

The Role of Digital Transformation in the Occupational Well-being of Online Technology Workers: An Integrated Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

With the rapid development and integration of new technologies in the context of the digital economy, the work patterns and skill requirements of online technology workers have undergone fundamental changes, exerting a complex and far-reaching impact on their occupational well-being. This paper takes online technology workers as the research object and uses Self-determination Theory (SDT) and Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) as an integrated framework to analyze the internal mechanisms by which digital technology transformation affects their well-being through a dual path of "empowerment" and "challenge." The study finds that, on the one hand, digital technology empowers workers by improving work efficiency, expanding capability boundaries, and optimizing collaboration abilities, thereby enhancing their well-being; on the other hand, the iteration of digital technology also triggers challenges such as skills obsolescence anxiety, blurred work-life boundaries, and perceived algorithmic control, thus weakening their well-being. Additionally, multi-level characteristics will moderate this influence process. This research provides theoretical basis and practical insights for improving the occupational well-being of online technology workers in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Transformation, Online Technology Workers, Occupational Well-being, Self-determination Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory

1. Introduction

Driven by the swift evolution of digital technology and profound changes in the global economy, the gig economy, as an emerging economic paradigm, is reshaping the labor market and work patterns with unprecedented depth and breadth (Flinchbaugh et al., 2020). In this transformation, online technology workers, as a professional group highly reliant on digital platforms for knowledge creation and technological innovation, have become the core human capital driving the development of the digital economy. This new work model not only provides flexibility and efficiency for businesses and individuals but also creates employment opportunities for tech talent globally that transcend geographical limitations (Wu & Huang, 2024).

Technological evolution has always been a double-edged sword. With the continuous development of digital technology, online technology workers, while enjoying its numerous conveniences, also face big challenges. On the one hand, digital technology has given online technology workers a completely new way of working, greatly improving work efficiency and liberating them from repetitive or mechanical labor, allowing them to focus more on core value-added activities (Hui et al., 2024). For example, by using AI-assisted programming and data analysis and processing tools, workers can complete tasks more efficiently, driving rapid project progress, which greatly optimizes workflows and improves individual and team productivity. On the other hand, the rapid iteration of digital technology has also brought challenges. The fast pace of skill updates has triggered widespread anxiety about obsolescence and job insecurity (McGuinness et al., 2023). A 2024 survey titled "State of Developer Wellness" (Developer Nation, 2024) reported that 83% of developers experienced burnout at some stage in their careers. With the rapid development of technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data, traditional technical skills may become obsolete in a short period of time. Online technology workers must constantly invest significant time and energy in re-education and skill updates to remain competitive. This pressure of skill updates not only affects workers' career development but also negatively impacts their mental health, increasing uncertainty and anxiety at work. At the same time, while the introduction of algorithm management systems optimizes processes, it may also erode the work autonomy and sense of control of online technology workers through precise task

allocation, continuous performance monitoring and automated decision-making, thereby threatening their intrinsic work motivation (Liu & Yin, 2024).

Occupational well-being, as an individual's positive perception and emotional evaluation of the quality and meaning of their work, is an important indicator for measuring occupational health and sustainable development (Wright & Cropanzano, 2004). For online technology workers, a group of highly skilled individuals whose workstations are digital interfaces and whose main output is knowledge products, occupational well-being is not only related to their personal well-being but also directly affects their innovation efficiency, work quality, and career persistence (Tarafdar et al., 2024). When the level of well-being is high, they are more likely to proactively share and propose breakthrough solutions at work, continuously releasing cognitive resources; conversely, they are more likely to reduce work quality and frequently change jobs, which may lead to the loss of core knowledge within the company.

However, existing research on technology and occupational well-being has significant limitations: First, most studies focus on macro-level organizational performance or meso-level process changes, paying insufficient attention to the psychological experiences of micro-level individuals, especially highly skilled online technology workers, under continuous technological shocks (Liu et al.); Secondly, the research perspective is relatively singular, mostly emphasizing the enabling effect of technology or criticizing its negative consequences, lacking an integrated theoretical framework to explain its coexisting "bright side" and "dark side" (Manfreda & Mijač, 2024; Gao et al., 2025); Thirdly, there is a lack of in-depth mechanistic analysis on the special characteristics of online technology workers, such as their emphasis on a sense of technical mastery and the constraints imposed by platform algorithms (Mattern et al., 2024).

