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Meaningful Work after Automation Reshapes Identity and Skill

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Abstract

Automation is increasingly reorganizing not only what employees do but also how they understand who they are, why their work matters, what they remain capable of doing, and where responsibility resides. Prevailing accounts often emphasize productivity, employment displacement, or technological adoption while treating meaningful work as a secondary outcome. This narrative review examines how automation may reshape meaningful work through four connected domains: identity continuity and disruption, purpose under task substitution, skill displacement and competence loss, and moral agency in automated systems. A structured narrative-review approach was used to identify, screen, critically read, and thematically synthesize relevant peer-reviewed scholarship. The evidence suggests that automation is neither intrinsically meaning-destroying nor meaning-enhancing. Its consequences depend on which tasks are removed or retained, whether valued contribution remains visible, whether workers can reconstruct role identities, whether opportunities for learning and competent performance are preserved, and whether human judgement remains substantively contestable and accountable. Evidence converges on the importance of work design and implementation configuration but remains heterogeneous across occupations, technologies, methods, and levels of analysis. Much of the available evidence is conceptual, qualitative, cross-sectional, or context specific, limiting causal inference and generalizability. The review contributes an integrative basis for later developing an Identity–Purpose–Competence–Agency redesign cycle, explicitly presented as an original synthesis rather than a validated model. Organizational implications therefore concern questions for design, participation, and monitoring, not universal prescriptions or implementation-ready rules.

Keywords: Meaningful work in automated organizations, Identity continuity and disruption, Purpose under task substitution, Skill displacement and competence loss, Implications and future research, Meaningful

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Introduction

Automation changes more than the allocation of effort. When algorithms recommend decisions, robots absorb technically central tasks, or generative systems produce outputs previously associated with expertise, employees may lose, preserve, or reconstruct the basis on which work feels significant. Meaningful work matters because it is associated with engagement, commitment, satisfaction, and other proximal work outcomes, although the predominance of nonexperimental evidence prevents simple causal interpretation [1]. The organizational problem is therefore not merely whether automation increases efficiency, but whether redesigned work still enables employees to recognize themselves in their roles, connect activity to valued contribution, maintain competence, and exercise morally consequential judgement.

Meaningfulness is not a fixed property of a task. It emerges from interacting individual, job, organizational, and societal conditions and is marked by tensions between self-realization and contribution, subjective experience and structural constraint, and episodic and enduring significance [2, 3]. These tensions make deterministic claims inadequate. Removing



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repetitive activity may release workers for more relational or creative contributions, yet the same intervention may also remove the visible accomplishment, craft knowledge, or social recognition through which a role previously made sense. Automation can consequently improve one dimension of meaningful work while weakening another.

AI-focused ethical analysis similarly indicates that autonomy, skill use, social connection, contribution, and dignity can be strengthened or undermined by deployment choices [4]. These effects cannot be inferred from technical capability alone. A system that can perform a task does not establish that transferring the task is organizationally legitimate, that retained work will be developmentally adequate, or that accountability can be safely redistributed. Formal human oversight may also be nominal when workers lack information, authority, time, or credible routes to challenge automated outputs.

The review therefore treats automation and augmentation as interdependent processes rather than opposing endpoints. Attempts to automate may create new needs for human interpretation, exception handling, coordination, and repair, while augmentation may gradually standardize or displace activities it initially supports [5]. This Narrative Review Article integrates evidence on identity, purpose, competence, and moral agency to explain why meaningful-work consequences arise through task and authority redesign. It distinguishes reported findings from critical interpretation and reserves the later proposed cross-domain framework as an original synthesis requiring empirical testing.

