



Perceived Autonomy and Sustainable Motivation in Flexible Work Arrangements

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Abstract

Flexible work arrangements have moved from peripheral employment practices to an important element of contemporary work design, yet their motivational consequences remain uneven across employees and organizational contexts. The present study examines perceived autonomy as a psychological mechanism through which flexible work arrangements may contribute to sustainable employee motivation. Drawing principally on Self-Determination Theory and the Job Demands–Resources perspective, the paper distinguishes structural flexibility from experienced autonomy. An employee may formally possess flexibility over work location or schedule while still experiencing surveillance, unpredictable demands, restricted decision authority, digital over connectivity, or expectations of continuous availability. Consequently, flexibility alone cannot be assumed to generate durable motivation. The study adopts a conceptual–simulation research design integrating established and recent literature on job autonomy, hybrid work, autonomous motivation, work–life balance, and sustainable workplace well-being.

A transparent hypothetical dataset representing 500 flexible workers was modeled across five levels of perceived autonomy. The simulation was designed to illustrate theoretically expected relationships rather than to substitute for empirical observations. Sustainable motivation was conceptualized through persistence, autonomous goal engagement, work enthusiasm, willingness to sustain effort, and reduced dependence on external control. The modeled results indicate a progressive increase in sustainable motivation as perceived autonomy rises, with the simulated motivation index increasing from 52 among very-low-autonomy profiles to 89 among very-high-autonomy profiles. Boundary control, managerial trust, competence support, and meaningful flexibility further strengthen this relationship, whereas digital monitoring, excessive availability expectations, and blurred work–life boundaries potentially weaken it. The findings suggest that organizations should evaluate flexible work policies not merely according to the number of remote days or scheduling options offered, but according to the extent to which employees experience genuine discretion over when, where, and how legitimate work objectives are achieved. The study contributes an autonomy-centered framework for understanding why apparently similar flexible work arrangements may generate substantially different motivational outcomes and provides a foundation for subsequent multi-industry empirical validation.

Keywords: perceived autonomy; sustainable motivation; flexible work arrangements; hybrid work; autonomous motivation; self-determination theory; job autonomy; work–life balance; employee engagement; work design



1. Introduction

Flexible work arrangements have become an increasingly significant feature of contemporary employment, encompassing practices such as flexible working hours, hybrid schedules, telework, compressed workweeks, location flexibility, and various forms of employee-controlled scheduling. Recent scholarship characterizes flexibility as multidimensional, involving temporal, spatial, and technological dimensions rather than merely the opportunity to work from home. This distinction is important because the psychological consequences of flexible work depend substantially on who controls the flexibility and how that flexibility is implemented. Employee-oriented flexibility may provide greater discretion over work timing and location, whereas organization-oriented flexibility can require employees to adapt continuously to operational demands. A major 2026 systematic review and meta-analysis similarly emphasizes that flexible work arrangements can improve work–life outcomes and organizational attachment when they provide meaningful control, but can also intensify boundary permeability and work–family conflict when poorly designed.

The present paper focuses on perceived autonomy, defined here as an employee's subjective experience of having legitimate discretion over important aspects of work, including location, scheduling, task sequencing, work methods, and selected work-related decisions. Perceived autonomy is not identical to contractual flexibility. Two employees may officially receive the same hybrid schedule but experience fundamentally different levels of autonomy. One may be trusted to organize work around agreed outcomes, while another may encounter intensive electronic monitoring, frequent compulsory check-ins, highly restricted hours, or expectations of constant online presence. The validated Autonomy in Hybrid Work Scale developed using data from 313 information-technology employees in Bengaluru therefore highlights the need to assess employees' actual autonomy experience instead of assuming autonomy from the formal label attached to a work arrangement.

