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Remote Work Autonomy and Productivity: The Mediating Role of Intrinsic Motivation

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between remote work autonomy and employee productivity, and to examine whether intrinsic motivation mediates this relationship among remote workers. A descriptive correlational research design was employed with a sample of 394 remote employees from various sectors in Bulgaria, selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table. Standardized measurement tools were used to assess remote work autonomy (Work Design Questionnaire – autonomy subscale), intrinsic motivation (Work Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale – WEIMS), and productivity (Individual Work Performance Questionnaire – IWPQ). Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for Pearson correlation and AMOS-21 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test direct and indirect relationships between variables and assess model fit. Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all study variables: remote work autonomy and intrinsic motivation ($r = .41$, $p = .001$), remote work autonomy and productivity ($r = .38$, $p = .002$), and intrinsic motivation and productivity ($r = .46$, $p < .001$). SEM results indicated that remote work autonomy had both a direct effect on productivity ($\beta = 0.38$, $p = .002$) and an indirect effect through intrinsic motivation ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = .003$), with a total effect of $\beta = 0.57$ ($p < .001$). The model showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.08$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .053, TLI = .95). The findings demonstrate that intrinsic motivation partially mediates the relationship between remote work autonomy and productivity, highlighting the critical role of psychological motivation in optimizing performance in autonomous work environments. Organizations should focus on fostering both structural autonomy and motivational support to enhance remote employee productivity.

Keywords: Remote work autonomy; intrinsic motivation; productivity.

Introduction

The acceleration of remote work has dramatically reshaped the nature of organizational performance and employee engagement across industries worldwide. As the boundaries between work and personal life become increasingly fluid, especially in post-pandemic labor structures, organizations have turned their attention to understanding the psychological and behavioral factors that contribute to remote employees' productivity. A central area of inquiry has been how individual autonomy in remote work settings affects not just task outcomes, but also the motivational processes that mediate such effects [1, 2]. Among these mechanisms, intrinsic motivation has emerged as a key psychological driver that may explain variations in productivity under conditions of self-directed work environments [3, 4].

Remote work autonomy, defined as the extent to which employees can independently regulate their tasks, schedules, and methods, has been widely recognized as a beneficial feature of contemporary work arrangements. This autonomy is not only linked to higher job satisfaction but is also associated with reduced levels of stress and increased organizational commitment [5, 6]. In the context of remote work, where physical monitoring is minimal and employees have increased discretion over their workflow, the presence of autonomy can serve as a double-edged sword—leading either to enhanced performance or,

conversely, to disengagement when poorly managed [7, 8]. The variability in outcomes suggests that the impact of autonomy may be contingent upon individual motivational factors, particularly intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal desire to perform a task out of genuine interest, enjoyment, or personal value rather than external incentives. It has long been identified as a critical component of employee well-being and performance, particularly in settings that require self-management and creativity [9, 10]. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that intrinsic motivation is facilitated when individuals perceive autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work environments [11, 12]. Given the increased reliance on remote work arrangements, understanding how autonomy shapes intrinsic motivation—and subsequently affects productivity—is essential for designing effective organizational strategies and management practices [13, 14].

Recent studies underscore the positive relationship between remote work autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Employees who are empowered to make decisions and organize their work independently are more likely to find personal meaning in their roles, which in turn enhances their intrinsic motivation [15, 16]. This motivational state fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, both of which are key drivers of sustained productivity [17, 18]. Furthermore, research in educational and corporate contexts has shown that intrinsically motivated individuals are more resilient to setbacks and more likely to engage in proactive behavior, especially when working remotely [19, 20].

The relationship between remote work autonomy and productivity, however, is not entirely linear. While autonomy can facilitate higher performance by enabling flexibility and reducing psychological strain, it may also lead to feelings of isolation or lack of direction when intrinsic motivation is low [2, 21]. In such cases, the absence of structured oversight can reduce engagement and diminish the quality of work outcomes. Therefore, intrinsic motivation may serve as a mediating variable that conditions the effects of remote work autonomy on employee productivity. This proposition aligns with empirical evidence showing that autonomy has the strongest impact on performance when employees are intrinsically motivated [22, 23].

Indeed, several empirical investigations have demonstrated that intrinsic motivation enhances the positive outcomes of autonomy by driving self-regulation, persistence, and cognitive engagement [3, 24]. For example, in a study by Giraud and Mahamadou (2024), intrinsic motivation mediated the link between interpersonal trust and work performance, highlighting its central role in facilitating productive behavior in decentralized settings [12]. Similarly, Abdi et al. (2024) found that intrinsic motivation significantly influenced teacher work commitment in contexts where emotional stability and competence were present, suggesting its broader applicability across professions [4].