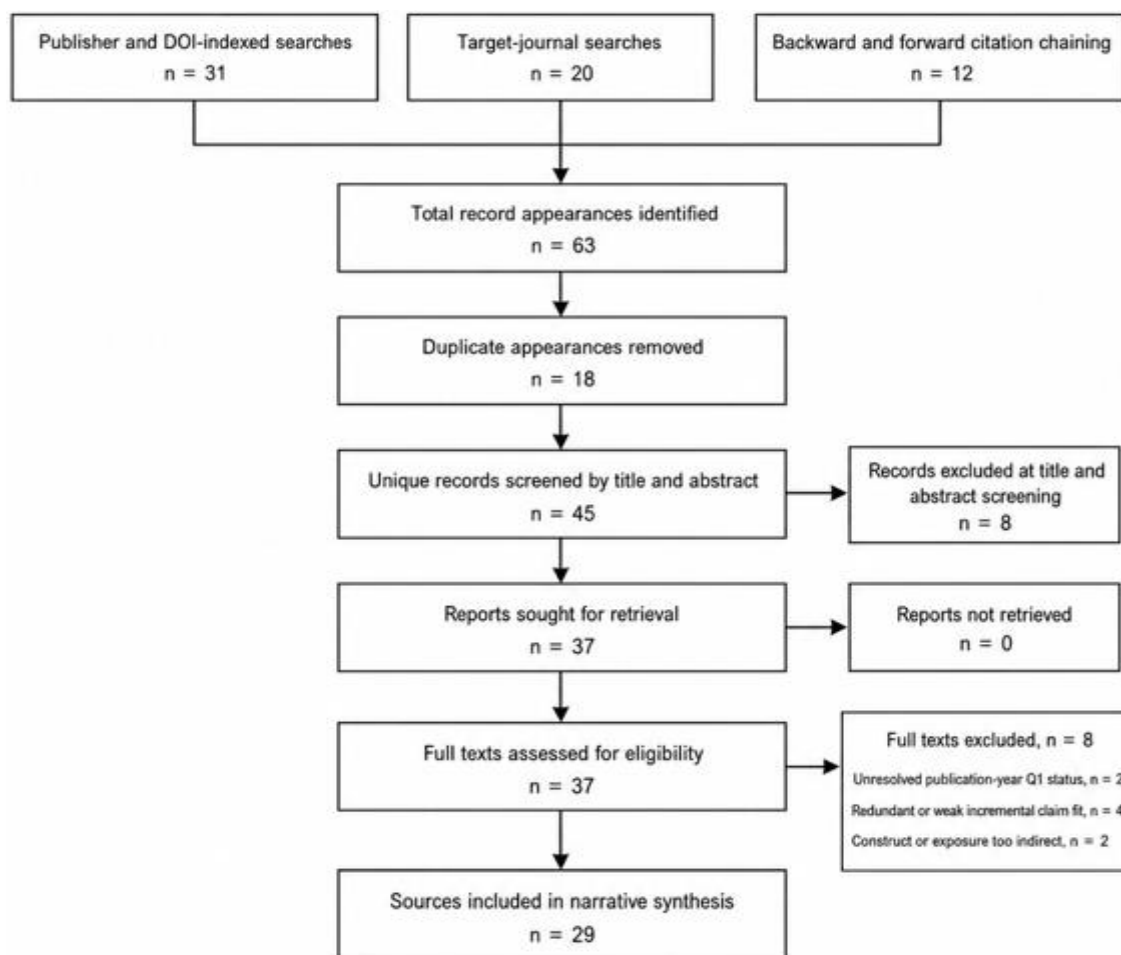
Narrative review method

The review followed a structured narrative approach aligned with an interpretive objective: to compare heterogeneous evidence, preserve competing explanations, and connect findings that differ in design, technology, occupation, and level of analysis. Narrative reviews require explicit alignment among questions, search choices, selection, critical reading, and synthesis rather than an unsupported claim of exhaustive coverage [6]. The guiding questions concerned how automation affects identity continuity, purpose, competence, and moral agency; which mechanisms and boundary conditions are reported; where evidence converges or conflicts; and what designs would be required to test an integrative redesign framework.

