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Employee Voice Strategies for Contesting Automated Organizational Decision Systems

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Abstract

Automated organizational decision systems increasingly shape hiring, task allocation, performance evaluation, scheduling, promotion, discipline, and access to work. Yet employees who question these decisions often confront uncertain authority, opaque criteria, fragmented accountability, and channels designed for human rather than computational decision processes. This Original Taxonomy Article develops a proposed classification of employee responses to such conditions. It integrates scholarship on employee voice and silence, algorithmic management, worker resistance, explanation, formal reporting, work design, and procedural legitimacy. The proposed Employee-Voice Taxonomy distinguishes four strategies: direct contestation, formal escalation, explanation-seeking, and silent compliance. These strategies are differentiated by whether a response is expressed or withheld, whether it targets interpretation or outcome, and whether the dispute remains local or moves to an authorized institutional channel. The article further proposes that employees may move recursively among strategies as perceived error, explanation adequacy, contextual voice efficacy, dependency, retaliation risk, collective support, and prior organizational response change. Governance implications emphasize identifiable human authority, intelligible explanations, correction routes, protected escalation, evidentiary preservation, and reasoned closure. The taxonomy is not presented as a validated causal model, exhaustive classification, or universally effective prescription. Its categories and transition pathways require longitudinal, comparative, experimental, qualitative, and multilevel testing. The contribution is a bounded conceptual vocabulary for examining how employees respond when consequential organizational authority is exercised partly through automated systems.

Keywords: Voice under automated authority, Foundations and taxonomy development, Direct contestation, Formal escalation, Employee-voice taxonomy, Governance and design implications

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Introduction

Automated organizational decision systems do more than accelerate calculation. They may participate in allocating work, ranking employees, evaluating performance, recommending discipline, determining access, or defining which conduct becomes visible to management. Research on algorithms at work shows that these systems can combine direction, evaluation, surveillance, and reward in ways that reorganize the terrain of organizational control [1]. In app-mediated work, managerial and human-resource functions may also be distributed across interfaces, data infrastructures, platform rules, and dispersed human actors, complicating conventional employment-relations channels [2]. The resulting authority is neither wholly technical nor wholly managerial: organizational actors select the system, define its objectives, supply data, interpret outputs, and decide whether an employee may challenge the result.



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This reconfiguration matters because algorithmic management can alter autonomy, feedback, workload, skill use, and other work-design properties rather than merely replacing a discrete human judgment [3]. At the same time, employee voice research distinguishes opportunities to speak from actual expression, and expression from consequential influence. Silence cannot be inferred simply from the absence of a complaint, nor can a formal channel be assumed to provide meaningful power [4]. An employee may dispute an input directly, request an explanation, transfer the matter to a grievance or collective channel, or comply without expressing disagreement. These responses differ in target, visibility, risk, and institutional location. Automated authority is therefore organizationally significant because algorithmic systems can combine control, redistribution of managerial functions, and changes to work design [1–3]. Prevailing accounts often classify responses broadly as voice, resistance, acceptance, or silence. Such labels obscure whether the employee is seeking interpretation or reversal, addressing a local decision-maker or an institutional reviewer, and acting immediately or deferring action. They may also overstate the agency implied by visible resistance or misread compliance as consent. A more precise vocabulary is needed to examine how workers contest decisions when responsibility is distributed across software, managers, vendors, and organizational procedures.

This article offers an Original Taxonomy Article rather than an empirical test, systematic review, or implementation guideline. It proposes four strategies—direct contestation, formal escalation, explanation-seeking, and silent compliance—and a set of conditional pathways among them. The contribution is not that these responses have never been observed separately, but that their relationship can be organized through three questions: Is a response expressed or withheld? Does it target interpretation or outcome? Does it remain near the original decision or relocate the dispute to an authorized channel? The proposed taxonomy clarifies analytical boundaries while preserving uncertainty about motives, effectiveness, and causal sequence.

Foundations and taxonomy development

Employee voice is not a unitary behavior. Meta-analytic evidence distinguishes promotive voice, directed toward improvement, from prohibitive voice, directed toward preventing harm, while also showing overlap between their antecedents and consequences [5]. Contesting an automated decision may contain either orientation: an employee may correct an apparent error to improve a process, or object to a decision perceived as harmful. These established forms inform the taxonomy but do not map neatly onto it, because the proposed categories classify response strategy rather than message content.

