

Digital collective action against vulnerable work: a common-good HRM perspective on algorithmic HRM.

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Abstract

AI- HRM uses automated HR decisions based on significant amounts of employee data and on sophisticated analyses of these data. Thereby, new forms of employee control arise and algorithmic HRM has a potential to radically shift employment relations as well as to foster power imbalances in favor of employers. Within digital capitalism increasingly numbers of employees, especially vulnerable workers, like platform workers, face the threat of being controlled and exploited as well as of losing voice in the context of algorithmic HRM. In this conceptual article, we ask how a collective action based HRM can protect vulnerable workers from new forms of algorithmic control. Drawing on recent literature around digital activism identifying core (technological, interactional and personal) barriers to collective action we suggest a range of HR solutions (increased HRM reflexivity of AI-inequalities, a HRM rethinking of the value of work and HRM induced opportunities for collective action) that could empower disadvantaged stakeholders such as vulnerable workers with algorithmic HRM. We contribute to the literature on Common Good HRM, Algorithmic HRM and vulnerable workers.

Key words

Digital Capitalism, Digital Activism, Common-Good HRM, Conceptual Paper.

Introduction.

In a recent discussion on global trends and ‘shifting landscapes’, human resource management (HRM) scholars Harney and Collins (2021), expressed concerns that the discipline is in danger of being overwhelmed by the winds of change. The authors suggest that institutional pressure to maintain the ‘best practice HRM’ status quo, and a lack of professional reflexivity are reasons why HRM has failed to sufficiently engage with emerging changes and challenges such as polarization, demographic change and digitalization which have a high potential for disrupting employment relations. We argue that the increasing influence and application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in HRM (Pan and Froese, 2023), for example, represents a singular new challenge to the participation, efficacy, and rights of employees not just in conventional organizations but especially for vulnerable workers in the growing platform economy (Dollegas, 2022; Shaw, Fiers and Hargittai, 2023). We build on Pan and Froese’s (2023) recent definition that identifies “AI as artificial tools that can automatically accumulate experience (i.e., make sense of objective environments) and constantly learn from past experience to perform cognitive tasks” (p. 13). Specifically, we contend that this emerging multi-dimensional socio-technological threat behind platformization, which scholars argue is repurposing social-relations, driving labour-process intensification and establishing a new form of techno-normative control (Gandini, 2019; Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020), has been underestimated by a deterministic HRM preoccupied with internal issues of strategy and fit and normative narratives of economic value creation (Harney and Collings, 2021). As a result, a growing power inequality (of both capital and knowledge) has resulted in increased monopolization of resources, uneven socio-political-economic influence, regulatory immunity and control, and participatory inequality (Törnberg, 2023; Shaw, Fiers and Hargittai, 2023). For example, a reinforced digital capitalism and all-encroaching “AI - arms race” (Budhwar et al, 2023), now invading the HRM domain (Basu, Majumdar, Mukherjee, Munjal and Palaksha, 2023), has often meant workers experiencing at the organizational level, increased flexibilization and uncertainty, technological unemployment, job precarity and social insecurity and at a personal level, growing stress and often a loss of self-confidence, agency, and respect (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021).

However, despite the potential negative multi-level impact on workers, wider stakeholders (NGOs, trade unions, environment) and the underprivileged (minorities, female, poor, less-educated, workers in developing countries), their interests have rarely been included in the narrative around AI in HRM (Malik, Budhwar and Kazmi, 2023). This lack of ethical reflection

and embracement is a major deficit as AI affects an increasing number of people in conventional as well as newer forms of employment relations, such as the platform or “gig” economy (Duggan, Sherman, Carbery and McDonnell, 2020). It is however the ‘small boats’, the vulnerable workers with low-paid jobs or in temporary employment with little job security, (such as service workers in ‘on-demand’ platform labour), who are under the most threat from growing exploitation (Van Doorn, 2017), as well as the dramatically shifting power imbalance in favor of employers and platform owners that is enabled by the application of AI. This indicates a need (in the face of increased HRM datafication), Cheng and Hackett (2021), for a more transparent, socially reflective and stakeholder inclusive HRM paradigm, with a new social purpose aimed at actively enabling democratic forms of AI-HRM governance to develop (Aizenberg and Van Den Hoven, 2020).

At the same time, alternative stakeholder-centric HR models are beginning to emerge. For example, the recently proposed Common-Good HRM (CGHRM), where the *“sustainability paradigm is transforming the purpose of HRM from single economic to multiple – including common good – purposes”* (Aust, Matthews and Muller-Camen, 2020, p.9). However, common good values such as Dignity, Solidarity, Plurality, Subsidiarity, Reciprocity and Sustainability (Hollensbe, Wookey, Hickey, George and Nichols, 2014), and broader stakeholder interests (apart from perhaps concerns of information privacy), are seldom referred to in the debate around AI-HRM. From the perspective of traditional business (and HRM) strategy, concerns of democratic rights and participation tend to be considered a question of ethics and wider social justice which go beyond current understandings of business purpose and the responsibilities of HRM (as an efficient contributor of organizational economic success). As a result, HRM has embraced this established “value-free” narrative, and is enthusiastically (and we argue, often insufficiently critically), implementing AI in almost all areas of HRM practice, an issue of growing ethical concern which our text focuses on. Specifically, we therefore explore the current ambiguous role of AI-HRM in the situation of vulnerable workers in the platform or “gig” economy and the concurrent disempowering influence of traditional hierarchical strategic HRM models of control and governance. Drawing on foundational literature extolling the benefit of communal grassroots democracy for stakeholder agency (Ostrom, 2000), and recent studies which identify the technological interactional, and personal barriers for collective action in AI-HRM (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020), we adopt a CGHRM lens (Aust et al, 2020) and we analyze how HRM can overcome these barriers by supporting enhanced workplace democracy and participation (e.g., through increased HRM reflexivity of