In remote work settings, autonomy is often coupled with asynchronous communication, minimal supervision, and high expectations for self-discipline—all of which require strong internal motivational resources to maintain consistent performance [11, 25]. Employees lacking intrinsic motivation may experience reduced engagement and productivity despite high autonomy, particularly if they do not find their tasks meaningful or aligned with personal values [10, 23]. This underscores the importance of understanding how intrinsic motivation mediates the autonomy–productivity relationship, offering insight into how organizations can support employees in maintaining both motivation and performance under remote conditions.

Moreover, the evolving nature of work demands a deeper exploration of the psychological conditions that sustain long-term productivity beyond basic task execution. For instance, Herbst and Hausberg (2023) noted that intrinsic motivation

fosters creative performance by encouraging exploratory behavior, risk-taking, and innovation—traits increasingly valued in knowledge-based economies [17]. In a similar vein, Tataurova (2024) emphasized the importance of motivational strategies in educational settings, finding that autonomy-supportive environments can stimulate deeper learning and goal commitment [16].

From a managerial perspective, enabling remote work autonomy must go hand in hand with cultivating conditions that promote intrinsic motivation. Leadership behaviors such as value-based communication, empathy, and growth mindset cultivation have been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation among remote workers [3, 15]. For example, Lee et al. (2024) demonstrated that leaders' motivational language positively influenced employee well-being and perceived relatedness, which are essential for intrinsic motivation in remote contexts. Likewise, research by Ali et al. (2023) identified leadership support as a critical factor affecting remote workers' job satisfaction and performance in a U.S. context [5].

Taken together, the literature highlights an intricate interplay between remote work autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and productivity. While each of these constructs has been studied independently, few empirical studies have investigated their interrelationships in a single structural model, particularly in the context of long-term remote work adoption. Moreover, prior research has tended to focus on specific populations such as educators, health workers, or IT professionals, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader workforce segments [13, 18, 26]. There is a pressing need for integrative models that examine how autonomy and intrinsic motivation jointly influence productivity outcomes across diverse professional sectors.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships among remote work autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and employee productivity. The target population consisted of remote employees working in various sectors in Bulgaria. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample size of 394 participants was deemed appropriate for a population exceeding 10,000. Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling method to ensure adequate representation across sectors such as IT, education, finance, and customer service. Inclusion criteria required participants to be full-time remote workers for a minimum of six months. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection.

Data Collection

To measure employee productivity in remote work settings, the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) developed by Koopmans et al. (2014) is employed. The IWPQ assesses individual work performance across three dimensions: task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductive work behavior. For the purposes of this study, the 18-item version (IWPQ Version 1.0) is utilized, which includes subscales for Task Performance (5 items), Contextual Performance (8 items), and Counterproductive Work Behavior (5 items). Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (seldom) to 5 (always). Higher scores indicate better performance, except for the counterproductive behavior scale, which is reverse-scored. This instrument has been widely validated and has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70) and construct validity in diverse organizational contexts.

Remote work autonomy is measured using the Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ) developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006), specifically focusing on the subscale of Autonomy. This subscale consists of nine items divided into three components: Work Scheduling Autonomy (3 items), Decision-Making Autonomy (3 items), and Work Methods Autonomy (3 items). Participants respond using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived autonomy in remote work. The WDQ has been extensively validated in occupational research, with the autonomy subscale showing high reliability (Cronbach's alpha typically above 0.85) and strong evidence of convergent and discriminant validity in studies across various job types and industries.

Intrinsic motivation is assessed using the Work Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale (WEIMS) developed by Tremblay et al. (2009), grounded in Self-Determination Theory. The WEIMS includes 18 items that measure six types of motivation, but only the Intrinsic Motivation subscale (3 items) is used in this study. Respondents rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (does not correspond at all) to 7 (corresponds exactly). Higher scores on this subscale indicate a stronger internal drive to perform one's job for inherent satisfaction and enjoyment. The WEIMS has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80) and robust factorial and construct validity across multiple workplace populations and cultural contexts.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage, were used to summarize demographic information. To examine the direct relationships between the independent variables (remote work autonomy and intrinsic motivation) and the dependent variable (productivity), Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. Furthermore, to test the hypothesized mediation model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted in AMOS-21. Model fit indices such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) were used to evaluate the overall fit of the model.