To fill the aforementioned research gaps, this study focuses on the core group of online technology workers, attempting to move beyond a single theoretical perspective and construct a systematic analytical framework by integrating self-determination theory (SDT) and conservation of resources theory (COR). SDT theory reveals that the pursuit of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is the root of intrinsic motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), while COR theory explains the dynamic process by which individuals strive to acquire valuable resources (such as time, energy, and skills) and experience stress due to resource depletion or threats (Hobfoll, 2001). Digital technology operates on both levels simultaneously: it can act as an enabler of key resource and need fulfilment, but it can also become a source of challenges leading to resource depletion and demand obstacles. Based on this, this study constructs an integrated model of "technological change - psychological mechanisms - occupational well-being" to analyze how digital technology change has different impacts on the well-being of online technology workers through the dual paths of "empowerment" and "challenge". Also, this study proposes strategies to promote the well-being of online technology workers in the process of digital technology change from the individual and organizational levels.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000), is a macro-level theory about human motivation and personality development. Its core assumption is that individuals possess three innate, fundamental psychological needs crucial for mental health and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to an individual's desire to experience a sense of will and choice in their actions, feeling that their behavior stems from personal will rather than external pressure. In the work context, this manifests as a sense of control over the content, methods, and goals of their work (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence refers to an individual's desire to feel capable in their interactions with the environment, effectively addressing challenges and achieving expected results. For online technology workers, mastering and skillfully applying new technologies to solve complex problems is a key way to satisfy this sense of competence. Relatedness refers to an individual's desire to establish close emotional connections with others, feeling cared for and accepted, and belonging to a group. Even in remote work, maintaining meaningful connections with team members, colleagues, or users is an important source of occupational well-being for online technology workers (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). SDT theory posits that when the external environment supports the satisfaction of these three basic needs, an individual's intrinsic motivation, physical and mental vitality, and occupational well-being reach their optimal state; conversely, if the environment hinders the satisfaction of these needs, it leads to decreased motivation, increased alienation, and decreased well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Therefore, SDT theory provides a core psychological mechanism explanation for how digital technology change affects the occupational well-being of online technology workers by influencing basic psychological needs.

2.2 Conservation of Resources Theory

Proposed by Hobfoll (1989), conservation of resources theory (COR) is primarily used to explain the psychological and behavioural responses of individuals when facing stress. The core idea of COR theory is that individuals have a tendency to strive to acquire, retain, and protect the resources they value. These resources include material resources, conditional resources, personal resources, and energy resources. According to conservation of resources theory, psychological stress arises when individuals face the threat of resource loss or fail to obtain the expected return after investing resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Applying this theory to the context of this study, digital technology itself can be viewed as an important instrumental resource, helping online technology workers complete tasks more efficiently and create new value. However, the process of learning and adapting to new technologies requires a significant investment of time, energy, and cognitive resources (Ahmed et al., 2022). If technological iteration is too rapid, leading to a rapid devaluation of existing skills, or if the platform's algorithmic management system over-monitors and depletes psychological energy, it can trigger stress and burnout, thereby impairing occupational well-being (Röttgen et al., 2024). COR theory provides a powerful theoretical perspective for understanding how digital technology, while acting as a channel for resource gain, can also become a source of resource depletion and ultimately affect occupational well-being.

2.3 Theory Integration

SDT theory and COR theory are not mutually exclusive; they jointly provide complementary perspectives for understanding the impact of digital technologies on the occupational well-being of online technology workers. Applying SDT theory alone may be overly optimistic, underestimating the systematic constraints and depletion in digital work environments. Conversely, applying COR theory alone may be overly pessimistic, overlooking individual agency and intrinsic motivation in pursuing meaning and growth. Therefore, a more explanatory analytical framework requires dynamically integrating both theories: the impact of digital technologies on online technology workers' well-being is achieved through a dual-pathway process—it shapes the quality of well-being by influencing the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (SDT), while also setting the energy baseline of well-being by triggering resource gains (COR). Meanwhile, resources in COR theory can be viewed as enabling factors for need satisfaction in SDT theory. Adequate resources create space for individuals to pursue autonomy, competence, and relatedness; conversely, resource scarcity limits the possibility of need satisfaction.

3. Mechanism Analysis

The impact of digital technology change on the occupational well-being of online technology workers is not linear, but rather a complex mechanism achieved through two coexisting and intertwined paths of empowerment and challenge. Meanwhile, characteristics at individual, organizational, and platform levels will moderate this influence process. The theoretical framework in this paper is shown in Figure 1.