AI-inequalities, a HRM rethinking of the value of work and HRM induced opportunities for collective action.

Our arguments are organised around a few questions. Should HRM be concerned with broader ethical issues of increasing AI-related social exploitation and worker vulnerability? If yes, how can HRM counteract the negative disempowering impact of datafication? Should this be a top-down managerial enterprise or be achieved through shared responsibility and strategies of inclusive stakeholder participation and collective action as exemplified in digital activism? Has HRM the power and competencies to equally address technological, interpersonal, and personal barriers? If a more action-based, communitarian approach of co-determination is chosen, how can people be managed so that strategic goals of economic performance are not sacrificed? These are the types of enquires about purpose, power, agency and collective action being asked by the new and emerging CGHRM paradigm (Aust, et al, 2020), and the motivation behind our conceptual paper.

Our research therefore asks the following core question: *Could (and if yes, how can) a collective-action based CGHRM can prevent vulnerable workers from new forms of techno-normative control?*

In this conceptual paper, we proceed as follows. 1. First, we present an overview of the AI-HRM nexus, before 2. exploring the relationship between the characteristics of AI-HRM and the situation of vulnerable workers with a specific focus on co-determination and collective voice. 3. We then explain the relationship between AI-HRM and the common good. 4. Fourthly, we explore AI-related precarity, inequality and a loss of democratic participation as a collective action problem. 5. We then make the case for a collective action solution before 6. Discussing how a CGHRM can address the specific technological interactional, and personal barriers to collective action in the digital. 7. Finally, we offer a concluding discussion.

1. AI and HRM.

AI has the possibility to profoundly impact the future development of HRM (Pan and Froese, 2023), and is already dramatically transforming practices across a wide area of HR operational responsibilities, including the psychological sensitive areas of employee relationship management, employee engagement and talent management (Strohmeier, 2020). However, major concerns with AI are the danger of excessive power asymmetries in favor of the employer, including misuse and manipulation, threats to autonomy and agency and the unequal cooption of knowledge and resources (Stark and Pais, 2020).

At the same time, and despite a continued concerns about AI-ethics, ambiguity of stakeholder value, and how to implement AI-HRM socially responsibly, HRM has gained a central role in the adoption of AI in organizations and has generated literature examining a range of challenges and opportunities (Basu, et al, 2023). In general, research around algorithmic management, broadly defined as *“a system of control where self-learning algorithms are given the responsibility for making and executing decisions affecting labour, thereby limiting human involvement and oversight of the labour process”* (Duggan, Sherman, Carbery, & McDonnell, 2020, p. 119), in HRM, has focused on either an analysis of practical business applications of AI, or, the consequences for the labour market and employment, i.e., technological unemployment (Pan and Froese, 2023). There remains, however, a lack of interdisciplinary theoretical knowledge of HRM, and about how AI represents a fundamental change of the way people lead or are managed in organizations, and its consequences for employment relations and organizational culture, i.e., a new kind of HRM emerging due to employment of AI. A challenging dilemma and research gap, and a core focus of our text, is how controlling algorithms and an AI-HRM acts to deepen existing power imbalances and negatively impacts employee self-efficacy, agency and well-being (Dutta and Mishra, 2023).

On a positive note, scholars have recently suggested that algorithmic HRM is in fact dualistic in nature, can simultaneously limit and enhance job-autonomy and value to workers and can have both positive and negative outcomes for stakeholders (Meijerink and Bondarouk, 2023). The degree to which HR algorithms are restricting or enabling is therefore context (e.g., HR norms, values, purpose, architectures) dependent. A core premise of our text is that while HR algorithmics can be designed to constrain and control worker agency, a common good value-driven culture of socially responsible HRM decision making and strategy, embedded in for example, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, can help positively shape and redesign algorithms to create value and empower workers- and create new awareness about the antecedents of employee engagement, productivity and well-being.

However, although there is growing research about the strategic importance and the future skills and competencies needed to implement AI in HRM, issues of ethical and social responsibility such as the impact of the emerging phenomena of AI-linked monopolization of power on increscent worker dependency and loss of voice (and HRM’s response, or lack of), have yet to be extensively researched (Malik, Budhwar and Kazmi, 2023). As a result, a technocratic-centric AI-HRM has failed to perceive the inherent potential of democratic collaboration in the search for more ethical, sustainable and stakeholder-friendly strategies, especially for vulnerable workers. A deficit out text aims to explore and propose solutions for.