Findings and Results

Of the 394 participants, 176 individuals (44.67%) identified as male and 218 individuals (55.33%) as female. The majority were aged between 31 and 40 years (n = 152, 38.58%), followed by those aged 21–30 (n = 129, 32.74%), 41–50 (n = 78, 19.80%), and over 50 years old (n = 35, 8.88%). In terms of education, 188 participants (47.72%) held a bachelor's degree, 145 (36.80%) had completed a master's degree, 38 (9.64%) held a doctoral degree, and 23 (5.84%) had a high school diploma. The most common sector of employment was information technology (n = 114, 28.93%), followed by finance (n = 91, 23.10%), education (n = 86, 21.83%), customer service (n = 65, 16.50%), and other sectors (n = 38, 9.64%).

Prior to conducting the primary analyses, the assumptions underlying Pearson correlation and Structural Equation Modeling were assessed and confirmed. Normality was evaluated through skewness and kurtosis values, all of which fell within the acceptable range of −1 to +1 (e.g., productivity: skewness = −0.37, kurtosis = −0.45; intrinsic motivation: skewness = 0.12, kurtosis = −0.08). Linearity was examined through scatterplots, which indicated linear relationships among the variables. Homoscedasticity was confirmed by inspecting the residual plots, which displayed consistent variance across

values. Additionally, multicollinearity was ruled out as all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 2.00. These results supported the appropriateness of the planned correlation and SEM analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Remote Work Autonomy	34.76	5.42
Intrinsic Motivation	16.89	3.27
Productivity	72.44	10.15

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that the mean score for remote work autonomy was 34.76 (SD = 5.42), based on a total score from a 9-item scale. Intrinsic motivation had a mean of 16.89 (SD = 3.27) based on the 3-item WEIMS subscale. Productivity, measured via the IWPQ, showed a mean of 72.44 (SD = 10.15), reflecting high reported levels of task and contextual performance across participants.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Research Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Remote Work Autonomy	—		
2. Intrinsic Motivation	.41** (p = .001)	—	
3. Productivity	.38** (p = .002)	.46** (p < .001)	—

As shown in Table 2, remote work autonomy was significantly correlated with intrinsic motivation (r = .41, p = .001) and productivity (r = .38, p = .002). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation showed a strong positive correlation with productivity (r = .46, p < .001). These correlations suggest a consistent pattern of positive relationships among all key variables in the model.

Table 3

Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Criteria
Chi-Square (χ^2)	112.46	—
Degrees of Freedom (df)	54	—
χ^2/df	2.08	< 3.00
GFI	.94	≥ .90
AGFI	.91	≥ .90
CFI	.96	≥ .90
RMSEA	.053	< .08
TLI	.95	≥ .90

The fit indices presented in Table 3 indicate that the proposed model has a good fit to the data. The Chi-Square/df ratio was 2.08, well below the threshold of 3.00. The GFI (.94), AGFI (.91), CFI (.96), and TLI (.95) all exceeded the minimum recommended value of .90, and the RMSEA value of .053 falls within the acceptable range of less than .08. These results support the adequacy of the hypothesized model structure.