Evidence from telework and hybrid-work research also demonstrates why the autonomy mechanism deserves explicit attention. Gajendran and Harrison's meta-analysis of 46 studies involving 12,883 employees reported generally beneficial telecommuting outcomes, including increased perceived autonomy and reduced work–family conflict. More recent work-design research has shown that remote workers' experiences depend on job autonomy, social support, workload, monitoring practices, and self-discipline rather than on work location alone. These findings do not establish that every flexible arrangement produces equivalent benefits; rather, they indicate that flexible work outcomes are contingent on the quality of work design surrounding the arrangement.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Perceived Autonomy as a Core Feature of Flexible Work

The first objective is to distinguish the formal availability of flexible work arrangements from the psychological experience of autonomy within those arrangements. The study examines how control over working time, location, task scheduling, work methods, and routine decision-making may influence employees' interpretation of flexibility. This distinction is necessary because formal flexibility can coexist with managerial control, unpredictable workload demands, electronic surveillance, and compulsory digital availability. Accordingly, the study treats perceived autonomy as an employee-experienced job resource rather than as an automatic characteristic of remote or hybrid employment.



2.2 To Assess the Relationship Between Autonomy and Sustainable Motivation

The second objective is to analyze theoretically how increasing levels of perceived autonomy may correspond with sustainable forms of work motivation. Sustainable motivation is conceptualized through continuing willingness to exert effort, internally endorsed goal pursuit, work enthusiasm, persistence, and motivational resilience. The study investigates whether autonomy can help shift motivation away from compliance-dependent effort toward more self-regulated and durable engagement, consistent with Self-Determination Theory.

2.3 To Identify Conditions Supporting Autonomy-Based Flexible Work

The third objective is to identify organizational conditions under which flexibility is most likely to support sustainable motivation. Particular attention is given to managerial trust, outcome-based performance expectations, role clarity, digital infrastructure, competence support, work–life boundary control, and relatedness. The study also considers conditions capable of undermining autonomy, including excessive monitoring, unpredictable scheduling, forced availability, digital overload, and the uncontrolled expansion of work into personal time.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Autonomy and the Quality of Work Motivation

Autonomy has long occupied a central position in theories of human motivation and work design. Self-Determination Theory proposes that autonomy reflects the experience of volition and psychological endorsement rather than simple independence. Employees can collaborate closely with supervisors and colleagues while still experiencing autonomy if they perceive their actions as meaningful and self-endorsed. Conversely, an employee working alone from home may experience limited autonomy when behavior is heavily monitored or externally controlled.

Gagné and Deci explained that autonomous motivation can include intrinsic motivation as well as forms of extrinsic motivation that employees have meaningfully internalized. This distinction is particularly useful in organizational settings because most employment contains externally established objectives. Sustainable motivation therefore does not require employees to find every task inherently enjoyable. Instead, individuals may maintain high-quality motivation when they understand the value of their responsibilities and have sufficient discretion to determine appropriate methods for fulfilling them.

3.2 Flexible Work, Hybrid Work, and Employee Control

Earlier telecommuting literature identified autonomy as one of the principal psychological mechanisms through which off-site work could affect employee outcomes. Gajendran and Harrison's meta-analysis found that telecommuting generally increased perceived autonomy and produced beneficial associations with job satisfaction, performance, turnover intentions, role stress, and work–family conflict. Importantly, their analysis also demonstrated that telecommuting effects depended on work intensity and contextual conditions rather than following an unconditional positive pattern.

Nevertheless, flexible work should not automatically be interpreted as employee autonomy. Wöhrmann, Dilchert, and Michel distinguished individual-oriented flexibility, which provides employees with greater working-time control, from organization-oriented flexibility, which requires



employees to adjust working hours according to employer needs. Their findings support the importance of employee-controlled working time for work–life balance. Similarly, recent systematic evidence emphasizes that flexibility can generate either resources or demands depending on how control is distributed.

3.3 Sustainable Motivation, Boundaries, and the Autonomy Paradox

The motivational advantages associated with autonomy can be weakened when flexible work causes work to become continuously accessible. Digital communication technologies allow employees to perform tasks beyond conventional temporal and spatial boundaries, but the same technologies can increase interruptions and expectations of permanent availability. Flexible work may therefore simultaneously expand discretion and intensify work.