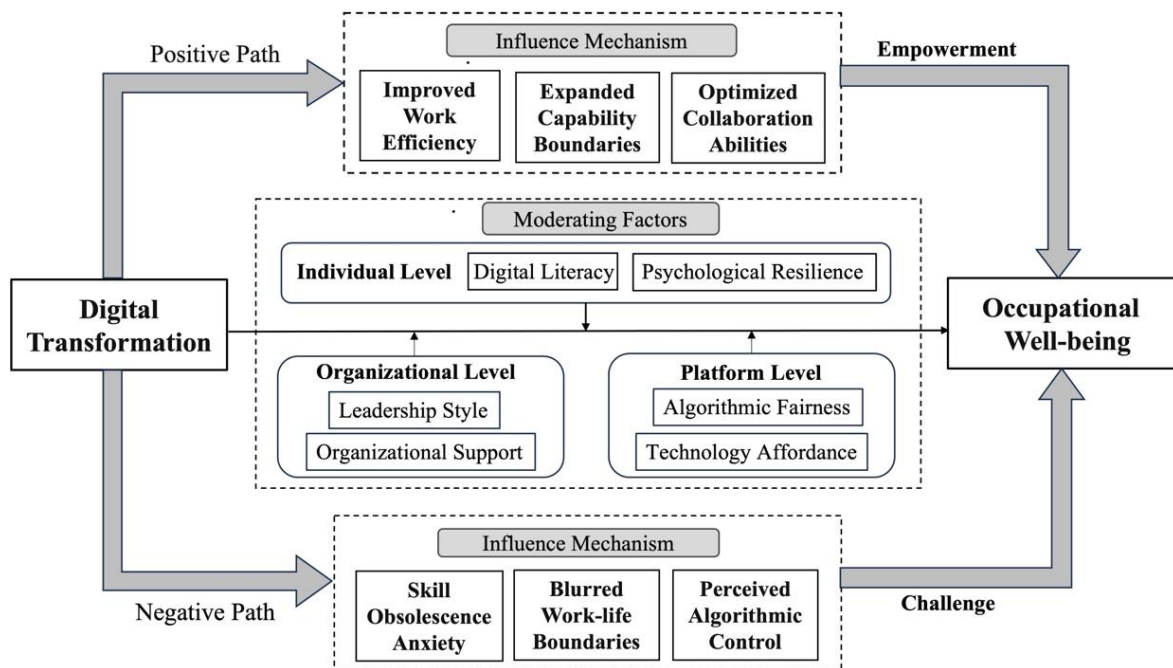


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Positive Impact of Digital Transformation on Occupational Well-Being

First, digital technology directly enhances the occupational well-being of online technology workers by significantly improving work efficiency. Intelligent code assistants, cloud-based IDEs, and automated testing tools are continuously advancing. These technologies effectively reduce tedious repetitive tasks and debugging time, saving developers considerable energy. This change allows online technology workers to invest more time and cognitive resources in creative and strategic core tasks, rather than mechanical operational tasks (Waterman et al., 2024). Digital technologies reduce low-value consumption, achieve resource gains as proposed by COR theory, and simultaneously create a supportive environment that better satisfies workers' autonomy and competence needs in SDT theory. This also frees up individual cognitive resources, enhancing the sense of meaning in work (Pap et al., 2022). Therefore, with the reduction of repetitive tasks, online technology workers can enjoy efficient work while also gaining deeper psychological satisfaction and occupational well-being.

Secondly, digital technologies like generative AI have significantly lowered entry barriers in the technical field. This helps online tech workers break through traditional skill boundaries and expand their capabilities (Manresa et al., 2025). Generative AI enables workers to transcend traditional skill barriers, extending their reach and influence across a wider variety of tasks. Furthermore, technology communities, online course platforms, and AI-driven personalized learning recommendation systems provide convenient learning channels for online technology workers, enabling them to continuously keep up with the latest technological advancements and alleviating the pressure of knowledge updates. According to SDT theory, these changes enhance individuals' sense of growth and professional achievement while effectively satisfying the psychological need for competence in the workplace, thereby improving occupational well-being (Tian et al., 2024).