Searches combined publisher and DOI-indexed retrieval, targeted journal searches, and backward and forward citation chaining. Search concepts included meaningful work, automation, AI, algorithmic management, identity threat and reconstruction, task substitution, purpose, deskilling, competence development, black boxing, responsibility, authority, work design, and methodological limitations. The logged process yielded 63 record appearances: 31 from publisher and DOI-indexed searches, 20 from target-journal searches, and 12 from citation chaining. After 18 duplicate appearances were removed, 45 unique records were screened. Eight were excluded at title and abstract screening. Thirty-seven full texts were assessed; none was unavailable. Eight were excluded because publication-year Q1 status remained unresolved, incremental claim fit was weak or redundant, or the construct or exposure was too indirect. Twenty-nine sources were included.

Eligibility required a peer-reviewed journal article with a verifiable DOI, Q1 status in a relevant publication-year category, direct relevance to a planned claim or synthesis category, and sufficient detail for bounded extraction. Selection was reported in a PRISMA-compatible flow because auditable counts and explicit transitions improve reporting transparency [7, 8]. This reporting device does not convert the article into a systematic review or establish exhaustive coverage.

Figure 1 reports the verified flow of records through identification, duplicate removal, screening, full-text assessment, exclusion, and final inclusion for this narrative review article.



Counts represent retained record appearances in the logged search process.
PRISMA-compatible reporting is used for transparency and does not change the narrative-review design.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Evidence Identification and Selection

Extraction recorded context, unit, design, focal construct, mechanism, outcome, limitation, and claim boundary. Evidence was appraised for direct relevance and inferential fit rather than assigned a fabricated quality score. Synthesis proceeded thematically and comparatively: reported findings were separated from authors' interpretations, cross-sectional associations from temporal evidence, and individual perceptions from organizational inference. **Table 1** later makes these review boundaries explicit.

Identity continuity and disruption

Identity continuity refers here to the preservation or reconstructability of self-meanings attached to one's occupational role, competence, authenticity, status, and contribution. From a functional-identity perspective, AI affects identity when it changes the psychological and social functions that work performs, including continuity, esteem, belonging, and recognition [9]. Automation therefore matters most when the displaced activity is identity central, not simply time consuming. Removing peripheral administration may protect a professional identity, whereas removing signature judgement may destabilize it even when pay and job title remain unchanged.

Direct evidence of this process comes from a qualitative study of substitutive decision-making AI in loan consulting. Employees experienced professional role-identity disruption when core decisions were transferred to a system and they lacked meaningful influence over or capacity to override its outputs [10]. The evidence supports a mechanism involving loss of role-defining discretion, but its single-company setting limits transfer to augmentative systems, occupations with different status structures, or implementations that preserve contestability.

Identity threat should also be differentiated rather than treated as one generalized reaction. Technology-related threat can concern social identity, role identity, or person identity, including anticipated damage to belonging, competence, worth, or authenticity [11]. This distinction matters because resistance may reflect threatened self-definition rather than ignorance of technical benefits. Yet the underlying measure was validated in a university context and does not itself demonstrate enduring identity loss under workplace automation.

Longitudinal qualitative evidence from imposed job redesign shows that identity continuity can sometimes be reconstructed through resistance, identity conservation, temporary “identity parking,” learning, and modified re-identification [12]. Although that setting did not concern AI, it supplies a temporal counterpoint to instantaneous threat models. Identity disruption may be transitional, but neither adaptation nor continuity is guaranteed. General restructuring, leadership communication, occupational status, implementation maturity, and available alternative roles remain plausible explanations or moderators. The evidence therefore supports conditional identity processes, not a universal sequence in which automation necessarily produces loss followed by recovery.

Purpose under task substitution

Purpose under task substitution concerns whether retained work remains connected to valued beneficiaries, outcomes, contribution, or achievement after activities are reallocated to technology. Workplace robots may remove drudgery and create space for more worthwhile work, but they may also eliminate autonomy, skill use, accomplishment, or contribution [13]. The relevant unit is therefore the redesigned task bundle rather than the isolated automated task. Purpose can decline even when employment is retained if employees no longer see how their activities matter, and it can increase when substitution removes burdens while preserving ownership of consequential work.

