

When the Algorithm Becomes the Manager Who Answers for Its Decisions



A worker opens the scheduling app and finds fewer assignments than usual. Their rating has fallen, but the screen doesn't explain which events affected it. Customer support sends a standard response. The local manager says the system makes the allocation.

The worker still has an account, but little useful access to work. After several unsuccessful attempts to obtain an explanation, they start prioritizing another organization. The first business may record the result as declining engagement without recognizing the management decision that contributed to it.

Canadian HR needs to address that gap. When software influences schedules, ratings or access to assignments, the organization needs a clear account of how consequential decisions are made and who can review them. A vendor's system can support management, but it doesn't remove the need for internal accountability.

Platform-worker rights trends make this issue especially visible. They also offer a useful prompt for employers using scheduling and performance systems elsewhere. Retention depends partly on whether people can understand decisions affecting their work, correct material errors and obtain a response from someone with authority.

Start with the consequence rather than the technology label

An algorithm is a set of instructions for processing information. It doesn't need to use advanced AI to shape someone's working life. A rule that stops offering assignments after three recorded cancellations can have a substantial effect even if it is technically simple.

HR should begin by identifying the decision. Does the system suggest a schedule, rank candidates for assignments, calculate a performance score or restrict access to work? What happens automatically, and where does a person exercise meaningful judgment?

A manager who routinely accepts the recommendation may provide little practical review. Conversely, a system that flags unusual cases for a qualified person can help identify problems without deciding the outcome.

Map that distinction honestly. The organization needs to understand its actual process, including settings managers have changed and informal practices that developed after implementation. The vendor's description of intended use may not reflect how the business now relies on the product.

Keep the workforce and legal frameworks separate

This article uses platform work to examine an issue that can also affect casual employees, on-call teams and independent service providers. These groups don't have identical legal rights or employment status. Using an app doesn't establish one common category.

Ontario's Digital Platform Workers' Rights Act includes a right to written reasons for removal of platform access and, subject to exceptions, two weeks' written notice for removal lasting 24 hours or more. Those requirements apply within the statute's defined scope, rather than to every scheduling system used in Ontario. [1]

British Columbia's targeted ride-hail and delivery framework also addresses removal of access. Its regulation requires reasons for temporary removal and information about any response or reconsideration process. The rule doesn't itself require the employer to create an appeal process. [2] HR should distinguish that legal requirement from a recommendation to provide meaningful review.

Outside those schemes, assess applicable employment, contract, labour, human rights and privacy obligations. A reduction in assignments can raise different issues depending on the relationship and its terms. Don't assume leaving an account technically active resolves the consequences of removing practical access to work.

Understand what the score represents

A rating may combine customer feedback, cancellations, response times and other data. The number can look objective while concealing substantial choices about what counts and whose explanation matters.

Ask how an event enters the record. If a customer cancels because the organization provided incorrect information, is that attributed to the worker? If a task takes longer because access to the site was delayed, does the system treat the delay as poor performance? If an employee rejects work outside declared availability, is that recorded as unreliable behaviour?

Review how those events affect future opportunities. A lower score may produce fewer offers, which reduces the chance to build a stronger recent record. That sequence can make an error self-reinforcing if the system doesn't provide a way to correct it.

Customer feedback also needs context. A complaint may identify a genuine problem or reflect an inaccurate account, discriminatory expectations or circumstances outside the worker's control. It should be investigated appropriately before supporting a consequential adverse decision.

The response shouldn't be to ignore all ratings. Define which information is relevant, how reliability is assessed and what additional evidence is required before the organization acts.

Treat missing explanations as a management problem

A generic message that a worker failed to meet standards may communicate an outcome without giving them a useful opportunity to understand or respond. If the person doesn't know which requirement was missed, they can't correct their practice or challenge an inaccurate record.

An appropriate explanation identifies the relevant criterion, the event or information that mattered and the resulting decision, subject to legitimate confidentiality and legal limits. It doesn't necessarily require disclosing source code, another worker's information or details that would compromise safety or security.

HR should work with the operational owner to establish what the organization can explain. If the vendor can't show how an outcome was reached, that limitation belongs in the deployment decision. It shouldn't become an excuse passed to the worker after the system affects their income.

A meaningful response also distinguishes a recommendation from a final decision. Workers should know whether the organization has made a determination, whether information is still being assessed and what happens while the review continues.

Recognize the separate Quebec requirement

Quebec provides an important example beyond platform-specific legislation. Section 12.1 of its private-sector personal information law addresses decisions based exclusively on automated processing of personal information.

Where that provision applies, the enterprise must inform the person that the decision was made in that way. On request, it must provide specified information, including the personal information used and the reasons and principal factors and parameters leading to the decision. The person must also have an opportunity to submit observations to a staff member in a position to review it. [3]

That is a specific legal rule, not a general statement that every algorithm-assisted Canadian management decision carries the same statutory rights. Whether a particular process is exclusively automated and whether the law applies need assessment on the facts. Adding a nominal human step shouldn't be treated as a substitute for that assessment.

The broader governance lesson is straightforward. Before deploying a system, determine what explanation and review the organization must provide and whether the product and operating process can support them. HR, privacy, legal and technology leaders need to resolve that question together.

Give the reviewer enough authority to matter

A review process isn't meaningful if the reviewer can only restate the system's output. The person needs relevant information, competence and authority to investigate the issue and correct an outcome where warranted.

Specify who can change an inaccurate event record, reconsider an allocation decision and address downstream effects. A corrected score may not automatically restore access if another rule continues to restrict the account. The organization needs to trace the full sequence.