Finally, the emergence of technologies such as cloud computing, real-time collaborative documents, and virtual offices has optimized the level of collaboration in remote teams, further promoting the well-being of online technology workers. These digital tools enhance information synchronization and knowledge sharing among team members by simulating elements of face-to-face interaction (such as real-time editing, video conferencing, and instant messaging) (Fang et al., 2021). Team members can thus collaborate efficiently while building emotional connections and trust, enhancing belonging and fulfilling relationships. SDT theory posits that the satisfaction of relatedness needs is essential to individuals' psychological health and positive work experiences. When individuals feel supported and recognized by their team, their job satisfaction and occupational well-being are significantly improved (Rubin et al., 2019).

In summary, digital technologies improve work efficiency, expand capability boundaries, and optimize team collaboration, thereby satisfying the multiple psychological needs of online technology workers and significantly boosting their occupational well-being. The widespread application of these digital technologies is creating a more efficient, flexible, and meaningful work environment for online technology workers.

3.2 The Negative Impacts of Digital Transformation on Occupational Well-being

First, the rapid development of digital technologies shortens the lifecycle of skills. Currently popular technological frameworks and tools may soon be replaced by newer technologies, leading online technology workers to face skill obsolescence anxiety and continuous learning pressure (Caselli et al., 2022). In the context of rapid technological updates, online technology workers often need to master new skills and tools in a short period, forcing them to continuously invest significant time and energy to keep pace with industry developments (Krutova et al., 2022). However, according to COR theory, when these investments of time and energy fail to translate into job security or economic rewards, an individual's psychological resources are depleted, leading to negative emotions such as burnout and anxiety, severely impacting occupational well-being.

Secondly, while remote work and asynchronous collaboration offer flexibility and geographical independence, they also blur the boundaries between work and life, increasing the psychological burden on workers. Frequent notifications, cross-time zone meetings, and the requirement to be on call at all times have created a "always-on" culture (Duan et al., 2023). This requires workers to remain constantly online and responsive to work demands, making it difficult for individuals to fully detach from work and even hindering effective rest outside of work hours. According to SDT theory, the long-term blurring of work-life boundaries not only depletes energy resources but also prevents individuals from fulfilling their needs for autonomy and relationships, thus threatening occupational well-being.

Furthermore, with the rise of platform-based work methods, many work platforms have begun using algorithms for task allocation, process monitoring, and performance evaluation, thereby depriving workers of their autonomy at work (Möhlmann et al., 2021). This algorithm-dependent management model pursues efficiency and quantifiable output, but it neglects the emotional and cognitive needs of knowledge workers. Digital tools and

algorithmic systems transform complex intellectual labor into a series of quantifiable indicators, significantly weakening workers' creativity and autonomy (Savolainen & Ruckenstein, 2024). This erosion of work autonomy directly challenges the core elements of SDT theory and triggers emotional resource depletion caused by continuously coping with loss of control, as identified by COR theory. When work becomes the execution of algorithmic rules, workers' intrinsic motivation and work passion diminish accordingly, ultimately undermining occupational well-being.

In conclusion, while the rapid development of digital technology has brought numerous conveniences and innovations to online technology workers, it has also been accompanied by a series of psychological pressures and challenges. The rapid iteration of technology, the blurring of work-life boundaries, and algorithm-driven management methods have all profoundly impacted the well-being of online technology workers. In coping with these challenges, online technology workers often face a loss of psychological resources and a decline in occupational well-being.

3.3 Moderating Factors of the Influence Pathways

The strength of digital technology's impact on occupational well-being is moderated by multi-level factors, encompassing three dimensions: individual, organizational, and platform levels.

At the individual level, digital literacy and psychological resilience are key moderating variables. Higher digital literacy enables online technology workers to utilize technological tools more proactively and efficiently, maximizing technology's potential to enhance occupational well-being while reducing the sense of competence frustration caused by barriers in technology use (Cetindamar et al., 2021). Meanwhile, understanding algorithmic logic can alleviate the uncertainty and pressure from algorithmic black boxes, protecting cognitive resources. Individuals with strong psychological resilience, when facing the pressure of technological iteration and algorithmic control, are less susceptible to psychological resource depletion, can better maintain intrinsic motivation, and buffer the negative effects of the occupational well-being challenge pathway (Aydin et al., 2023).

At the organizational level, leadership style and organizational support constitute important buffers. Transformational leadership, through creating vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, helps online technology workers find meaning and control amid digital technology changes, thereby satisfying their autonomy and relatedness needs and enhancing their perception of occupational well-being (Oliveira et al., 2025). Organizational support provides crucial external resource replenishment for online technology workers coping with challenges, directly mitigating the decline in occupational well-being caused by learning pressure and resource depletion (Altamimi & Hilmi, 2023).