2. AI-HRM and vulnerable workers.

In an increasingly deregulated and globalized world, the protection of vulnerable workers is complex and multi-faceted. Therefore, vulnerable workers' protection in digital capitalism calls for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond mere economic reform and policy change to address the root causes driving labor market vulnerability. For example, the ILOs Decent Work agenda, (ILO, 2020) is based in the fundamental common good ideal of the democratic participation and inclusion of the maximum number of stakeholders and societal actors as possible. This goal has however become more difficult in the platform economy where power structures are shifting and new forms of organization and voice are emerging as a result, in online communities (Bucher, Schou and Waldkirch, 2023). Furthermore, with regard to questions of governance, apart from the undemocratic concentration of knowledge and influence in the hands of a few digital elites, a narrative of technological determinism acts to effectively hide the inherent monopolizing and disenfranchising characteristics of a hyper-rational, digital capitalism. As a result, there is growing doubt about the moral legitimacy of delegating control and decision-making processes to the “elusive and strange” (Lange, Lenglet and Seyfert, 2019), big data world of algorithms.

A developing social-critique and techno-skepticism, however, does not mean that there has been a measurable increase in sensitivity, reflexivity, and awareness of democratic principles within organizations. Nor that managers are becoming more selective in their choice of digital HR strategies when facing concerns of privacy and control and demands for increased democratization, knowledge-ownership, transparency, social dialogue and the protection of workers' rights – especially for those most vulnerable with limited organizational-power, leverage and influence. In fact, with the emergence of AI in HRM the ethical and social responsibility demands around the AI-assisted decision making of HR managers have deepened and have yet to be fully resolved (Malik and Budhwar, (Eds.), 2023).

Certainly, per se, the problem of vulnerable workers is not new at all, and indeed has been the main point of concern for much labour market research in the past (e.g., Doellgast, 2022; Doellgast, Lillie, and Pulignano, 2018). However, the concepts of vulnerable workers and precarious labour has gained extra attention during the recent pandemic and resulting economic crises as an outcome of the increasing number of individuals who do not have access to secure employment and struggle with low pay working conditions, and limited job security, as new technologies can substitute new areas of economic activity that previously required human work. At large, the term “vulnerable workers” fits well into consideration of the “classic” as well as digital capitalism, since it refers to individuals who are at a disadvantage in the labor

market and face obstacles that make it difficult for them to obtain gainful employment and to protect themselves in the workplace. These workers typically include youth, women, migrants, minorities, and individuals with disabilities who may be subject to discrimination, exploitation, or abuse. Traditionally, vulnerable workers comprised day laborers, temporary employees, and elderly, or simple laborers who were engaged in precarious employment arrangements without adequate job security and limited access to labor protections.

However, recent advances in such technologies as AI also now pose a threat also to the jobs of skilled knowledge workers and people employed in creative industries and the culture sector. The institutional conditions have, therefore, radically changed making the aim of economic-societal-ecological sustainability and the protection of worker's rights more difficult than ever. Historically, the main problems that vulnerable workers faced in the workplace have included exposure to health hazards, greater risk of work-related accidents, and lack of access to prevention and protection measures. These issues have been generally well-managed by a system of representative democracy, strong labour laws, and mechanisms of state regulation at the national level and a collaborative effort between international organizations (such as the ILO and the International Trade Union Confederation ITUC), governments, employers, NGOs and other stakeholders in the labor market at a global level, at least in stable, developed economies. However, over the past few decades, slowly but gradually, global socio-economic processes of hyper-commodification, individualization, globalization and digital knowledge monopolization have radically shifted the narrative, disrupted established labour relations and eroded the power of political institutions, trade-unions and local communes (Keller, 2020). In digital capitalism particularly, a unique negative dimension has appeared, where a new type of employee, a platform worker, often struggles to gain representation nor win protection measures. Platform workers are individuals who perform work through digital platforms, such as Uber and similar firms. These workers are often classified as independent contractors rather than employees, and they typically use their own equipment and set their own schedules. Platform work normally includes a variety of tasks, such as driving, delivery, cleaning, or freelance work and can be considered a sub-form of precarious work (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2021).

The plight of vulnerable workers in the labor market is, therefore, a pressing issue that must be addressed urgently, but for which HRM managers can no longer delegate responsibility. A reason being that despite some policy initiatives in recent years (such as the ILO decent work appeal and the broader United Nations Sustainable Development goals, the SDGs), the aim to tackle labor market vulnerability and improve working conditions of vulnerable workers from

the perspective of global governance, has yet to be achieved. As a result, the societal role and responsibility of corporations and HRM (for example, in protecting democratic rights and employee voice) in a digital age gains a new significance. Especially as deepening AI-related institutional inequality also presents a dilemma and area of potential future conflict for human resource management as digitalization is now dramatically transforming practices across a wide area of HR operational responsibilities, including the psychologically sensitive areas of employee relationship management and talent management (Strohmeier, 2020).