Table 4

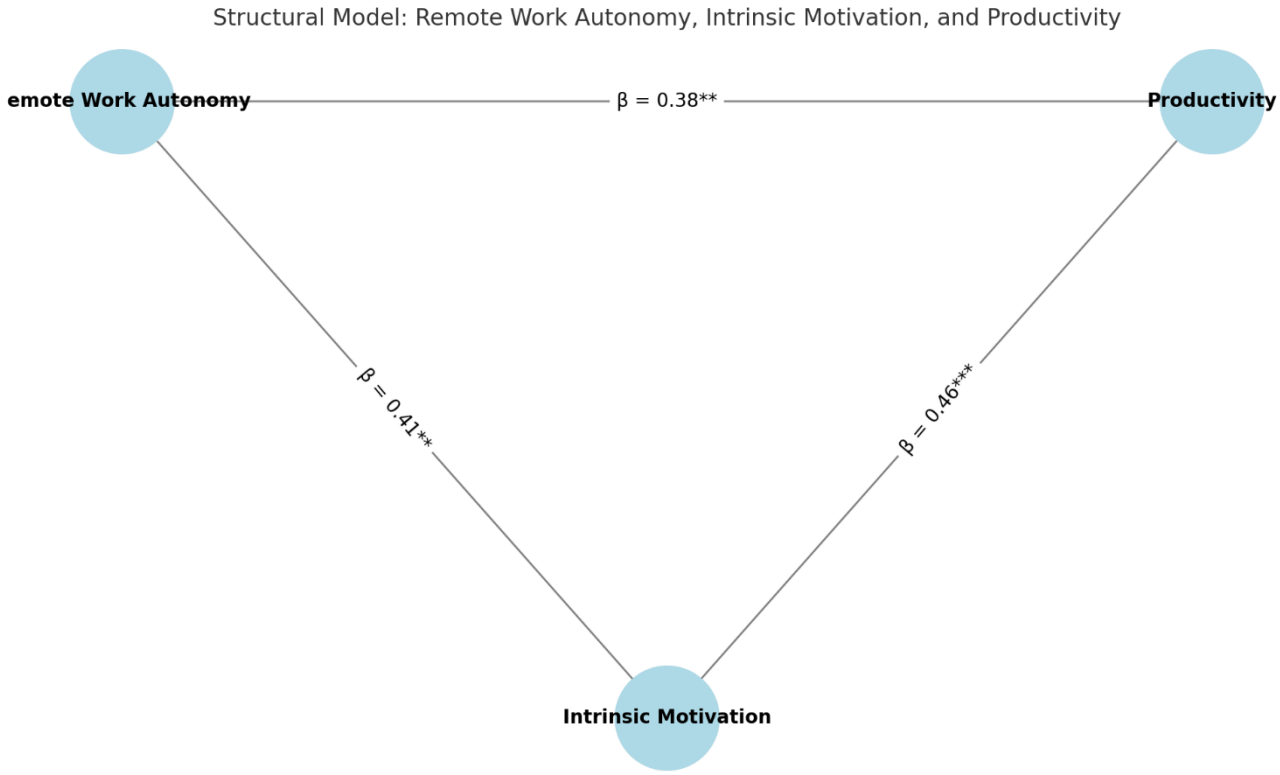
Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E	β	p
Remote Work Autonomy → Intrinsic Motivation	0.48	0.07	0.41	.001
Intrinsic Motivation → Productivity	0.76	0.09	0.46	<.001
Remote Work Autonomy → Productivity (direct)	0.59	0.10	0.38	.002
Remote Work Autonomy → Productivity (indirect)	0.36	0.05	0.19	.003
Remote Work Autonomy → Productivity (total)	0.95	0.11	0.57	<.001

Table 4 displays the direct, indirect, and total path coefficients between the variables in the structural model. Remote work autonomy had a significant direct effect on productivity (b = 0.59, β = 0.38, p = .002), and also an indirect effect through intrinsic motivation (b = 0.36, β = 0.19, p = .003). The total effect of remote work autonomy on productivity was b = 0.95, β = 0.57 (p < .001), highlighting the significant contribution of both the direct path and the motivational mediation.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Values



Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between remote work autonomy and productivity, and to examine whether intrinsic motivation mediates this relationship among a diverse sample of remote workers in Bulgaria. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), the results demonstrated that remote work autonomy positively predicted productivity, both directly and indirectly, through the mediating effect of intrinsic motivation. Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations between all three variables, confirming the hypothesized directional relationships.

The finding that remote work autonomy significantly predicts productivity aligns with a growing body of literature emphasizing the performance-enhancing benefits of autonomy in decentralized work environments. Autonomy allows remote employees to tailor their work methods and schedules to personal preferences, thereby increasing their sense of control and accountability, which contributes to more efficient task execution and greater output quality. This result is consistent with the findings of Malarvizhi et al. (2024), who reported that employees in remote and hybrid settings exhibited higher performance levels when granted autonomy over their work processes [1]. Similarly, Lee et al. (2024) noted that motivational support from leadership, coupled with autonomy, facilitated improved well-being and effectiveness among remote employees [15]. The current study strengthens the case for autonomy as a structural feature of remote work that promotes productivity.

Moreover, the significant positive relationship between remote work autonomy and intrinsic motivation supports the theoretical foundation of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy is a core psychological need essential for fostering intrinsic motivation. When employees perceive their work environment as autonomy-supportive, they are more likely to internalize their goals and engage in their tasks out of interest or personal value. This notion is validated by the results of this study, which found that employees with higher autonomy levels also reported higher intrinsic motivation. These findings echo those of Abdi et al. (2024), who identified intrinsic motivation as a major contributor to work commitment in autonomy-rich environments [4]. Similarly, Giraud and Mahamadou (2024) found that intrinsic motivation mediated the relationship between interpersonal trust and work performance, indicating that motivational mechanisms translate social and structural inputs into behavioral outcomes [12].

Most importantly, the mediating role of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between remote work autonomy and productivity was confirmed through SEM analysis, supporting the hypothesis that autonomy exerts its impact on productivity not only through structural control but also through psychological pathways. This finding highlights the importance of motivational dynamics in understanding how flexible work arrangements affect employee performance. It aligns with prior studies by Gunawan and Efendi (2022), who observed that the presence of intrinsic motivation significantly enhanced the positive effect of organizational structures on employee performance [13]. Likewise, the work of Adiwinata et al. (2022) found that intrinsic motivation served as a critical intervening variable between work environment conditions and job performance among lecturers [14].