Provide a route beyond the original decision-maker for material unresolved issues where appropriate. A manager responsible for meeting staffing targets may have valuable context but shouldn't be the only source of review when their own conduct is in question.

Keep urgent safety and security concerns within the applicable response process. Meaningful review doesn't mean ignoring a serious risk until every fact is resolved. It requires an authorized interim decision, prompt investigation and a clear distinction between a temporary safeguard and a final finding.

Explain the next step and update the worker if it takes longer than expected. A functioning review route should have a service commitment the organization can meet, not an aspirational promise that leaves cases unanswered.

Compare review costs with avoidable loss of capability

Consider a hypothetical Canadian organization with 120 active assignment-based workers. Assume 12 leave during a year. Management wants to test whether unresolved allocation disputes contributed to some departures, without assuming all turnover came from the system.

Suppose replacing one active worker involves \$700 in recruitment and screening expenditure, \$500 in paid orientation and 12 hours of internal onboarding at a loaded cost of \$50 an hour. The defined replacement cost is \$1,200 in expenditure plus \$600 in employee capacity, or \$1,800 in total economic cost.

If a review process helped avoid four otherwise preventable departures, the replacement costs avoided would be \$4,800 in expenditure and \$2,400 in capacity. That scenario is worth examining, but the retention effect would need evidence. Workers can leave for several reasons, and a fair review may properly uphold a decision they dislike.

Now assume the organization receives 60 review requests annually. An average of 90 minutes each at a loaded cost of \$65 an hour uses capacity valued at \$5,850. Add \$2,000 in process and system expenditure. The annual economic cost is \$7,850, before any other implementation costs.

Under those assumptions, avoiding four replacements produces \$7,200 in economic benefit, less than the \$7,850 process cost. Retention alone wouldn't establish a positive return. Better decisions, reduced repeated disputes or other benefits may still justify the investment, and applicable obligations may require action regardless of the financial comparison.

These are illustrative Canadian-dollar figures, not benchmarks or a legal damages estimate. The value of the example is that it tests the proposal honestly. HR shouldn't promise that every fairness measure immediately pays for itself. It should show the actual costs, the evidence needed and the consequences leadership must consider.

Avoid measuring success through fewer complaints alone

A fall in complaints may mean decisions improved. It may also mean workers couldn't find the review route or stopped believing it was useful.

Track whether people receive timely responses, whether material errors are corrected and whether corrections reach the systems that allocate work. Examine repeat cases and decisions overturned for the same reason. Those patterns may indicate a configuration or policy defect that individual reviews won't resolve.

For retention, compare participation over time, accounting for demand and worker availability. An account that remains open isn't evidence that the person continues working. Reduced offers also shouldn't be mistaken for voluntary withdrawal.

Use feedback carefully. Ask whether workers understood the reason, knew how to respond and received a useful outcome explanation. A person can disagree with the result while recognizing that the process considered their evidence.

Review access to the process as well. Does it work for someone using a phone between assignments? Are language, accessibility or account restrictions preventing participation? If a worker needs an active account to challenge deactivation, the organization has built a barrier into the remedy.

Put workforce questions into procurement

HR should be involved before a system starts influencing work opportunities. Ask the vendor which data the product uses, what settings affect allocation and what records are available for reviewing a disputed decision.

Determine whether authorized staff can override an outcome, how changes are recorded and whether corrections propagate. Ask how the organization will detect a configuration change that affects workers and who must approve it.

Review privacy, security, retention and access arrangements with the appropriate owners. Collecting more personal information isn't automatically a better way to explain a decision. The organization needs a lawful, proportionate approach matched to the actual purpose.

Test realistic cases before purchase or expansion. Include a customer cancellation attributed to the wrong person, an employee with approved availability limits and a disputed complaint. Ask the team to demonstrate how each would be investigated and corrected.

A product that performs well on ordinary allocations may still be unsuitable if consequential errors can't be understood or remedied. That limitation should be visible alongside price and scheduling efficiency.

Give HR an owner to work with

Algorithmic management can fall between departments. Operations owns staffing, IT owns access, procurement owns the vendor relationship and HR receives the complaint. Without an accountable process owner, each can address part of the issue while the

underlying decision remains unchanged.

Name the business owner of each consequential decision. Establish who controls the criteria, approves system changes and reviews outcomes. HR should help assess workforce effects and ensure appropriate handling of concerns, while technical and legal owners provide expertise within their responsibilities.

Train managers to explain the process accurately. They shouldn't tell workers the system made the decision when the organization selected the rules and can reconsider the outcome. Nor should they promise an override they aren't authorized to provide.

A short decision record can identify the relevant evidence, the assessment and the result. Keep it factual, protect access and follow retention requirements. Records should support accountability without turning every worker interaction into unnecessary surveillance.

Review one consequential decision before expanding the system

Start with a process that affects access to work. Trace a recent disputed case from the original data through the outcome and any review. Identify what the worker was told, what the reviewer could see and whether anyone could correct the result.

Address immediate legal or operational issues through the appropriate processes. Then select the most important design improvement, such as clearer attribution of cancellations, a functioning review contact or an approved way to correct an allocation record. Test the change using actual operational conditions.

Retaining a flexible workforce requires more than making assignments easy to distribute. People also need confidence that the organization can account for consequential decisions about their work. HR can help establish that confidence by ensuring the process has an explanation, a responsible owner and a practical way to correct a mistake.