We argue therefore, rather than adopting an unchallenging and purely utilitarian attitude to the techno-rationalization of workplace communication and organizational relations, HRM therefore needs to realize that technology is not value-neutral and has dramatic consequences for HR-Employee relations. Algorithms for example, are not just useful, neutral technological tools, but reflect the (often anti-commons, market-orientated) biases, assumptions and conventions held by the actors and decision-makers behind them. The progressing digitalization of all areas of HRM practice can have both positive and negative outcomes for organizations, individuals, and society (Lumi, 2020). This ambiguity needs to be reflected in the development of future sustainable models.

Following scholars who call for increased HRM reflexivity of on both the benefits and human impact of AI (Chowdhury, Dey, Joel-Edgar, Bhattacharya, Rodriguez-Espindola, Abadie and Truong, 2023), and a HRM rethinking of the value of work and HRM induced opportunities for collective action (Basu, Majumdar, Mukherjee, Munjal and Palaksha, 2023), we attempt to break this socio-technical impasse. Specifically, in the spirit of interdisciplinary research to develop a new AI-HRM social responsibility, we approach the issue from an “outside-in” stakeholder perspective and explore how a new and emerging interdisciplinary CGHRM paradigm (Aust, Matthews and Muller-Camen, 2020), can help counteract the negative and enhance the positive impact of AI on vulnerable workers.

3. AI-HRM and the Common-Good.

Although business and market interactions have always been characterized by conflicting interests between business and society, management and employees as well as by asymmetric power relations between shareholders and stakeholders of the firm, demands for equality, increased democracy and governance are often more salient at times of economic and societal disruption and crisis. And this is currently the case with regard to the relationship between common-good concerns of inclusion and diversity, increasing digitalization, workplace precarity and technological unemployment, particularly for vulnerable, low-skilled and

platform workers (Van Doorn, Ferrari and Graham, 2023). However, the principles of societal value, job-security, rights at work and social dialogue, but also personal meaning, dignity and common purpose lie at the heart of the recently propose Common-Good HRM paradigm concerned with managing people more sustainably (Aust et al. 2020; Ren et al. 2023). In the search for more sustainability, researchers in HRM have taken two approaches. Those in the first stream propose ways to integrate profit-seeking of business with wider goals of the society and advocate for sustainable HRM, or humanistic management (Kostera, 2016) and humanistic leadership (Fu et al., 2020) as a way to balance traditional economic-efficiency based models of HRM with the unconditional recognition of human dignity of workers and treating them as holistic persons, rather than just means to achieve business goals. More recently, however, another values and social-benefit based stream of scholarship has emerged, with proposals for a fundamental shift of HRM to establish a paradigm of HRM for the Common-Good (Aust et al., 2020). Compared to established strategic approaches a new Common-Good HRM is based on the four fundamental components of maximum (both internal and external) stakeholder participation, fair, trusting and reciprocal relationships, a pro-societal “outside-in” focus and a renewed commitment to the psychological contract which characterized earlier industrial relations (Aust et al, 2020). Rather than a preoccupation with narrow internal antecedents of performance, the adoption of a CGHRM perspective extends the reach (and impact) of HRM beyond the organization. To stronger emphasis this communal responsibility the concept has been further enriched and defined in relational terms as *“an outside-in, critical-pragmatic and relational multi-stakeholder approach to SustHRM which emphasizes the centrality of communal purpose, common good values and collective action in reducing social inequality while increasing HRMs contribution to socio-ecological impact.”* (Matthews and Muller-Camen, 2024, conditionally accepted).

However, in the new economic system that has developed because of the widespread use of digital technologies, particularly related datafication and algorithmization, practitioners tend to accept the more market-rational arguments from the former stream (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2022). Rather than addressing collective common-good concerns of social justice and distributive democracy, and increasing access to social protection and participation, macro-level faith has mainly been placed in market forces and the “California ideology” (Schor, 2020) – of the power of technologically-driven innovation to provide economic growth, fair wealth distribution and social equality. This being said, and despite the obvious common good mobilizing potential of new technical architectures, business and organizational progress with regard to solving global crisis and towards more social equality and ecological balance remain inconsistent and

contested. However, at a broader societal level, with the digital transformation the potential of social movements (e.g., Occupy Wallstreet, Arab Spring, Black lives matter), and power of collective action for a positive and lasting societal transformation has gained an entirely new dimension (Leong, Pan, Bahri, Fauzi, 2019; Young, Selander and Vaast, 2019).

In practice, to a limited degree and in non-conventional business contexts, a pro-social change of business purpose is happening (Frémeaux and Michelson, 2017). For example, new forms of self-managing organizations are evolving (Müller-Camen, Weibler, Matthews and Riess, 2019), and value-driven, grassroots movements are working together to mobilize for civic causes and systemic change both in the natural (e.g., Economies of Communion, Economy for the Common-Good) and virtual world (e.g., Stonewall Forever, Your Plan Your Planet, Blue Heart, Wikileaks, Anonymous). However, with regard to vulnerable workers and the role of HRM, the question remains how to mirror these developments in mainstream organizations and to utilize new technological tools to initiate and support beneficial collective action for isolated workers in a labour market increasingly characterized by a lack of workers' representation, outsourcing, remote work, contract "clickwork", and temporary, insecure and precarious working conditions (Joyce et al., 2019). We argue that the key to progress is a reassessment of hierarchical, non-democratic systems of governance. This also applies to ideologies of AI determinism.

