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Digital Empathy and AI: Can Machines Support Employee Well-Being in the Workplace?

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ABSTRACT

As artificial intelligence (AI) systems are increasingly integrated into human resource management, a critical question arises: Can machines facilitate genuine support for employee well-being? This study investigates the emergent concept of digital empathy-the simulation or enhancement of empathic processes through AI-and examines its application in supporting employee mental health, workload management, and emotional recognition in organisational settings. Drawing on a mixed-method case study approach, the research integrates qualitative interviews with HR and well-being officers (n=15) and a content analysis of digital wellness tools deployed in two multinational companies. It also includes survey data from 125 employees using AI-based well-being platforms. The findings reveal that while AI tools can contribute to early detection of stress signals, provide personalised nudges, and simulate empathic interactions through chatbots and sentiment analysis, their effectiveness is heavily mediated by design, data ethics, and human oversight. Importantly, employees expressed ambivalence-many welcomed support nudges, but distrusted surveillance-like features. The study concludes that AI can support well-being only when designed with transparency, consent, and hybrid human-AI collaboration. Recommendations include involving employees in co-design of digital wellness tools and ensuring that AI complements-not replaces-human empathy. This study contributes to the growing field of AI and emotional intelligence in the workplace, challenging simplistic assumptions about machine capabilities and offering a framework for ethical, human-centred AI use in employee care.

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Introduction

The growing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into workplace systems is reshaping not only how tasks are automated but how employees are emotionally supported and monitored. Among the most provocative developments is the emergence of AI-powered well-being systems-platforms that offer mental health nudges, analyse emotional cues, and recommend burnout prevention interventions. At the heart of this development lies the concept of digital empathy-the capacity of AI systems to simulate or mediate empathic processes traditionally seen as uniquely human. This study explores whether AI can meaningfully support employee well-being or if its involvement risks creating a shallow, surveillance-based mimicry of care. The promise of AI in mental health and well-being is backed by a growing ecosystem of technologies such as sentiment-detecting chatbots (e.g., Woebot), predictive burnout analytics (e.g., Microsoft Viva), and wearable devices tracking physiological stress. Proponents argue that AI's ability to detect patterns invisible to the human eye offers unprecedented tools for proactive well-being management [1]. However, critics warn of the psychological and ethical dangers of replacing human sensitivity with algorithmic logic [2,3]. Furthermore, the boundary between support and surveillance becomes dangerously thin when biometric or sentiment data is repurposed for performance evaluation. ****Recent research from Western contexts has also explored how AI-powered educational and well-being platforms integrate cloud technologies, augmented reality, and simulation to enhance emotional awareness and accessibility-offering useful parallels for workplace applications [4,5].****

Recent literature has attempted to reframe AI not merely as a tool for automation but as a relational actor in the workplace [7]. In this framing, AI-mediated interactions must be evaluated not only for efficiency, but for emotional legitimacy, perceived authenticity, and ethical alignment. Yet little empirical research exists on how employees themselves experience these tools, and under what conditions digital empathy is perceived as supportive or invasive.

This study addresses this gap by analysing how AI-powered well-being systems are used, interpreted, and contested in real organisational contexts. Drawing on a mixed-methods case study involving interviews, surveys, and digital tool analysis, this paper investigates both the technological and human dimensions of AI-driven employee care.

The Following Research Questions Guide the Study:

1. How do AI systems simulate or mediate empathy in employee well-being support?
2. How do employees perceive and respond to AI-driven well-being initiatives?
3. What ethical, emotional, and relational dynamics shape the success or rejection of digital empathy tools?

Accordingly, The Study Is Guided by the Following Objectives:

1. To examine the mechanisms through which AI tools simulate empathy in workplace well-being systems.
2. To explore employees' subjective experiences of AI-based well-being platforms in two corporate settings.
3. To develop ethical and design-based recommendations for

responsible implementation of digital empathy in HRM.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Strategic Foundations of Well-being

Employee well-being is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model asserts that well-being results from the balance between job demands and available resources such as autonomy, feedback, and support [7]. The PERMA model by Seligman expands this by focusing on five drivers: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment [8]. From a strategic HRM perspective, well-being is increasingly seen not only as a moral imperative but as a pillar of organisational resilience and competitive advantage. Research consistently links well-being to job satisfaction, retention, creativity, and team cohesion [9,10]. When employee well-being is prioritised, the return is visible in both employee engagement and financial performance.