Voice and silence should likewise not be treated as opposite endpoints of a single continuum. Integrative scholarship indicates that employees may speak on one issue, remain silent on another, or combine expression and withholding for different motives [6]. Multi-study evidence further associates perceived impact and psychological safety differently with voice and silence, suggesting that response choices depend partly on whether expression appears safe and consequential [7]. The available voice literature therefore supports a multidimensional foundation because voice forms differ, voice and silence are not simple opposites, and perceived impact and psychological safety differentiate response patterns [5–7].

The proposed taxonomy uses three intersecting dimensions. The first is expression: whether the employee overtly communicates a concern or conforms without doing so. The second is target: whether the immediate objective is to understand the decision or alter, suspend, or review it. The third is channel location: whether action occurs near the original decision or transfers to a formally authorized or collectively constituted venue. These dimensions organize behavior without assuming motive. Silent compliance may reflect agreement, uncertainty, strategic delay, dependency, or perceived futility; direct challenge may seek correction rather than resistance to automation itself.

The unit of classification is the employee's response to a consequential decision episode, not the employee as a stable type. Team climate, occupational norms, employment status, national institutions, and system design may influence strategy availability, but individual-level observations cannot establish organizational-level voice capacity. The categories are proposed analytic distinctions. Their discriminant validity, completeness, temporal stability, and usefulness for predicting consequences remain open empirical questions.

Direct contestation

Direct contestation is proposed as an overt attempt to challenge, correct, resist, circumvent, or renegotiate an automated decision at or near the point where it affects work. Its defining property is proximity to the original decision interaction. The employee may question data accuracy, reject an instruction, contest a score, confront a supervisor who relies on an output, or alter behavior to counter an evaluative system. Research on online work shows that workers can exercise agency within algorithmic arrangements while remaining constrained by substantial platform power asymmetries [8]. Directness therefore concerns the target and location of action, not equality of power.

Opaque algorithmic evaluations can provoke reactivity as workers attempt to infer what the system rewards, punishes, or fails to recognize [9]. Such reactions may challenge control, but they may also reproduce it by encouraging employees to orient behavior toward the metric. This ambiguity is central. A worker who changes task timing to improve a score may be strategically adapting rather than communicating disagreement. A worker who explicitly disputes the data or refuses the

resulting instruction is more clearly contesting. The proposed category should therefore distinguish expressive challenge from silent gaming, even when both seek to alter an outcome.

Crowdworkers also manage algorithmic scores through practices shaped by the affordances and constraints of particular platforms [10]. This evidence supports the claim that employees are not passive recipients of computational evaluation. It does not establish that score management is always visible, protected, or successful. Direct contestation may be individual or coordinated, verbal or digitally documented, and corrective or oppositional. Its organizational meaning depends on whether a human recipient can interpret the challenge and possesses authority to modify the decision.

Alternative explanations must remain visible. Apparent contestation may reflect misunderstanding, routine error correction, performance optimization, or conflict with a human manager rather than opposition to automated authority. Conversely, the absence of direct challenge may reflect lack of knowledge, inability to identify the decision source, or rational concern about retaliation. The proposed construct therefore captures a response form, not courage, legitimacy, or effectiveness. Evidence of direct contestation cannot by itself demonstrate that organizational voice exists, because expression may occur without acknowledgment, review, or influence.

Formal escalation

Formal escalation is proposed as relocating a disputed automated decision from its immediate setting to an authorized review, grievance, representation, whistleblowing, compliance, legal, or collective-action channel. Its defining feature is institutional transfer rather than intensity, hostility, or publicity. Comparative research on gig-economy couriers indicates that solidarity and shared identity can enable organized challenges to platform control [11]. Collective support may supply information, protection, interpretive resources, and bargaining capacity that an isolated employee lacks, although it cannot guarantee reversal of a particular decision.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for employee voice strategies for contesting automated organizational decision systems. Internal reporting systems can aggregate information about organizational problems and make recurrent concerns visible beyond the original decision site [12]. For automated decisions, a credible channel would need to preserve relevant inputs, outputs, explanations, prior communications, and the identity of accountable reviewers. However, reporting volume is not equivalent to procedural justice. A channel may collect complaints without investigating them, route them back to the original decision-maker, or provide no reasoned closure. Formal availability must therefore be separated from enacted review capacity. Whistleblowing research further shows that formal reporting is shaped by interacting individual, organizational, and contextual conditions, including retaliation risk, organizational climate, legal protection, and perceived seriousness [13]. Routine algorithmic appeals should not be collapsed into whistleblowing, which often concerns more severe wrongdoing and may involve external disclosure. The shared analytical insight is that escalation depends on channel credibility and institutional protection, not personal willingness alone.