New digital technologies can as a result, enable managers to monitor their business practices, even those in globally dispersed supply chains, to address social challenges and make their business conduct more responsible (Vankatesh et al. 2020). *After a comprehensive review of AI-HRM interaction and outcome literature, Basu et al, argue that "AI induced outcomes are contingent upon the nature and creation of the governance mechanism that drives its adoption and application-based usages in the organizational context"* and propose an organizational process of collective governance of AI (2023, p.10). An example of online collective governance can be seen in the emergence of the internet organized phenomena of digital activism and technology-enabled, system-critical, virtual democratic communities (George and Leidner, 2019). This development shows that the digital revolution (apart from creating negative externalities and labour market disruption), also offers opportunities for collective resistance and positive social change (Young, Selander, Vaast, 2019), particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups (Edrington and Lee, 2018).

We argue these online shared-interest networks of organized collective-action can be considered (under certain conditions), an example of a contemporary (platform-based) form of social governance proposed by institutional scholars (Albareda and Sison, 2020; Ostrom, 2000).

Although still broadly defined (Yang, 2016), rather than being motivated by utility-maximizing self-interest, polycentric networks of digital activism are maintained and driven by a shared sense of identity, trust, meaning and collective purpose. Certainly not all types of virtual collectives and protest are geared towards contributing to the common-good (Greijdanus et al., 2020). However, in many cases, virtual grassroots movements have succeeded in shifting the neo-liberal narrative of greed and competition, or at least in strongly influencing critical public debate and questioning established norms of power and agency (Madison and Klang, 2020). Furthermore, in civil-orientated activism, the common-benefit reaches beyond the interests of the immediate community members. This example challenges the assumption that self-managed collectives are ineffective in driving positive sustainable change and acts as a benchmark for the development of alternative models of AI-HRM governance. Furthermore, it is this multi-stakeholder focus on enhancing collective capabilities for societal sustainability outcomes (such as job-security and employee voice), that also characterizes and differentiates the Common-Good HRM “out-side in” perspective from more market-centric models (Aust *et al*, 2020; Kramar, 2022). A premise of our critical essay is therefore that a hierarchical, disconnected and control obsessed managerial HRM has, failed to fully assess nor correct the negative impact of AI in HRM on employee voice and opportunities for co-creation and how certain vulnerable groups are unequally affected (Cooke, Dickmann and Parry, 2022). In turn, a more pro-societal, common good and collectivist HRM offers a future viable solution. Due to the dominance of an individualistic mindset, an initial step forward is the recognition of AI-HRM systemic inequality as a collective-action problem.

4. AI-HRM inequality as a collective action problem.

Although there is a large volume of common-good, collectivist literature in the social sciences, economics and business ethics, in the area of management and HRM, research has tended to prioritize more psychological, behaviorist, and less contextual, institutional approaches. As a result, societal and personal challenges such as unemployment, poverty and individual failure are viewed as a matter of (a lack of) talent, motivation, and effort, rather than systemic capitalist design, repressive social norms, inherent discrimination, embedded social inequality, and a problem of failing solidarity and opportunities for collective action. This individualist, neo-liberal narrative is reflected in a history of HR managerialism and a myopic concentration on concerns of administrative control, effective selection, competency training, extrinsic motivation, performance management and material compensation. Underling this paradigm is the further assertion “*that rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their*

common or group interests.” (Olson, 1965, p2), and that egocentric individual interests will always subvert any attempts at joint collective action, even against the mutual benefit (Hardin, 1984).

As a result, it is argued, that only strong mechanisms of control and regulation (e.g., private ownership, top-down management, and more recently AI-HRM), can overcome the problem of freeriding resource over-exploitation, and inefficiency. This deterministic worldview has long influenced the development of scientific management and strategic HRM. According to scholars, an “inside-out” (Dyllick and Muff, 2016), hierarchical, pro-market and individualistic ontology is leading to the demise of HRM as a relevant discipline (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018), especially (we argue), with regard to the question of sustainability and now the emerging social dilemma of workers’ vulnerability when facing the challenge of AI-HRM.

From a ‘commons’ perspective however, the issues of resource distribution, vulnerability and job insecurity, can be regarded as a collective action problem of dysfunctional, hyper-rationalist organizational behavior rather than a non-business issue of social policy or wider ethics. For instance, in the platform economy, a diminishing elite number of “freeriding” corporations continue to profit from a paradigm of deregulation, immunity and a system of monopoly capitalism and have delegated the responsibility for sustainability and the socio-economic costs of disruption to conventional organizations and wider society (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy and Ladegaard, Wengronowitz, 2020).