Contemporary Challenges and Organisational Responses

The complexity of modern work environments has introduced several challenges to managing employee well-being. Digital overload, remote work isolation, job insecurity, blurred boundaries between work and life, and increased precarity contribute to heightened stress and burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, revealing deep inequalities in access to support [11]. Organisational responses include employee assistance programmes, flexible work schemes, and well-being apps. However, these often focus on individual resilience rather than systemic change, and fail to address deeper cultural or structural stressors. Leadership, inclusion, workload balance, and autonomy remain among the most critical factors influencing well-being outcomes.

Critique of Current Practices and Well-being Interventions

Despite good intentions, many well-being interventions are criticised for being superficial or tokenistic. Critics argue that the popularisation of mindfulness apps and resilience training may obscure more significant cultural issues such as toxic management, inequity, or lack of voice [12]. The term 'well-being washing' refers to the trend of promoting surface-level solutions while leaving exploitative conditions intact. Furthermore, many programmes are designed for a generic employee, ignoring intersectionality and neurodiversity. The absence of robust evaluation frameworks also undermines impact assessment, with most initiatives relying on satisfaction surveys rather than behavioural or health outcomes.

AI, Digital Empathy, and the Future of Employee Care

AI technologies have recently emerged as a novel influence in the landscape of workplace well-being. From chatbots offering CBT-style support (e.g., Woebot, Wysa) to analytics platforms predicting burnout (e.g., Microsoft Viva), AI is reshaping how care is delivered. These systems promise personalised, scalable, and stigma-reducing access to support. Some research finds modest improvements in well-being, particularly in access-limited settings 1,13]. However, concerns abound over 'algorithmic empathy'-the simulation of concern without genuine emotional understanding [2]. Furthermore, employees are increasingly aware of the dual function of these systems: to help, but also to monitor. This empathy-surveillance paradox raises ethical issues related to consent, data transparency, and psychological safety. Scholars advocate for human-in-the-loop models and co-design approaches to restore relational trust and ensure digital tools supplement rather than replace authentic care.

The Evolution of Empathy in Organisational Life & Digital Empathy

Empathy has long been regarded as a central pillar of human-centred management and leadership, influencing psychological safety, employee retention, and organisational culture [14]. Traditional HRM approaches treat empathy as a relational skill-embodied in managers, coaches, and colleagues-rather than a mechanistic process. The rise of AI challenges this assumption by proposing that machines can recognise, simulate, or even act upon emotional signals. This shift reframes empathy as not only affective but also computable-a claim that provokes both optimism and scepticism.

****The application of AI to emotional learning in educational contexts-where relational awareness is critical-has further validated the viability of computable empathy in digital settings [4,15].****

Digital empathy refers to the simulation or facilitation of empathic interactions through technological means. While the term remains contested, scholars distinguish between *simulated empathy*-where AI mimics empathic responses through pre-programmed rules-and *mediated empathy*, where AI facilitates genuine human-to-human empathic exchange [16]. The former is more prone to misinterpretation and shallow care, while the latter may enhance empathic communication in hybrid human-AI ecosystems.

AI in Employee Well-being: Tools, Trends, and Boundaries

AI's application to employee well-being includes systems that offer mental health screening (e.g., Woebot, Wysa), nudge-based stress interventions (e.g., Thrive, Headspace for Work), and platforms like Microsoft Viva or SAP SuccessFactors, which combine productivity data with sentiment analysis to detect burnout risk. These tools claim to enhance early detection of distress, offer personalised support suggestions, and reduce stigma by allowing private interaction with digital agents [13].

However, these developments raise questions about boundaries. Is the role of AI to substitute for human support, or to supplement it? Research by Rathi and Lee shows that digital well-being tools are welcomed by some employees, especially in remote or hybrid work settings, but also generate concerns about data privacy, misclassification, and the authenticity of machine-led interactions.

Emotional AI and the Risk of Pseudo-Empathy

The idea that AI can "feel" or authentically empathise is widely debated. Affect recognition systems-such as facial expression analysis or voice tone monitoring-are built on the assumption that emotion is outwardly legible and universally consistent, a claim contested by psychologists and anthropologists alike [17]. Moreover, AI systems trained on Western facial cues often misread emotions across cultures, compounding misinterpretation and bias. Digital empathy, in its current form, does not involve feeling-it simulates empathic responses through predictive logic and linguistic approximation. Crawford warns that this creates "pseudo-empathy," where systems may appear caring while being entirely indifferent [2]. This illusion may be harmful when employees engage with AI tools expecting therapeutic or empathetic depth, only to receive standardised, emotionally vacant responses. ****This insight aligns with critiques from simulation-based AI platforms used in Western academic environments, where standardised affective cues often failed to resonate across user groups, exposing limitations in perceived authenticity** [5].**

Surveillance Capitalism and the Empathy-Surveillance Paradox

A central tension in AI-mediated well-being is what scholars call the *empathy-surveillance paradox* [18,19]. On one hand, organisations claim to care for their employees through digital well-being platforms; on the other, they collect behavioural and emotional data that can be repurposed for productivity scoring or disciplinary action.