The mediating effect observed in this study also resonates with the findings of Zhao et al. (2024), who demonstrated that intrinsic motivation was significantly enhanced through autonomy-supportive leadership and positively influenced work engagement [3]. In the context of remote work, this underscores that it is not sufficient to merely grant employees autonomy; rather, organizations must simultaneously cultivate the internal conditions that allow autonomy to be experienced as motivating. This distinction is supported by Simmermeyer et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of context and delivery in ensuring that autonomy enhances rather than hinders motivation [18].

These findings are further corroborated by Marchelinda and Abadiyah (2023), who reported that remote work structures that allowed for high levels of autonomy resulted in increased intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction, which subsequently led to better performance outcomes [2]. A similar pattern was observed by Prasad et al. (2023), whose study of remote workers in India revealed that when autonomy was accompanied by intrinsic motivation, employees were better equipped to handle occupational stress and maintain performance levels [20]. Thus, this study contributes to the growing empirical

consensus that intrinsic motivation is a vital mechanism through which autonomy influences performance in remote work settings.

The consistency between the current findings and earlier studies extends beyond general workplace contexts. For instance, Er and Karataş (2021) showed that even among online EFL teachers, intrinsic motivation increased with experience and autonomy, suggesting the universality of this mediational dynamic across professions [9]. Similarly, Abdel-Rahim et al. (2023) demonstrated that personality traits such as extraversion interact with autonomy and asynchronous communication to influence intrinsic motivation and, subsequently, performance outcomes [11].

Another noteworthy contribution of this study is its application to a Central European context. Much of the existing literature on remote work autonomy and motivation is concentrated in North America and East Asia, with limited empirical attention to Eastern and Southeastern European contexts. The findings align with those of Ziomek (2023), who explored motivational dynamics under remote work conditions in Poland and concluded that structural conditions like autonomy must be paired with intrinsic motivators to sustain remote performance [8]. Similarly, Rurkkhum and Detnakarin (2024) found that perceived organizational support enhanced the impact of meaningful work and autonomy on motivation and reduced withdrawal behaviors among remote workers in Thailand [6].

This cross-validation of results across diverse sociocultural contexts, including the present sample from Bulgaria, strengthens the generalizability of the mediated relationship between autonomy, motivation, and productivity. It also aligns with research from the long-term care sector, where Zeng et al. (2022) observed that intrinsically motivated nurses were more engaged and effective, even in highly autonomous but high-pressure environments [23].

Despite its valuable contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among the variables. Although SEM allows for the modeling of theoretical pathways, longitudinal data would be necessary to confirm the directionality and temporal stability of these relationships. Second, the data relied entirely on self-report measures, which can introduce biases such as social desirability or common method variance. While all instruments used in the study had strong validity and reliability, the exclusive use of self-reports may inflate the observed relationships. Third, although the study included a diverse sample of employees across multiple sectors in Bulgaria, cultural and organizational norms specific to this region may limit the applicability of the findings to other populations. Lastly, the study focused only on intrinsic motivation as the mediating variable, whereas other potential mediators such as job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, or organizational commitment were not explored.

Future research could address these limitations by adopting a longitudinal design to examine how the relationships among autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and productivity evolve over time, especially in contexts of prolonged remote work. Experimental or intervention-based studies could also provide stronger causal evidence by manipulating levels of autonomy and measuring changes in motivational and performance outcomes. Additionally, researchers should consider integrating other potential mediating or moderating variables, such as digital fatigue, work-life balance, and emotional intelligence, to build a more comprehensive model. Comparative cross-cultural studies would also be valuable in identifying how national culture or organizational climate may shape the autonomy–motivation–productivity dynamic. Finally, qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or case studies, could uncover richer insights into how remote workers interpret and experience autonomy in their day-to-day work.

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for managers and organizational leaders. First, to optimize productivity in remote settings, it is essential to provide employees with not only task autonomy but also decision-making and scheduling flexibility. However, autonomy must be supported with structures that encourage intrinsic motivation, such as meaningful tasks, opportunities for growth, and clear communication of purpose. Managers should invest in leadership training that emphasizes autonomy-supportive behaviors and motivational communication. Additionally, human resource policies should include mechanisms for evaluating and fostering intrinsic motivation, such as recognition programs, mentorship systems, and feedback structures that affirm employee competence and impact. Finally, digital tools and platforms should be selected and designed to enhance, rather than hinder, employees' sense of control, engagement, and intrinsic enjoyment in their work.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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