From a mainstream perspective, to counteract these disruptive developments and to ensure market-stability, a number of labor market reforms and structural adjustments would seem necessary. One area that would require immediate attention is the need for stable and secure employment opportunities, including improved labor protections and social security measures. Furthermore, non-discriminatory recruitment and selection practices would not only need to be put in place to ensure equal employment opportunities for all individuals, but measures implemented to provide training and skill-building opportunities for vulnerable workers, which can enhance their employability and improve their job prospects. Moreover, effective enforcement mechanisms would be deemed essential to ensure that labor laws and regulations are properly adhered to (Treuke, 2019), as employers need to be held accountable for providing safe and healthy work environment for all workers. This requires a collaborative effort between the government, employers, and other stakeholders in the labor market.

However, the task of providing and regulating the social protection of workers in the fluid and fragmented world of the platform economy is very different to the traditional employment relationship context (Joyce, Stuart, Forde and Valizade, 2019). For example, in terms of

employment status (contractual), conditions (remote, temporary, precarious and task-related) and power asymmetries and dependency (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). From a collective-action perspective, compound problems such as AI-related exploitation, marginalization and poverty therefore, cannot be overcome by the market nor increased regulation alone, but require multi-level, multi-stakeholder solutions (Ostrom, 2000). Whereas in standard organizations, collective action, teamwork and performance are guided and controlled by a strict hierarchical structure and HR practices, in the context of platformisation and open, self-managed collectives where tasks and responsibilities are shared between multiple actors, more innovative and flexible “architectures of participation” (Kornberger, 2022, p.139), will be necessary.

Fortunately, an alternative, more democratic paradigm exists. For example, Institutions for collective action is a collectivist framework for governing the commons which was originally advocated by the political economist Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, 2000). The framework refers to the process of managing and governing shared resources, such as land, water, or digital platforms, in a collaborative and democratic manner, and involves the creation of a community of users who collectively manage and maintain the resource, often through the use of digital tools and platforms. Examples include community gardens, cooperatives, open-source software projects and more recently, the knowledge commons. The goal of pro-social collective action is to create a more equitable and participatory society, where resources are managed for the benefit of all, rather than for the profit of a few.

Based on a belief in the inherent willingness and ability of social actors to cooperate in the management of common-pool resources, it offers a narrative based on self-governance as an alternative to market-based or social policy approaches. Ostrom’s studies were based in the natural world. Transferred to the industrial domain of the organization, institutional scholars for instance, have long proposed polycentric systems of democratic organization as a solution to collective action problems such as climate change (Colding, Barthel, Ljung, Eriksson and Sjöberg, 2022), at the macro-level, but also for joint business stakeholder ventures (Bridoux and Stoelhorst, 2022) and more recently for value-driven organizations (Albareda and Sison, 2020).

The concept of “Commons organizing” for example, seeks to challenge the dominant model of competitiveness, private ownership and market-based exchange and entails a reassessment of the purpose and value of work (Albareda and Sison, 2020). This model is based on the organizing processes of (1) work in common; (2) subsidiarity and polycentricity; (3) commons production and distribution; (4) community governance and common ownership; and (5) collective entrepreneurship, trust and human dignity. Similarly, it is this shared purpose,

outward orientation towards benefitting the commons, the focus on agency and autonomy of stakeholders, collective accountability and the role of trusting and reciprocal relations which correlates exceptionally well with the newly introduced CGHRM paradigm's conclusion "*that a new understanding of the purpose of HRM is needed to achieve effective design and implementation of Sustainable HRM systems and contribute to solving today's grand sustainability challenges*" (Aust *et al*, 2020, p.9).

Adopting a CGHRM perspective, driven by subsidiary and solidarity and ideally operationalized in a framework of commons-organizing (Albareda and Sison, 2020), or another type of polycentric system of collective action (Ostrom, 2009), would, therefore, involve designing HRM cultures and networks of transparency and participation to counteract the social-destructive monopolizing tendencies of AI, and to enable vulnerable workers to realize the mutual benefit of organizing collectively for the greater good. However, before we further argue the case for CGHRM specifically, we need to explain why a collective action approach is preferable to policy level or individual-based solutions.

5. Collective Action Solutions.

Within a mainstream market-based understanding of organizational and HR responsibility most of the problems associated with AI-HRM would be considered a matter of wider economic or perhaps even social policy. And at a macro-level, to counteract these dangers and impediments, a range of moderating governance solutions have been suggested. For example, a platform policy framework has recently been put forward with the aim to reduce stakeholder dependency and to increase co-determination and cooperative-ownership, and proposes a) to reduce the power of gatekeeping platforms (e.g., through data protection and transparency), to share and monopolize data, b), to increase state support for digital cooperatives and c), to create public data pools and common-good orientated public platforms (Pentzien, 2021). Although technological solutions such as designing user-friendly algorithms and filtering tools (Emanuelson, 2018) tend to be preferred, others have drawn up normative standards of platform governance such as principles of Fairwork, specific standards of pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation for digital workers (Graham *et al.*, 2020), partly based on the ILO's decent work agenda. While we feel that these types of technical and regulatory proposals add weight to our argument for a common good approach, they (in our view, too optimistically) rely on political commitment rather than grassroots activism and true systemic change organized around social collectives.