Working-from-home studies have produced comparable findings. Niebuhr and colleagues reported that perceived autonomy was positively associated with job satisfaction, while greater proportions of weekly home working were also associated with some adverse stress-related outcomes. Galanti and colleagues similarly demonstrated that job autonomy and self-leadership represented important factors in remote-work productivity and engagement, whereas family–work conflict, isolation, and distracting environments could undermine remote working experiences.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employs a conceptual–simulation research design combining theoretical synthesis with transparent numerical modeling. The approach examines how different levels of perceived autonomy may correspond with sustainable motivation based on assumptions derived from established literature on self-determination, job demands, work design, flexible work, and work–life boundaries.

No employees were surveyed for the numerical analysis. The simulation therefore does not represent observed population statistics or causal evidence. A hypothetical population of 500 employee profiles was distributed equally across five perceived-autonomy categories. The model demonstrates potential relationships for future empirical investigation.

4.2 Construct Operationalization

Perceived autonomy was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct incorporating work-location autonomy, working-time autonomy, scheduling autonomy, task-method autonomy, and routine decision autonomy. This structure recognizes that autonomy in flexible and hybrid work environments can involve several distinct dimensions rather than representing a single generalized form of workplace freedom.

Sustainable motivation was modeled through willingness to persist with demanding work, internally endorsed goal commitment, continuing work enthusiasm, motivational resilience following setbacks, and sustained effort without intensive supervision. Each component was normalized to a 0–100 scale, while the Sustainable Motivation Index represented their average modeled value.

Table 1: Operational Framework for the Conceptual–Simulation Model

Construct	Operational Dimension	Analytical Interpretation	Scale
Perceived Autonomy	Control over work location	Ability to select an appropriate work setting within organizational requirements	0–100
Perceived Autonomy	Working-time control	Discretion over starting, finishing, and selected working periods	0–100
Perceived Autonomy	Scheduling control	Ability to organize task sequence and working rhythm	0–100
Perceived Autonomy	Method autonomy	Discretion regarding legitimate methods used to achieve work objectives	0–100
Perceived Autonomy	Decision autonomy	Participation in routine decisions directly affecting one's work	0–100
Sustainable Motivation	Goal ownership	Degree to which work objectives are psychologically endorsed	0–100
Sustainable Motivation	Persistence	Willingness to continue productive effort over time	0–100

4.3 Simulation and Analytical Procedure

Five hypothetical autonomy groups were established: very low, low, moderate, high, and very high autonomy. Each group consisted of 100 simulated employee profiles, producing a total analytical population of 500 profiles. The Sustainable Motivation Index was modeled to reflect the theoretically expected positive association between perceived autonomy and high-quality motivation, including stronger goal ownership, persistence, resilience, and willingness to sustain effort.

The simulation was designed to illustrate theoretical relationships rather than establish causal effects or predetermined increases in motivation. The analytical procedure involved defining autonomy dimensions, developing sustainable-motivation indicators, generating five autonomy scenarios, comparing motivation and boundary-control patterns, and interpreting the simulated results against relevant literature. The principal proposition was that higher perceived autonomy would correspond with stronger sustainable motivation when role clarity and organizational support were maintained. A second proposition suggested that excessive monitoring, boundary erosion, and unpredictable availability could weaken the motivational benefits of autonomy.

5. Analysis and Results

5.1 Autonomy Gradient in Sustainable Motivation

The modeled analysis produces a clear autonomy gradient. Sustainable Motivation Index values rise from 52 under very-low-autonomy conditions to 61 at low autonomy, 71 at moderate autonomy, 82 at high autonomy, and 89 at very high autonomy.