Economic accounts of automation often foreground wages, productivity, or employment quantity. A well-being perspective adds the intrinsic goods supplied by work, including opportunities to exercise capability, contribute, and participate in valuable activity [14]. This does not mean that every existing task should be preserved. Some work is degrading, unsafe, or needlessly repetitive. The narrower claim is that organizational evaluation is incomplete when it records output gains but does not examine whether the remaining role still provides recognizable sources of purpose.

Empirical evidence indicates that algorithmic functions should not be collapsed into one exposure. Among crowdworkers, directive algorithmic control was negatively associated with meaningfulness, whereas algorithmic matching was positively associated, partly through identity and belonging pathways [15]. Because the study was cross-sectional and platform based, the mediation cannot establish temporal causality and may not transfer to standard employment. Nevertheless, it supports a configuration-sensitive interpretation: systems that connect workers to suitable tasks may have different consequences from systems that intensify direction and surveillance.

Recent qualitative evidence from employees using Microsoft 365 Copilot likewise shows that workers construct different meanings around AI as a task aid, intelligent assistant, or expert-like teammate [16]. These ideal types reflected variation in retained discretion, expertise, role interpretation, and organizational conditions. They are not validated categories or developmental stages, but they show that purpose is enacted through employee practices rather than mechanically determined by software capabilities.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for meaningful work after automation reshapes identity and skill.

Table 1. Review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for Meaningful Work After Automation Reshapes Identity and Skill.

Evidence domain or review construct	Review question	Eligible evidence type	Extraction fields	Synthesis role	Main limitation	Interpretation boundary
Narrative-review method	How should heterogeneous evidence be identified and synthesized transparently?	Methodological review and reporting guidance	Sources, search concepts, eligibility, screening, extraction, synthesis	Defines review procedure	Reviewer judgement remains	Transparency does not establish exhaustiveness
Meaningful-work baseline	Why is meaningful work consequential and multilevel?	Meta-analysis, integrative review, conceptual synthesis	Definition, level, outcome, paradox	Frames the focal outcome	Measures and designs vary	Associations do not establish automation effects
Identity continuity	Which identity functions are preserved, threatened, or reconstructed?	Theory, qualitative studies, construct validation	Role centrality, threat type, response, time	Organizes identity synthesis	Evidence is context specific	No universal identity-loss sequence
Purpose under substitution	What valued contribution remains after task reallocation?	Normative, survey, and qualitative evidence	Removed and retained tasks, ownership, beneficiary, algorithmic function	Organizes purpose synthesis	Task substitution differs from job substitution	Evaluate the remaining task bundle

Skill and competence	Does automation alter demand, practice, inspection, or recovery capability?	Ethnographic, process, and review evidence	Practice exposure, epistemic authority, black boxing, complementarity	Guides later skill synthesis	Actual skill decay is rarely measured longitudinally	Distinguish displacement from demonstrated loss
Moral agency	Can workers deliberate, contest, decide, and remain answerable?	Experimental, philosophical, and integrative evidence	Authority, contestability, responsibility, control	Guides later agency synthesis	No single validated agency measure	Agency differs from liability and nominal oversight
Redesign and future research	Which conditions might preserve identity, purpose, competence, and agency?	Work-design reviews, conceptual frameworks, longitudinal and multimethod studies	Design lever, level, moderator, outcome, test required	Supports proposed integration	Interventions remain incompletely tested	Proposed principles are not implementation-ready

Note. Evidence-derived entries are mapped to the cited sources; uncited cross-domain classifications are original review-design decisions. No row provides a ranking, effect estimate, validation score, or universal prescription.

Skill displacement and competence loss

Skill displacement and competence loss are related but distinct. Skill displacement occurs when redesigned work reduces demand or opportunity to enact a capability. Competence loss is stronger: it denotes deterioration in a worker's capacity to understand, diagnose, perform, or recover the work when automation fails or conditions change. Automation may therefore displace a skill without immediately erasing it, while prolonged nonuse, restricted access to underlying processes, or weakened learning pathways may eventually reduce competence. This distinction prevents forecasts about changing skill demand from being misreported as evidence that workers have already become less capable.