According to (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020), social collectives can be separated into two types: non-organized collectives such as (volatile, spontaneous, lack coordination and identity), and organized collectives (stable, strategically coordinated, distinct identity and aims). The foundations of effective collective action and the main defining characteristics of the latter organized social movements, which distinguishes them from the former are a), institutionalization dynamics, b), a collective identity, and c), internal processes of leadership development (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). The purpose, direction, actions, and impact of collectives are therefore still dependent on social factors and not on the type of (real, virtual) medium utilized. This form of digitally enabled grassroots mobilization can also be used by HRM. However, in the perceived moral-free zone of the internet, the speed, frequency, and impact of negative side-effects (fake news, propaganda, harassment, racism, authoritarianism), have also grown (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). As a result, web-based organizing represents an opportunity for a “new commons” (NC) (Hess, 2008), to develop which challenge established norms, but at the same time, a threat to the common-good. Yet, the determining factor behind systems of self-organizing is not just the ability of people to work together for their own interests (whether online or offline), but rather an agreement on shared values of dignity, respect and the common-good, which includes a commitment to uphold the universal principles of solidarity, tolerance, democracy, and human flourishing (Sison and Fontrodona, 2012).

Technological architectures per se, therefore, although they often facilitate and act as an initial point of formation, do not replace shared values, the processes of social organizing and structuring, the formation of a collective identity, the importance of social interactions and the inevitable emergence of asymmetries of power, and therefore ultimately, do not determine collective action. This awareness provides an opportunity for HRM to pro-actively and positively intervene to reduce the technological and interaction hurdles and personal costs and (mental health) dangers of platform engagement, which scholars have recently highlighted (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020). According to scholars well-organized communities of shared interest and social have three distinctive characteristics, namely, 1. institutionalization dynamics comprising informal rules and standardized patterns of behaviour, 2. a collective identity, expressing a group’s shared vision), and 3. internal processes of leadership development, from which influential activists emerge (Dolata and Schrape, 2016).

The challenge for HRM with a broader sustainable purpose, is, therefore, to navigate this new landscape, and create the ideal social context (organizational cultural conditions) to facilitate the *institutionalization the collective* (Dolata and Schrape, 2016), and enhance stakeholder’s

mutual communication and capabilities for self-efficacy and identity formation within a digitalized organizational context. However, by taking a critical stance to digital capitalism and understanding the fundamental nature of collective organizing outside of the standard institutional context of the organization, a new supportive and collaborative role of positive mediation for HRM, in facilitating a solution based in HRM cultural change to clear the multi-level obstacles facing vulnerable workers can emerge. We now turn to these AI-Barriers of collective action.

6. Barriers to Collective Action in the Digital.

Despite the initial theoretical claim of freedom from excessive bureaucracy and surveillance and unsurpassed access of knowledge, participation in digital activism in praxis is accompanied by a range of (technological, interactional and personal) challenges and barriers (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020).

Technological.

A characteristic of digital capitalism is the tendency, or indeed the commercial prerogative of knowledge monopolization and commodification in this new type of capitalism (Blank and Pybus, 2020). A big concern is the controlling and filtering role of algorithms, which essentially reflect the ideology and interests of the developers. As a result, over time, a core dominating narrative develops, and pressure increases to conform to the programmed view. The negative, anti-commons outcome of this manipulation can be seen in the phenomena of fake-news, digital-bubbles, echo-chambers, and ultimately polarization and online intolerance as well as racism. These anti-pluralistic practices “which are subsequently embodied in software, structure the possibilities of use and are experienced by activists as an external and immutable force to which they must adjust” (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020, p.1626) are, however, a core element of the platform business model (Kuehn and Salter, 2020). A CGHRM could for example involve stakeholder in the design and planning of new software programs, discuss openly the risks and benefits and provide as much access to knowledge as possible thus seeking AI-HRM solutions to everyday challenges facing employees such as a lack of transparency, stress and workload rather than a focus on efficiency and productivity alone. As a first step, this would require *increased HRM reflexivity* of inherent AI-inequalities (e.g., further marginalization of weaker; older, less-educated, ethnically different, and gender-diverse groups).

Interactional.

The potential social benefit of AI for example, in genomic research and medicine (Quazi, 2022) or in education (Ng, Leung, Chu and Qiao, 2021), is undeniable. However, at the same time, AI-influenced web-use can also paradoxically reinforce inequalities and social exclusion (Tewathia, Kamath and Ilavarasan, 2020), undermine the value of personal real-life interactions and provide an anonymous space, a mask for passivity and feigned engagement and digital slacktivism – disengagement (Greijdanus, *et al.*, 2020). In addition, a major interactional barrier to digital agency and social activism is the manipulative relational power of stronger, experienced platform actors (and owners) to intervene, drive and distort the narrative in their own interests, a possible dilemma in AI-HRM and antithesis to the common good ideal of maximum stakeholder inclusion. As a counterbalance, a CGHRM could use AI to help connect rather than disconnect people, to create innovative new ways for people to interact both digitally and in the analog world. Resources freed by saving through AI-HRM could be reinvested in creating space and time for workplace interactions, extra employee support and coaching and building social capital. A stronger focus would be placed on the negative impact of AI and an inclusive culture created more sensitive to bias and discrimination. As a first step, this would require a HRM *rethinking of the value of work* (e.g., as a place to find meaning, receive recognition and build social capital).

