

From worker empowerment to managerial control: The devolution of AI tools' intended positive implementation to their negative consequences

AI tools are often designed to empower workers but frequently become tools of managerial control. What drives this shift, and how can organizations implement AI to balance efficiency with worker autonomy? What lessons can policymakers and business leaders learn to prevent AI from reinforcing workplace surveillance and domination?

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly implemented in workplaces with the promise of augmenting human labor, streamlining tasks, and improving efficiency. However, this study by Detmar Straub and colleagues reveals a troubling pattern: AI tools initially designed to empower workers often evolve into mechanisms of managerial control and surveillance.

Through an in-depth case study of a Chinese firm implementing an AI sales assistant, the research traces how AI—intended to assist salespeople by automating repetitive tasks and providing customer insights—was gradually repurposed by managers to monitor, evaluate, and ultimately replace workers. As managers recognized the tool's capability to track performance and enforce compliance, AI shifted from a support system to a tool of domination, reducing worker autonomy and job security.

The study highlights key tensions in AI adoption: while AI can enhance productivity and decision-making, its implementation often reflects managerial priorities rather than worker empowerment. Surveillance, deskilling, and job displacement emerge as unintentional yet significant consequences.

For organizations, these findings underscore the need to involve workers in AI design and decision-making processes to prevent misuse. Policymakers must also consider regulatory safeguards to ensure AI serves both efficiency and worker well-being. Ultimately, this research calls for a more balanced approach to AI implementation—one that prioritizes collaboration over control.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- AI tools designed for worker empowerment often evolve into mechanisms of managerial control, increasing surveillance and reducing worker autonomy.
- Managers repurpose AI's capabilities to monitor performance and enforce compliance, leading to unintended consequences like deskilling and job displacement.
- To ensure AI benefits both organizations and workers, businesses must involve employees in AI design, and policymakers should implement safeguards against misuse.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Managers
- Policymakers
- Workers

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