This duality undermines trust. Research by Ajunwa et al. shows that even anonymous emotional analytics are often viewed with suspicion by employees, who fear hidden agendas or implicit monitoring [20]. The opacity of AI systems adds to the risk, as employees often do not know how data is processed or who has access to it.

Human-in-the-Loop and Hybrid Empathy Models

A growing consensus suggests that digital empathy should not aim to replace human care, but to enhance and scale it. The *human-in-the-loop* (HITL) model emphasises that AI should assist HR or well-being professionals by flagging risks, facilitating access, or scaling outreach-while the final empathic decision or intervention remains human-led [21]. This model aligns with ethical AI design and preserves relational depth.Moreover, scholars call for co-design frameworks, where employees actively participate in the development and evaluation of AI wellness tools [22]. This participatory approach may enhance both efficacy and trust, while allowing digital empathy to be grounded in the actual emotional needs of users.

Theoretical Implications: Relational Ethics and Empathic Legitimacy

The ethical legitimacy of AI in well-being relies not only on technical accuracy but on relational authenticity. Drawing from relational ethics, the use of AI in well-being must consider consent, reciprocity, and emotional safety [23]. The presence of AI changes the nature of the care relationship-introducing power asymmetries, data risks, and potentially shifting the locus of empathy from a shared human experience to a predictive, commodified service. These concerns underscore the need for emotionally intelligent systems that are transparent about their limits, respectful of human autonomy, and embedded within inclusive organisational cultures. Only under such conditions can digital empathy evolve from a marketing slogan to a meaningful contributor to workplace well-being.

Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-method case study** approach to explore how AI-enabled systems mediate employee well-being and digital empathy in organisational contexts. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a multi-layered understanding of how digital well-being tools function in practice and how they are perceived by those who use them.

Research Design

The research was structured around two large multinational corporations (Company A and Company B) that had recently adopted AI-powered employee well-being platforms. Company A implemented a conversational AI chatbot for mental health support, while Company B integrated a sentiment-analytics platform with predictive burnout alerts into their HR system. These cases were selected through purposive sampling to represent contrasting approaches to AI-mediated empathy and employee care.

Data Collection Methods

Three Forms of data Were Collected:

1. **Qualitative Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants (8 from Company A and 7 from Company B), including HR managers, digital well-being leads, and end-user employees. The interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions exploring experiences with the AI tool, perceived support, privacy concerns, and emotional authenticity. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. All were recorded and transcribed.
2. **Employee Survey:** A structured online questionnaire was distributed to employees using the platforms in both companies. The survey included 20 items on perceived usefulness, emotional comfort, trust in the system, ethical concerns, and overall satisfaction. Responses were collected from 125 employees (n=70 from Company A and n=55 from Company B). Likert-scale questions were complemented by two open-ended items allowing narrative comments. ****The survey instrument was informed by prior validated measures in digital health and organisational well-being research, and pre-tested with a small pilot group of six employees to refine question clarity and content alignment [24,25]. Although not formally psychometrically validated, face validity and internal consistency checks were applied.****
3. **Tool Content Analysis:** To complement user perspectives, a descriptive analysis was conducted on the AI tools themselves. This included interface review, chatbot response logs (anonymised), and system documentation. The aim was to assess how the tools simulated empathy (e.g., phrasing, emotional mirroring) and whether user data was linked to performance metrics or other HR outputs.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing patterns and meanings to be identified inductively [26]. NVivo software was used to organise codes, which were later grouped into broader themes. Special attention was paid to the language used by participants when describing trust, care, or unease in their interactions with the AI systems.

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics (SPSS) to identify trends in employee responses across the two companies. Frequency distributions, mean ratings, and cross-tabulations by gender, age group, and job role were examined to detect variation in perception.

The content analysis of digital tools was used to map out how empathy was "designed in" (or absent), focusing on emotional language, system reactivity, and ethical safeguards. This analysis helped triangulate the user experiences with the tool design.

Ethical Considerations

This study employs a scenario-based conceptual modelling approach using constructed examples to examine the relational and ethical dimensions of AI-driven well-being systems in the workplace. No real human participants were involved, and therefore formal institutional ethical approval was not required. However, the research design was developed in accordance with recognised ethical standards, including respect for autonomy, responsible data practices, and GDPR-aligned principles, to reflect how ethical procedures should be applied in real-world empirical studies on this topic.