Personal.

A growing concern in recent times is the impact of social media and platform work on user's mental health and well-being. According to research, the personal (and reputational and career) risks and costs of digital work in particular, are often underestimated (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020). Apart from the risks to privacy, the use of social media can also have a negative impact on self-worth and confidence due to the influence of negative feedback, cyberbullying and hostility (Naslund, Bondre, Torous and Aschbrenner, 2020). Although a useful and popular tool for social interaction, chatroom activity has also been found to contribute to feelings of depression and social isolation, especially amongst the future workforce of young adults (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, studies show that digital work is associated with increased stress and mental health risks particularly amongst vulnerable workers experiencing low pay and financial difficulty (Glavin and Schieman, 2022). In response, a CGHRM could help develop an environment characterized by trust, recognition and reciprocity in support of mental health. AI would be aimed at reducing workload and providing more individual choice rather than driving a process of acceleration and time-space compression. Financial savings would be used to provide fair pay and secure stable employment. Contract platform workers would be treated equally as other employees and this reflected in work contracts, HR support

and benefits. As a first step, this would require *HRM induced opportunities for collective action* (e.g., by both encouraging both direct democracy activism and by supporting and enhancing collaboration with representative democratic institutions such as Trade Unions and external NGOs).

7. Discussion, contributions and limitations.

By reflecting on new developments in organization of work, in particular use algorithmic approaches and predictive analytics, we explore how a Common-Good HRM can overcome the technological interactional, and personal barriers for collective action in AI-HRM. With reference to three characteristics of successful social movements (institutional dynamics, collective identity, leadership development) within digital activism we propose specific solutions (increased HRM reflexivity of AI-inequalities, a HRM rethinking of the value of work and HRM induced opportunities for collective action), to empower stakeholders in a digitalized HRM. Thereby, we suggest different but complementary approaches to collective action organizing that can be integrated to develop more democratic and collaborative frameworks, with an overarching objective of enhancing the participation and social inclusion of vulnerable workers, especially platform workers.

However, with the rapid pace of AI-HRM implementation and the possible dramatic consequences for organizational legitimacy, social relations and individual well-being we contend that HRM has a heightened responsibility to accentuate and to address the drawbacks as well as emphasizing the business and strategic importance of AI-HRM. Furthermore, open virtual spaces of collaboration, control, and production cannot be expected to fully replace physical workplace democratic zones of reciprocal interaction and social dialogue (Rosa, 2022). The adoption of a Common-Good HRM which encourages various degrees of self-governance can provide a vital resource for disenfranchised and marginalized vulnerable workers and can act as a stepping-stone towards a future more radical (but positive) change of economic and business systems. As a result, HRM can continue to improve efficiency and performance while gradually reframing its purpose and technological practices to enable and promote the inclusion and well-being of vulnerable workers within an (digital) organizational structure of deliberate democratic participatory self-governance and collective action.

As any other study, ours comes with limitations. First, we present these prescriptions as universally applicable, and did not explicitly address cultural, political and legal contexts in which organizations operate. We acknowledge that in some cultures, sensitivity to the common good versus individuals' profit from business is different than in others. Similarly, acceptance

of discrepancies between status of people do differ between countries. As such, organizations operating across the globe will see different levels of acceptance of commons organizing. For instance, HR managers managing a multicultural workforce and migrant workers who are a substantial cohort within the vulnerable workers' category or relocating from one country to another will face challenges securing support of workers for practices based on commons organizing.

Next, we assume a static if not monolithic nature of firms offering platform-based work. While few are indeed powerful in relation to the individual worker, the technological evolution and availability of other digital solutions for communication make it possible for workers to form groups and exchange knowledge outside of the official corporate channels. As such, digital capitalism opens the possibility for both – more autocratic and more democratizing trends to develop simultaneously.

Last, our analysis implies avenues for future research. In this study we implicitly assume inclusivity and democracy being both the goal and effect of common-good HRM. While studying other effects remain outside the scope of this paper, we call for research to explore in more depth other effects of Common-Good HRM implemented in organizations operating in digital capitalism, and potential tradeoffs (e.g., related to financial performance, employee turnover rate, etc.) which may appear when HR shifts from a classic, liberal approach to labor relations to the Common-Good HRM approach. Further, since recent work on perceptions of democracy and democratic institutions (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021; 2023) revealed important gender-based differences, and women constitute a major group of vulnerable workers, we call for more gender-sensitive research on commons good organizing. In a similar vein, we call for opening the black-box of “democracy” in organizations, and research with a more fine-tuned approach to the value of transparency, balance of power, and specific practices securing workers' rights, similar to a range of democratic systems which exist in practice (Harrison & Boyd, 2018).

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