At the platform level, algorithmic fairness and technology affordance are fundamental moderators. Algorithmic fairness can greatly reduce autonomy deprivation and emotional exhaustion resulting from the sense of loss of control among online technology workers, thereby moderating the impact of digital transformation on occupational well-being (Zhang et al., 2022). Technology affordance determines whether it serves as a rigid control tool or an empowering partner that online technology workers can flexibly utilize. This directly affects whether digital technology primarily leads to resource depletion or promotes competence satisfaction, ultimately moderating its impact on occupational well-being. (Gibbs & Navick, 2023).

4. Conclusions and Implications

4.1 Research Conclusions

This study explores the impact of digital transformation on the occupational well-being of online technology workers against the backdrop of the digital revolution in work patterns. The research indicates that this impact is not a simple linear promotion or inhibition, but a complex process interwoven with two paths: technology empowerment and technology challenge. While digital technology enhances well-being by improving work efficiency, expanding capability boundaries, and optimizing collaboration abilities to meet workers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relationships; it also reduces occupational well-being by triggering skills anxiety, blurring work boundaries, and bringing algorithmic control, through depleting their psychological resources and hindering the fulfilment of basic needs. At the same time, factors at multiple levels, including digital literacy and psychological resilience at the individual level, leadership style and organizational support at the organizational level, as well as algorithmic fairness and technology affordance at the platform level, can moderate the impact of digital transformation on occupational well-being of online technology workers.

The main theoretical contributions of this study are: First, it expands the research focus from a broad group of gig workers or general knowledge workers to the more contemporary online technology workers, deepening the understanding of the psychological experiences of highly skilled personnel in the context of digital transformation.

Second, it breaks through the single perspective of the mutually exclusive impact of digital technology by integrating theories to construct a double-edged sword model, systematically revealing how digital transformation affects occupational well-being through both empowering and challenging forces, while also identifying the key moderators in this influence process.

4.2 Practical Implications

Based on the above mechanism analysis, this study proposes the following practical implications for different stakeholders:

For individual online technology workers, first, implement of strategic technology adaptation. Proactively select and learn technical tools that can empower their professional depth rather than simply replace them, consciously manage the boundaries of technology use; Second, reshape professional identity. In the AI era, redefine one's core value, transforming from "implementer" to "problem definer," "architect designer," and "human-machine collaboration planner," constructing a more resilient and forward-looking professional identity; Third, build a continuous learning system. Internalize learning as a way of working, focusing on underlying thinking and core principles rather than blindly pursuing them, to improve the efficiency and sustainability of skill adaptability.

For enterprises and platform organizations, first, design a "human-centered" technology work system. When introducing efficiency tools and algorithm management systems, a "human-centered" evaluation must be conducted. It is crucial to protect the autonomy of online technology workers by preserving sufficient options for work methods, process control, and participation in results evaluation. This is becoming a regulatory focus internationally. For instance, the EU Platform Work Directive mandates human oversight of algorithmic management and transparency, offering companies a clear compliance framework. Second, it is essential to cultivate a supportive learning culture and a psychologically safe environment. This includes providing systematic skills training resources closely integrated with career development paths, encouraging trial and error and knowledge sharing, alleviating employees' learning anxiety and fear of failure, and creating an organizational atmosphere that meets their competence and relationship needs. Third, it is vital to implement a technology strategy of "intelligent enhancement" rather than "simple replacement." This involves clearly defining the auxiliary role of technologies such as AI, emphasizing human-machine collaboration, and ensuring that online technology workers feel that digital technology can amplify their intelligence rather than threaten their positions. This concept aligns closely with the global consensus on developing AI responsibly and ensuring technology serves humanity.

4.3 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

As a theoretical study, this research has certain limitations. First, the core constructs and relationships in the theoretical framework need to be tested and revised through empirical research. Future research could develop scales specifically for online technology workers, collect data through multi-wave questionnaires, and employ structural equation modeling (SEM) or regression analysis to empirically test the theoretical pathway. Additionally, work autonomy and job crafting could be incorporated into the testing framework as mediating variables. Second, this study has not yet empirically explored some important moderating variables. Future research could incorporate individual-level factors and organizational-level factors to more meticulously characterize the differences in influencing mechanisms under various conditions. Finally, research methods could be further diversified. In addition to quantitative research, in-depth case studies can help researchers better capture the complex psychological states of online technology workers during digital transformation, thereby enriching and deepening the theoretical implications.

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