The largest practical interpretation of this pattern is not the numerical difference itself, because the figures are simulated. Rather, it is the theoretical proposition demonstrated by the gradient:

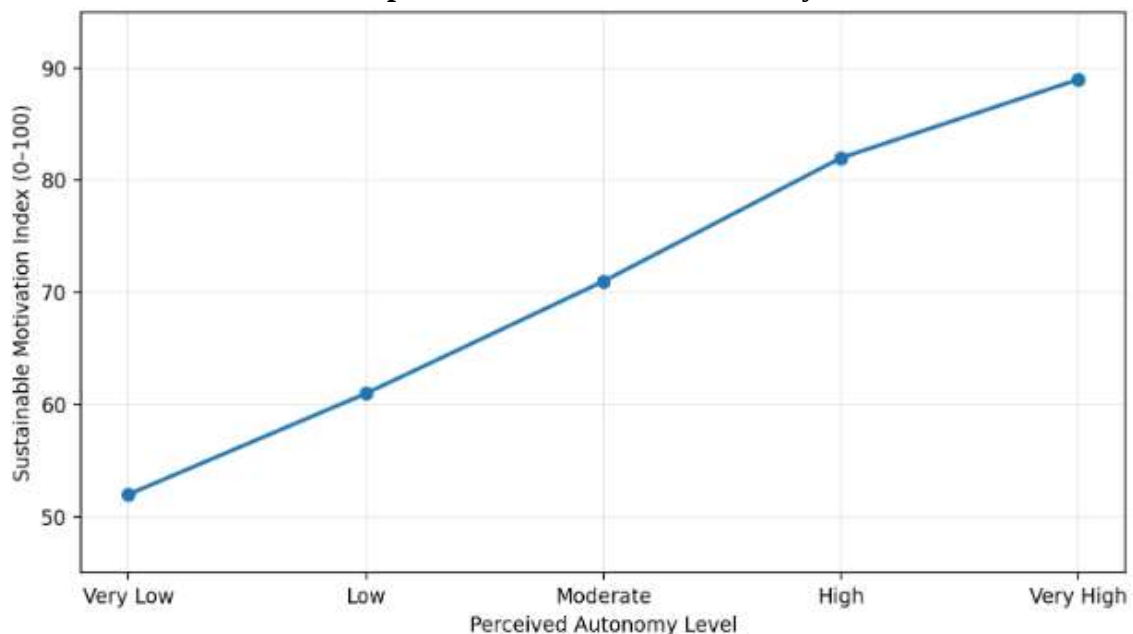
employees are expected to maintain stronger motivation when flexibility is experienced as genuine discretion rather than as a managerial scheduling mechanism.

Table 2: Simulated Autonomy and Sustainable Motivation Outcomes

Perceived Autonomy Category	Simulated Profiles	Autonomy Index	Sustainable Motivation Index	Boundary-Control Index	Estimated Motivational Condition
Very Low	100	24	52	46	Predominantly compliance dependent
Low	100	39	61	53	Limited psychological ownership
Moderate	100	57	71	65	Balanced but context sensitive
High	100	76	82	78	Strong autonomous engagement
Very High	100	90	89	86	Highly self-regulated motivation

5.2 Graphical Interpretation

Figure 1: Simulated Relationship between Perceived Autonomy and Sustainable Motivation





The simulated line graph presents an approximately progressive increase in sustainable motivation across autonomy categories.

Graph values: Very Low = 52; Low = 61; Moderate = 71; High = 82; Very High = 89.

The upward trajectory indicates that the conceptual model does not treat motivation as an automatic consequence of remote working. Rather, flexible work becomes increasingly motivational as employees experience stronger discretion over legitimate work decisions.

5.3 Interpreting Autonomy Together With Boundary Control

The analysis suggests that autonomy and boundary control should be considered together when evaluating sustainable motivation. Employees may have apparent freedom regarding work location and scheduling, yet motivation may decline if they are continuously expected to respond outside legitimate working periods. The simulated Boundary-Control Index increased from 46 under very-low autonomy to 86 under very-high autonomy, illustrating how well-designed autonomy may support clearer transitions between work and nonwork responsibilities.