Three analytical errors should be avoided. First, declining demand for an established skill is not evidence that the skill has disappeared from the worker. Second, frequent interaction with an automated system is not necessarily learning when interaction consists only of accepting outputs. Third, newly demanded capabilities do not automatically compensate for lost craft knowledge, because old and new skills may serve different diagnostic, relational, or identity functions. A competence-sensitive review must therefore examine opportunities for supervised practice, feedback quality, access to underlying reasoning, exposure to routine and exceptional cases, and the capacity to resume performance after system interruption. These are developmental conditions rather than claims that unaided human performance should always be preferred.

Robotic surgery illustrates how competence-development pathways can be altered even when technology improves task performance. Trainees lost legitimate hands-on participation because experienced surgeons retained control of technologically mediated procedures, prompting some novices to assemble informal "shadow learning" opportunities [17]. The study identifies reduced participation as a learning mechanism, but its specialized clinical setting and safety constraints limit generalization. It does not show that automation inevitably produces deskilling; rather, competence becomes vulnerable when implementation removes graduated practice without establishing an equivalent developmental pathway.

Competence also depends on what organizations recognize as legitimate knowledge. Longitudinal evidence shows that predictive algorithms can change a "regime of knowing," gradually increasing the authority of algorithmic outputs while marginalizing experiential expertise [18]. Such shifts may improve consistency or reveal patterns unavailable to individuals, yet they can also reduce opportunities to articulate, compare, and refine situated judgement. The relevant concern is not preserving tradition against technology, but maintaining enough epistemic plurality to detect errors and interpret exceptions. Black boxing creates a related tension. Practices that conceal analytical complexity can make systems usable and coordinatable while restricting workers' ability to inspect reasoning, learn from discrepancies, or correct underlying processes [19]. Surface proficiency with outputs should therefore not be equated with retained competence. At the same time, future work may require new technical, socio-emotional, metacognitive, and adaptive capabilities that complement AI [20]. Claims of reskilling remain conditional on access to training, protected practice, feedback, and opportunities to use the new capabilities. The evidence identifies risks to learning and epistemic authority, but direct longitudinal measurement of actual skill decay remains limited.

Moral agency in automated systems

Moral agency concerns workers' practical capacity to recognize reasons, deliberate, question instructions, exercise judgement, and remain answerable for action. It differs from technical autonomy, which describes system operation, and from formal liability, which allocates legal or organizational responsibility. A nominal human decision maker may have little moral agency when information is opaque, decisions are time constrained, or disagreement carries no consequential route. Conversely, automated support need not eliminate agency when workers retain knowledge, authority, and credible contestability.

This distinction also separates formal policy from enacted practice. An organization may declare that employees remain responsible while simultaneously centralizing data, narrowing permitted responses, and penalizing deviation from algorithmic

recommendations. In that arrangement, responsibility is transferred without equivalent authority. The opposite problem occurs when broad discretion is announced but workers receive insufficient explanation or competence support to exercise it safely. Because algorithmic control is negotiated through local practices and power relations [21], moral agency should be evaluated through observable opportunities to question, delay, override, document disagreement, and obtain review, rather than through the mere presence of a human name on the final decision.

Experimental evidence indicates that authority source matters. Participants adhered more to unethical instructions from human than AI supervisors, suggesting that human and automated authority are not psychologically interchangeable [22]. This finding does not establish that AI supervision is ethically safer: laboratory or scenario-based tasks cannot reproduce enduring employment dependence, and automated systems may create other pressures through surveillance, ranking, or constrained choice. It instead shows that moral conduct depends partly on how authority is perceived and socially embedded.

Responsibility also fragments in several ways. AI can create gaps concerning culpability, moral accountability, public accountability, and active responsibility, each arising from different combinations of opacity, distributed design, institutional structure, and limited control [23]. Treating all such gaps as one problem risks assigning responsibility to frontline workers who cannot understand or alter the system. At the organizational level, algorithms redistribute direction, evaluation, and discipline, while workers and managers contest or accommodate these controls [21]. Moral agency is consequently relational: it depends on decision rights, explanation, worker power, escalation routes, and the distribution of consequences.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in meaningful work after automation reshapes identity and skill.