Formal escalation may follow failed direct contestation, but it may also be the first response when the decision is severe, local authority is absent, or collective representation is already established. It remains distinct from explanation-seeking because its immediate objective is authorized review or accountability rather than understanding alone. Existing evidence supports the relevance of solidarity and reporting architecture, but it does not establish that escalation reliably produces human reconsideration, remedy, or protection.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Employee Voice Strategies for Contesting Automated Organizational Decision Systems

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Automated decision system	System materially shaping work decisions	Distributed authority	More than decision support	Context for response	Human discretion varies	Capability is not legitimate authority
Voice under automated authority	Employee response to system-mediated authority	Unclear recipient	Not mere system use	Proposed umbrella construct	Scope remains testable	Expression is not influence
Direct contestation	Local, overt outcome challenge	Immediate correction	Not silent gaming	Proposed primary strategy	Visibility varies	Directness does not imply success
Formal escalation	Dispute transferred to authorized channel	Local power limits	Not ordinary complaint alone	Proposed primary strategy	Review may be symbolic	Availability is not protection
Explanation-seeking	Request for decision-relevant understanding	Opacity	Inquiry, not necessarily opposition	Proposed primary strategy	Explanation quality varies	Transparency is not contestability
Silent compliance	Conformity without overt challenge	Risk or futility	Not proven agreement	Proposed primary strategy	Motive often unobserved	Behavior does not reveal consent

Strategy movement	Change in response across episodes	Static classifications	Not a fixed employee trait	Proposed dynamic relation	Sequence unvalidated	No transition probability claimed
Consequential influence	Capacity to affect review or outcome	Symbolic voice	More than opportunity	Proposed evaluation criterion	Influence may be delayed	Being heard is not remedy
Accountable authority	Identifiable actor able to review	Responsibility diffusion	Not technical ownership	Proposed governance condition	Authority may be fragmented	Formal title is not substantive power

Explanation-seeking

Explanation-seeking is proposed as an expressed response aimed first at making an automated decision interpretable, assessable, or actionable. An employee may ask which data were used, how criteria were weighted, whether an exception applies, who authorized the system, or what evidence could support correction. Such inquiry differs from direct contestation because it does not initially demand reversal. Empirical research indicates that reactions to algorithmic decisions involve fairness, trust, and emotion, and that perceptions may vary with the decision process and source [14]. Explanation-seeking may therefore be motivated by uncertainty as well as disagreement.

A useful explanation is not equivalent to disclosure of code, model architecture, or a generic statement that an algorithm generated the result. Social-science research characterizes explanation as selective, contrastive, audience-sensitive, and embedded in interaction [15]. In organizational settings, employees commonly need to know why this outcome occurred rather than another, which information was decisive, whether the information is correct, and what can happen next. An explanation that is technically detailed but unresponsive to those questions may increase information without improving contestability.

Experimental evidence suggests that explanation-seeking can affect adherence to anomalous recommendations and that responses may differ when advice comes from artificial intelligence rather than a person [16]. The transfer to employment decisions must remain cautious: a controlled recommendation task does not establish how employees respond to high-stakes evaluations, discipline, or job allocation. Still, the evidence supports treating inquiry as behaviorally consequential rather than merely informational.

Explanation-seeking also changes the location of interpretive responsibility. When an organization tells employees merely that “the system decided,” it converts a governance question into a technical fact and leaves no accountable recipient. A meaningful response requires a person or body able to connect the output to policy, evidence, and available remedies. This requirement does not mean every model must be fully disclosed; it means that confidentiality or technical complexity cannot substitute for an organizationally intelligible reason.

The taxonomy proposes explanation-seeking as a branching strategy. A satisfactory account may support informed acceptance; an incomplete or contradictory account may prompt direct contestation or formal escalation; perceived risk may instead lead to compliance. These pathways remain unvalidated. Explanation quality, technical literacy, decision severity, access to evidence, and the reviewer’s authority may all condition what follows. Explanation-seeking should therefore be evaluated by whether it supplies understandable, decision-relevant, and challenge-enabling information, not by disclosure volume alone.

Silent compliance

Silent compliance is proposed as behavioral conformity with an automated decision without overt contestation, formal escalation, or an expressed request for explanation. It is a response category, not an inference about inner agreement. Research on gig work shows that workers may anticipate algorithmic expectations and adjust conduct before receiving an explicit instruction [17]. Such anticipatory compliance illustrates how authority can operate through expected evaluation, visibility, and sanction rather than direct commands.