This relationship can be expressed as: Meaningful Flexibility → Perceived Autonomy → Psychological Ownership → Sustainable Motivation. Conversely, excessive monitoring and constant availability may transform formal flexibility into reduced experienced autonomy and motivational depletion. The managerial distinction is therefore important: organizations should provide flexibility that genuinely increases employee control rather than flexibility that simply extends work demands. Effective boundary norms and organizational support are essential for maintaining sustainable motivation in flexible work arrangements.

6. Discussion

6.1 Why Perceived Autonomy Matters More Than Formal Flexibility

The central interpretation arising from the study is that formal flexible-work arrangements and experienced autonomy are related but conceptually distinct phenomena. An organization may announce a hybrid-work policy and nevertheless establish conditions that restrict meaningful employee discretion. Employees may be permitted to work from home while being required to maintain constant camera visibility, provide frequent activity reports, respond immediately to messages, or follow rigid scheduling procedures.

This distinction helps explain the mixed results found in flexible-work literature. Research does not support a universal conclusion that more remote work is always better or always worse. Instead, outcomes vary according to job design, leadership, technological demands, home-working environment, task characteristics, work–family circumstances, and employee preferences. Wang and colleagues' work-design analysis demonstrated that autonomy and social support can protect against specific remote-working challenges, while excessive workload and monitoring can undermine effective remote work.

6.2 Autonomy as a Resource for Sustainable Rather Than Temporary Motivation

A second contribution of the study involves distinguishing sustainable motivation from temporary motivational activation. Short-term performance can often be increased through deadlines, supervision, competition, incentives, or external pressure. Such mechanisms are not inherently inappropriate, but an



organizational system that depends continuously on external pressure may not create durable employee engagement.

Flexible work can provide a particularly suitable context for such internalization. Employees who can organize periods of focused concentration, coordinate responsibilities around legitimate personal demands, select an effective working location, and exercise reasonable judgment over task execution may experience stronger ownership of work outcomes.

This does not imply that autonomy eliminates accountability. Sustainable autonomy requires:

- clear performance expectations;
- appropriate deadlines;
- transparent responsibilities;
- accessible managerial support;
- reliable digital systems;
- competence development; and
- fair evaluation based on legitimate outcomes.

6.3 The Limits of Autonomy: Boundaries, Isolation, and Digital Control

Autonomy should not be interpreted as unlimited individual discretion because organizational work requires coordination, communication, shared standards, deadlines, and collective responsibilities. Flexible arrangements can also create boundary erosion when employees remain accessible beyond working hours. Therefore, sustainable autonomy requires clear expectations regarding availability, workload, and transitions between professional and personal responsibilities.

Autonomy must also be considered alongside competence, relatedness, resources, and organizational support. Not every occupation or employee has equal access to remote work or flexible schedules. Sustainable flexible-work systems should therefore combine employee discretion with role clarity, appropriate support, trust, and coordination. The objective should be balanced autonomy rather than unrestricted independence.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between perceived autonomy and sustainable motivation in flexible work arrangements through an integrated theoretical and simulation-based framework. The analysis indicates that the motivational value of flexible work does not automatically result from remote work, hybrid schedules, or flexible hours. Instead, it becomes meaningful when employees experience genuine control over appropriate aspects of their work. The simulated Sustainable Motivation Index increased from 52 under very-low-autonomy conditions to 89 under very-high-autonomy conditions. These values are illustrative and should not be interpreted as empirical effect sizes.

The study further emphasizes the distinction between formal flexibility and experienced autonomy. Flexible policies may lose their motivational value when employees face excessive monitoring, unpredictable availability expectations, rigid control, or continuous work–life boundary expansion. In contrast, meaningful discretion, clear accountability, managerial trust, adequate resources, reliable technology, and reasonable boundaries may strengthen sustainable motivation. The theoretical contribution of the study is an autonomy-centered understanding of flexible work: flexibility creates



motivational potential, while perceived autonomy determines how effectively employees can use that potential. Future research should examine this framework through longitudinal, multi-industry, cross-cultural, and empirically validated studies.

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