Table 2. Cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in Meaningful Work After Automation Reshapes Identity and Skill.

Construct, mechanism, or relationship	Representative context	Reported finding	Evidence design	Convergent evidence	Conflicting evidence	Methodological concern	Review interpretation
Identity disruption and reconstruction	Loan consulting and public-service redesign	Substitutive AI threatened role identity when core discretion was removed [10]	Qualitative case	Identity may later be reconstructed through learning and modified identification [12]	Adaptation is neither immediate nor guaranteed	Situated evidence across different technologies and occupations	Identity continuity depends on task centrality, recognition, alternatives, and time
Task substitution and purpose	Robotics, crowdwork, and office AI	Algorithmic control and matching had divergent associations with meaningfulness [15]	Normative, survey, and qualitative evidence	Removing drudgery may preserve valued contribution [13]	Human–AI practices produced different meanings within one implementation [16]	Cross-sectional mediation and early adoption	Evaluate the retained task bundle, not automation presence alone
Skill displacement and competence	Robotic surgery and expert knowledge work	Reduced participation generated informal learning pathways [17]	Ethnographic and process evidence	Algorithm adoption shifted epistemic authority [18]	Black boxing can enable use while restricting inspection [19]	Few direct longitudinal measures of skill decay	Monitor practice, diagnostic understanding, and recovery capability
Moral agency and responsibility	Experimental supervision and algorithmic control	Authority source affected unethical-instruction adherence [22]	Experiments, conceptual taxonomy, and integrative review	Responsibility gaps differ in form and source [23]	Control effects vary with context and worker power [21]	No single validated workplace agency measure	Agency requires substantive contestability and answerability
Proposed IPCA relationship	Cross-domain integration	Identity, purpose, competence, and agency may reinforce or undermine one another	Original proposed synthesis	The domains share task-design and authority mechanisms	Alternative sequences and moderators remain plausible	The complete cycle has not been tested	Use as an organizing framework, not a validated causal model

Note. Evidence-derived cells are cited to the relevant source. The final row is original proposed synthesis. Convergence indicates interpretive consistency, not pooled effects, causal proof, or framework validation.

Pathways to meaningful work redesign

Meaningful-work redesign should begin with work configuration rather than the assumption that a particular technology is beneficial or harmful. Digital technologies influence employee experience through changes in autonomy, skill use, feedback, relational conditions, and demands, making work design a central explanatory and intervention level [24]. The same system can therefore remove burdens in one configuration and intensify fragmentation or control in another. Redesign must examine the total role, including retained tasks, new exception work, invisible coordination, and the consequences of system failure. Algorithmic management is itself a work designer. Through allocation, direction, evaluation, and discipline, it alters task, knowledge, social, and contextual characteristics of jobs [25]. A redesign assessment should therefore ask who defines goals, who sees the basis of recommendations, which decisions remain contestable, how performance is evaluated, and whether workers retain opportunities to learn. Formal human involvement is insufficient when the person merely approves an output without adequate understanding, discretion, or authority.

A duality perspective further cautions that algorithmic arrangements may enable and constrain autonomy and value at the same time [26]. Matching may expand access to suitable tasks while evaluation narrows acceptable methods; decision support may improve diagnostic reach while weakening independent practice. Benefits do not automatically compensate for harms, particularly when they accrue to different groups. Evaluation should therefore be distributional as well as aggregate, attending to occupational status, experience, contractual position, disability, and access to development.

The proposed cycle also implies that redesign levers should be matched to the deficit identified. Task rebundling addresses fragmented contribution by reconnecting residual, interpretive, and relational activities to a visible outcome. Participatory role narration addresses identity disruption by allowing workers and affected groups to define how expertise and contribution are changing. Competence safeguards preserve practice, explanation, feedback, and recovery capability. Nondelegable decision rights identify judgements that require legitimate human authority and an effective route for disagreement. These categories may overlap, and their appropriateness depends on the occupation, hazard profile, institutional setting, and maturity of the technology. They are proposed design hypotheses, not certified controls or demonstrated guarantees of meaningful work.