Longitudinal qualitative research further indicates that algorithmic management may manufacture consent through recurring but confined choices [18]. Employees can experience moments of discretion while the wider choice architecture remains restrictive. This duality cautions against treating observable choice as proof of autonomy. It also cautions against assuming that every compliant act is coerced. Employees may accept a decision because they consider it accurate, because the issue is minor, or because compliance is temporarily advantageous.

Studies of algorithmic demand control show that participation, accommodation, and resistance may coexist within the same work arrangement [19]. Silent compliance may therefore accompany private disagreement, later evidence gathering, selective contestation on other issues, or continuing dependence on the organization. The category includes strategic delay and perceived futility but does not presume either. Motive must be investigated rather than assigned from behavior.

The level of analysis is also consequential. One employee’s silence may reflect a personal calculation, whereas widespread silence may arise from shared expectations, channel design, occupational norms, or institutional vulnerability. Aggregating

individual behavior without evidence of common conditions would overstate organizational suppression. Conversely, a formally open climate cannot be inferred from one visible complaint when less protected workers remain silent.

At least four rival explanations require attention. The employee may genuinely agree; may not recognize that automation materially shaped the decision; may lack enough information to formulate a concern; or may regard the costs of action as disproportionate. Individual silence also cannot establish an organizational climate of suppression without team- or organizational-level evidence. The proposed construct is analytically useful precisely because it separates behavioral conformity from legitimacy, trust, satisfaction, and consent. Whether silent compliance stabilizes automated authority, protects the employee, or precedes later challenge remains an empirical question.

Movement between response strategies

The four strategies are proposed as episode-level orientations rather than fixed employee types. Process research shows that workers' responses to platform organizing can change under conditions of regulated dependence [20]. An employee may comply with one allocation, request an explanation for a later score, contest a subsequent penalty, and escalate only after repeated nonresolution. Strategy movement may reflect learning, changing issue severity, accumulated evidence, shifting dependence, or new access to collective support.

Contextual voice efficacy—the belief that speaking can produce a meaningful response—helps distinguish expression from silence [21]. In automated decision settings, efficacy may depend on whether a responsible person is identifiable, whether the system permits correction, and whether prior challenges received reasoned answers. Perceived efficacy is not the sole cause of strategy choice; confidence, personality, issue importance, and employment alternatives may also matter. Nevertheless, it provides a plausible mechanism linking organizational response history to later behavior.

Human-resource practices and the perceived strength of the HR system may shape whether channels appear consistent, credible, and consequential [22]. Dependence, contextual voice efficacy, and the credibility of organizational voice arrangements therefore indicate that employee responses should be modeled dynamically [20–22]. The proposed movement logic is recursive rather than sequential: explanation may precede challenge, failed challenge may produce escalation or silence, and collective mobilization may reactivate previously withheld concerns.

Movement is likely to be issue-specific and path-dependent. A responsive explanation may preserve local engagement, whereas repeated routing failures may lower efficacy and shift later concerns toward silence or collective escalation. Prior outcomes can therefore become part of the next decision episode. This is a proposed temporal mechanism, not evidence that employees pass through predictable stages or that one unsuccessful challenge causes withdrawal.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in employee voice strategies for contesting automated organizational decision systems.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Employee Voice Strategies for Contesting Automated Organizational Decision Systems.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Opacity to explanation-seeking	Unclear decision basis	Interpretive uncertainty	Literacy; severity	Inquiry or deferred action	General distrust	Field experiment
Perceived error to direct contestation	Disputed data or output	Corrective challenge	Local authority	Attempted revision	Routine error correction	Episode-level observation
Weak local authority to escalation	Unresolved dispute	Institutional relocation	Channel credibility	Authorized review sought	Forum shopping	Comparative process study
Risk to silent compliance	Retaliation or dependence	Withholding	Alternatives; support	Behavioral conformity	Genuine agreement	Confidential longitudinal study
Inadequate explanation to challenge	Unresponsive account	Increased discrepancy	Review access	Contestation or escalation	Outcome dissatisfaction	Explanation manipulation
Failed challenge to silence	Repeated nonresponse	Reduced efficacy	Psychological safety	Withdrawal from expression	Issue resolution	Longitudinal mediation test
Collective support to escalation	Shared concern	Solidarity and protection	Institutions	Collective review effort	Occupational identity	Cross-context comparison
Work design to strategy access	System configuration	Discretion and visibility	Task and organization	Unequal response options	General management quality	Multilevel design

Note: Relationships and expected consequences are proposed synthesis unless a cell states an observed association. They are not validated causal paths or transition probabilities.

