workers but to manage them. In platform work, algorithms can shape access to income, rankings, rewards and sanctions while remaining difficult to understand or challenge. The case helps students examine whether efficiency and flexibility justify opaque control, whether formal contractor status matches practical dependence, and what fairness requires when automated systems govern livelihood opportunities.

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish operational efficiency from ethical legitimacy.
- Identify the precise decision, stakeholders and ethically significant case facts.
- Reason about fairness, power, transparency, autonomy, responsibility and risk distribution.
- Examine whether formal freedom is the same as meaningful freedom in a platform relationship.
- Present a serious counterargument and defend a final or conditional judgment.

Recurring Ethical Reasoning Capabilities

Define the decision → Identify stakeholders → Recognize competing values → Use case evidence → Examine outcomes → Consider rights / duties / fairness → Surface worldview assumptions → Present the strongest counterargument → Consider alternatives → Defend a reasoned judgment

Suggested 50–60 Minute Flow

Time	Activity	Facilitator Move
0–5 min	First judgment	Students choose: acceptable, unacceptable, or acceptable with conditions. Require one reason.
5–15 min	Case mapping	Pairs identify the decision, stakeholders and three facts that materially affect fairness.
15–27 min	Power test	Ask who controls data, rules, sanctions and access to work, and whether workers can realistically negotiate.
27–38 min	Competing positions	Groups build the strongest argument for the platform and the strongest argument for worker protections.
38–47 min	Worldview exploration	Discuss work, dignity, freedom, justice, responsibility and the common good.
47–56 min	Counterargument + policy repair	Students answer the best objection to their view and propose safeguards or alternatives.
56–60 min	Final judgment	Students revise or reaffirm their position and explain why.

Key Tensions / Competing Values

- Efficiency vs fairness and due process
- Flexibility vs dependence and control
- Same algorithm vs unequal impact
- Performance measurement vs context beyond the worker's control
- Automation vs explanation, review and appeal
- Platform innovation vs responsibility for worker livelihood
- Contractor status vs practical power imbalance

Worldview Exploration Prompts

- What gives work moral value: income, productivity, service, dignity, autonomy, contribution to community, or something else?
- When does legitimate management become unjust control?
- Is freedom meaningful if a worker technically can leave but depends economically on the platform?
- What responsibilities do powerful institutions have toward people whose livelihoods depend on their decisions?

GOSPEL-INFORMED PERSPECTIVE — FOR FACILITATOR USE

A Gospel-informed reading begins with workers as persons bearing God-given dignity rather than as performance scores. Work can be understood as vocation and service; justice requires honest treatment and protection against arbitrary power. Truth supports explainable rules and accurate data, while love of neighbour resists shifting avoidable risks onto vulnerable workers. Stewardship welcomes technology that serves people, and human fallibility

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cautions against treating managers or algorithms as morally neutral. Sabbath and creaturely limits challenge systems that reward constant availability or unsafe speed. Explore these ideas alongside other worldviews without requiring a Christian conclusion.

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CASE 05

Algorithmic Management

FACILITATOR GUIDE — REASONING & ASSESSMENT

Weak vs Strong Reasoning

Weak / Incomplete	Stronger Reasoning
Weak: "The system is fair because every worker is judged by the same algorithm."	Stronger: "Using the same algorithm may create consistency, but fairness also depends on whether the criteria are relevant, whether workers face unequal circumstances, and whether errors or sanctions can be challenged."
Weak: "Workers are independent contractors, so the company owes them very little."	Stronger: "Legal or contractual status matters, but ethical responsibility should also consider actual dependence, power asymmetry and how strongly the platform controls access to work and income."
Weak: "AI makes the platform more efficient, so it should be used."	Stronger: "Efficiency is a legitimate benefit, but it does not by itself justify opaque rankings, unreviewable penalties or shifting operational risks onto workers."
Weak: "The algorithm should be banned because machines should not manage people."	Stronger: "The ethical problem is not automation itself. AI may assist management if criteria are job-relevant, transparent enough to contest, context-sensitive, and serious sanctions receive human review."

Counterargument Requirement

A strong response must present the best argument against the student's own position before defending, qualifying or revising the final judgment. Reward fair representation of the opposing view. Assess the quality of reasoning, not whether the student reaches a predetermined conclusion.

Alternative Assessment Uses

- TESOL / oral communication: structured discussion using claim → reason → evidence → counterargument → response.
- Composition: 500–700 word argumentative essay or policy recommendation.
- Business / Management: redesign the platform's algorithmic-management policy and justify each safeguard.
- Formative assessment: compare an initial judgment with a revised judgment after discussion.
- Summative assessment: evaluate whether a proposed algorithmic-management system is ethically acceptable under stated conditions.

Compact 4-Level Ethical Reasoning Rubric

Level	Descriptor
4 — Strong	Defines the precise decision; uses relevant case evidence; weighs competing values and stakeholders; makes worldview/value assumptions explicit; presents a serious counterargument; considers alternatives or safeguards; defends a coherent final or conditional judgment.
3 — Competent	Identifies the main ethical issue and relevant evidence; considers more than one perspective; gives reasons for a judgment; engages a counterargument, though weighing or worldview analysis may be limited.
2 — Developing	States a position with some reasons but relies on assertion or one-sided analysis; limited use of case facts; weak counterargument; little explanation of value priorities.
1 — Beginning	Mostly gives opinion or preference; oversimplifies the decision; minimal use of case evidence; ignores competing perspectives; conclusion is unsupported.

Very Short Source / Context Note

This teaching case is adapted from an ERS Paper 1-B mock question on Business and Economic Ethics. It uses AI-based platform management to examine fairness, power, transparency, worker autonomy, accountability and the distribution of economic risk. The scenario is designed for ethical reasoning practice rather than legal or employment advice.

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