The original synthesis proposed here is the Identity–Purpose–Competence–Agency, or IPCA, Meaningful Work Redesign Cycle. It asks four linked questions: Can workers preserve or reconstruct a credible role identity? Can they see and influence valued contribution? Can they develop, exercise, and recover relevant competence? Can they contest automated direction and remain appropriately answerable? Where deficits appear, proposed responses include task rebundling, participatory role narration, protected developmental exposure, diagnostic transparency, and nondelegable decision rights. Because task substitution can either remove drudgery or remove meaningful achievement [13], the cycle is diagnostic rather than preservationist. IPCA is an original integrative framework; its pathways, ordering, interactions, and decision rules remain unvalidated and require empirical testing.

Implications and future research

Organizational implications follow as bounded design questions. Before transferring a task, decision, or evaluative function, organizations should specify which identity functions, sources of purpose, learning opportunities, and responsibilities the existing arrangement carries. Monitoring should examine enacted practice rather than policy alone: whether workers can challenge outputs, whether exceptions provide learning or merely residual burden, and whether new expertise is recognized. These questions do not establish that every organization should retain existing work or apply the same safeguards.

Research should treat learning algorithms and organizing as co-evolving processes rather than stable interventions [27]. Longitudinal studies are needed before deployment, during adaptation, and after routines stabilize. Comparative field studies, phased rollouts, natural experiments, and mixed-method process tracing could distinguish technology effects from restructuring, job insecurity, leadership communication, or selection into AI-enabled roles. Repeated demonstrations of diagnosis and recovery would provide stronger evidence of competence than perceived deskilling alone.

Measurement is a further priority. Studies should distinguish perceived meaningfulness from task significance, occupational identification from generalized technology anxiety, self-reported skill confidence from demonstrated competence, and nominal oversight from consequential authority. Repeated measurement is necessary because initial threat, experimentation, routinization, and later dependency may produce different patterns. Analyses should report who gains discretion, status, developmental opportunity, and relief from undesirable work, as well as who inherits monitoring, exception handling, emotional labor, or accountability. Such distributional evidence is necessary to determine whether an apparently positive average conceals meaningful-work losses concentrated among less powerful employees.

Work-design scholarship also supports dynamic, multilevel, relational, and contextual analysis [28]. Future studies should connect individual meaning and identity to team coordination, occupational institutions, organizational governance, and labor-market conditions without inferring higher-level outcomes from individual perceptions. Worker-initiated job crafting may expand or reduce roles and resources in distinct ways [29], but adaptation should not be treated as a substitute for organizational responsibility. Configuration-specific research should jointly examine work characteristics, algorithmic

functions, and autonomy–value dualities [24-26]. The IPCA cycle would be strengthened, revised, or rejected through preregistered longitudinal tests, validated measures, behavioral competence assessments, authority experiments, and evidence of differential effects across worker groups.

Conclusion

Automation reshapes meaningful work when it changes more than task execution. Its consequences arise through the reconstruction or disruption of occupational identity, the visibility of valued purpose after substitution, opportunities to develop and retain competence, and the practical capacity to exercise moral agency. The reviewed evidence does not support a universal claim that automation impoverishes work, nor does it justify assuming that augmentation preserves meaning. Effects remain conditional on task centrality, implementation configuration, occupational context, worker power, time, and the distribution of benefits and burdens.

The principal contribution of this Narrative Review Article is to connect these domains and propose the IPCA Meaningful Work Redesign Cycle as an organizing synthesis. The cycle directs attention to reconstructable identity, visible contribution, developmental participation, and contestable judgement, while linking identified deficits to possible redesign questions. It is not a validated causal model, readiness framework, or universal managerial prescription.

The evidence base remains methodologically heterogeneous and contains substantial conceptual, qualitative, cross-sectional, and context-specific scholarship. Stronger conclusions require longitudinal and multilevel research, comparative implementation designs, direct assessment of competence, and tests of authority and responsibility in enacted work. Meaningful automation should therefore be treated as an open organizational-design problem whose consequences must be examined in practice rather than inferred from technical capability alone.

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