Proposed employee-voice taxonomy

Algorithmic management may combine coordination with control rather than functioning as neutral matching alone [23]. This makes the target of employee response difficult to locate: the disputed outcome may arise from data collection, model rules, interface design, a managerial interpretation, or an organizational policy embedded in the system. The proposed taxonomy begins with the decision episode and asks what the employee does next, not whether the technology is inherently acceptable. **Figure 1** presents the original conceptual synthesis for employee-voice taxonomy, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

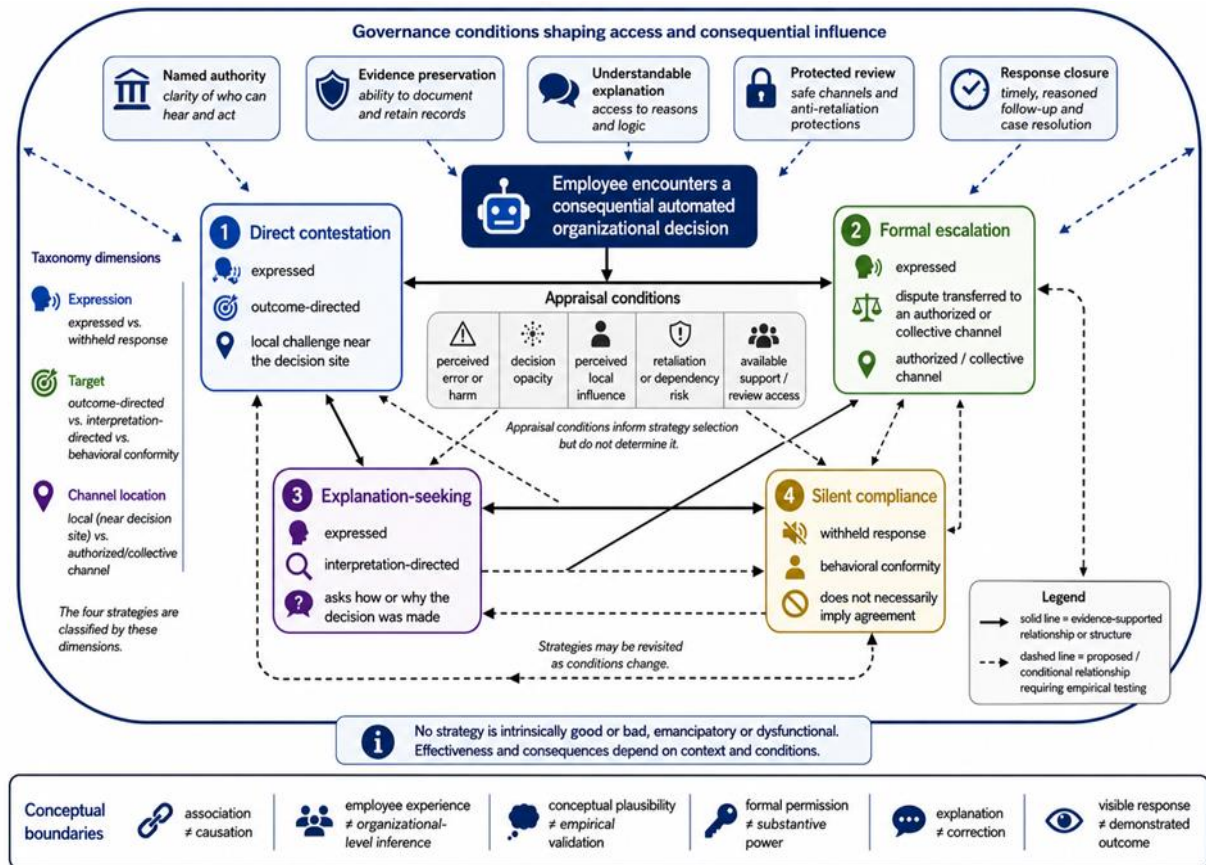


Figure 1. Employee-Voice Taxonomy

The central anchor is the employee's encounter with a consequential automated decision. From that point, the taxonomy separates an appraisal of error, opacity, influence, risk, and available support from the strategy subsequently observed. This distinction prevents perceptions from being treated as behavior and behavior from being treated as outcome. It also allows the same employee to respond differently when issue severity, review access, or dependency changes.

The taxonomy organizes responses along expression, target, and channel location. Direct contestation is expressed and outcome-directed near the decision site. Formal escalation is expressed and relocates the dispute to an authorized or collectively constituted channel. Explanation-seeking is expressed but initially interpretation-directed. Silent compliance withholds overt challenge while conforming behaviorally. These dimensions permit overlap across time without collapsing the categories within a single episode.

Algorithmic management may simultaneously enable autonomy and intensify control or responsibility transfer [24]. Accordingly, no strategy is intrinsically emancipatory or dysfunctional. Direct contestation may correct an error or expose an employee to retaliation. Escalation may activate review or merely reproduce symbolic procedure. Explanation may clarify a decision or legitimate it without enabling correction. Compliance may represent consent, temporary protection, or constrained dependence.

Work-design scholarship indicates that technology consequences depend on surrounding task, job, team, and organizational choices [25]. The taxonomy therefore places governance conditions around, rather than after, employee strategy. Named authority, evidence preservation, understandable explanation, protected review, and response closure may alter which strategies are accessible and consequential. The categories are proposed as neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive across episodes. Their discriminant validity, temporal ordering, occupation-specific meaning, and organizational consequences require empirical testing.

Governance and design implications

Algorithm-based human-resource decisions may threaten personal integrity when affected employees cannot understand consequential classifications, maintain appropriate agency, or contest their application [26]. A governance response should therefore begin by identifying who possesses authority to explain, correct, suspend, and review a system-mediated decision. Technical ownership, vendor responsibility, managerial use, and formal accountability must not be treated as interchangeable. Research on people analytics identifies risks involving surveillance, opacity, reductionism, and unequal organizational power [27]. The taxonomy suggests that governance should be evaluated through the response strategies it makes substantively available. A direct-contestation route requires a reachable recipient with correction authority. Formal escalation requires independence, documentation, protection, and traceable disposition. Explanation-seeking requires audience-relevant information and a path from understanding to review. Silent compliance requires attention because low complaint volume may indicate satisfaction, but may also reflect low efficacy, unrecognized automation, or credible fear.

Perceived legitimacy of artificial-intelligence decisions depends on process as well as outcome [28]. This supports a procedural principle: favorable results cannot compensate automatically for an opaque or noncontestable process, and an available appeal cannot establish legitimacy if it lacks substantive power. Still, perceived legitimacy is not identical to legality, morality, technical accuracy, or distributive justice.

Governance assessment should also examine enacted practice rather than policy text alone. Relevant indicators would include whether employees can identify the reviewer, obtain the record used, correct factual errors, receive a reasoned decision, and pursue further review without retaliation. These are proposed evaluative questions, not validated performance metrics. High utilization could indicate trust or widespread error; low utilization could indicate accuracy, futility, or lack of awareness.

The proposed design principles are bounded: disclose the decision's organizational owner; preserve decision-relevant evidence; provide comprehensible reasons; permit correction and review; protect employees from retaliation; distinguish local reconsideration from independent escalation; and close the loop with a reasoned response. These principles identify governance questions rather than validated interventions. Their effects may differ by decision severity, employment status, occupation, national institutions, collective representation, system maturity, and the extent of human discretion. Organizational readiness cannot be inferred from adopting the taxonomy or displaying formal channels.

Conclusion

This Original Taxonomy Article proposes a vocabulary for examining how employees respond when automated systems participate in consequential organizational authority. Direct contestation challenges a decision near its point of enactment; formal escalation relocates the dispute to an authorized or collective channel; explanation-seeking pursues decision-relevant understanding; and silent compliance denotes conformity without overt challenge or inquiry. The categories classify response episodes rather than stable employee types.

The central contribution is dynamic. Employees may move among strategies as information, perceived efficacy, risk, dependence, collective support, and organizational response change. These pathways are conceptually plausible but unvalidated. Observable compliance does not establish consent, visible voice does not establish influence, formal permission does not establish substantive power, and explanation does not establish contestability.

Future research must test category distinctiveness, mixed and sequential responses, contextual moderators, multilevel conditions, and consequences for employees and organizations. Longitudinal process studies, comparative institutional research, field experiments, event-based measurement, and confidential qualitative inquiry are especially important. Research should also determine whether the four strategies remain distinguishable when employees combine them, act collectively, or communicate through representatives. The taxonomy may need revision, subdivision, or rejection if observed responses do not fit its boundaries.

Until such evidence accumulates, the taxonomy should be used as a bounded analytical framework for asking who can question automated authority, through which channel, with what information, and under whose accountable power.

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