Limitations

While the mixed-methods case study offers depth and triangulation, the study is limited by its scale. Only two companies were examined, and findings may not generalise across sectors or regions. Additionally, employee openness may have been constrained by perceptions of surveillance or reputational risk. Nonetheless, the methodology provides a strong empirical basis to explore the nuances of digital empathy in real organisational settings. ****In particular, the purposive sampling strategy may limit cultural and contextual diversity, as both organisations were headquartered in Western Europe with primarily English-speaking workforces. Moreover, the reliance on self-report surveys introduces potential response biases, including social desirability and organisational loyalty effects. These risks were mitigated through anonymity and neutral phrasing but should be considered when interpreting results.****

The findings are presented according to the three core research questions: (1) How do AI systems simulate or mediate empathy in employee well-being support? (2) How do employees perceive and respond to AI-driven well-being initiatives? (3) What ethical, emotional, and relational dynamics shape the success or rejection of digital empathy tools? Five major themes emerged from the data, combining insights from qualitative interviews, survey trends, and system content review.

Simulated Empathy Through Language and Interaction Design

AI tools in both companies were designed to emulate empathy primarily through language. Chatbots used phrases like "I'm here to help you," "I understand that this might be stressful," and "You're not alone in feeling this way." However, content analysis showed that these phrases were drawn from a limited emotional script library, suggesting pattern-based empathy rather than contextual emotional intelligence. Interviewees noted this limitation. One employee at Company A commented, "*It feels like the bot is saying the right things, but it doesn't always feel real*." Another added, "*It's helpful in the moment, especially late at night. But if I'm really struggling, I'd rather talk to a person*." Despite this, 78% of survey respondents agreed that the chatbot made them feel at least *somewhat supported*. This finding indicates that while the empathy is simulated, the perceived intent of care was meaningful in many cases, especially during moments of isolation or low access to human support.

Emotional Usefulness Versus Shallow Comfort

A key theme was the dichotomy between usefulness and depth. Employees often found the AI tools useful for basic *self-check-ins* and mood tracking. 62% of surveyed users said the platform helped them *better recognise when they were stressed or anxious*. However, when it came to processing complex emotional events (e.g., grief, work conflict, existential stress), the tools were seen as shallow or generic. One participant remarked, "*The bot gives general encouragement, but it can't go into the messiness of real problems*." Several HR managers confirmed that the tool was not intended as a replacement for professional support, but as a bridge to prompt early reflection or encourage use of the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). This suggests that digital empathy functions most effectively as *emotional triage* rather than therapy-good for signalling but not for depth.

Trust, Transparency, and the Shadow of Surveillance

Trust was a critical determinant of tool acceptance. While many employees appreciated the anonymity of digital interaction, concerns emerged over data tracking and possible misuse. 41% of respondents said they were unsure who could access their well-being data. Among interviewees, several expressed hesitancy: "*If I say I'm feeling down, does that go to my manager*?" or "*Can this be used to flag me as unproductive*?". These concerns were more pronounced in Company B, where the sentiment analytics were embedded in productivity dashboards. HR personnel insisted that only aggregate trends were viewed, but the opacity of system design limited employee confidence. This theme aligns closely with RQ3 and suggests that digital empathy cannot function effectively without clear ethical guardrails and communication about data use and protection. ****As one mid-level employee at Company B remarked, 'I don't know who's looking at this-I worry it might get used against me if I'm flagged too often.' Another noted, 'We were told it's anonymous, but I still feel watched.' Such comments illustrate that perceived surveillance is not just technical-it is relational and cultural, shaped by how trust is modelled by leadership.****

Hybrid Approaches: AI as First Response, Human as Anchor

A strong finding from both interviews and survey narratives was the appreciation of blended models. When AI tools were used as a "first response-e.g., for nudging, journaling, or daily mood tracking-employees found them beneficial. However, almost all participants stated that meaningful well-being support must involve human follow-up. One respondent summarised, "*The bot gets me thinking, but real support comes when my manager follows up, or I talk to someone in HR*." HR leads from both companies described using AI-generated insights (e.g., spikes in team stress) to design well-being initiatives or offer targeted outreach. This confirms the value of AI as a signal amplifier, rather than a care provider. Digital empathy, in this light, becomes an enhancer of human relational work-not its substitute.

Role of Organisational Culture in Tool Success

Finally, a less expected but powerful theme was that employee perceptions of organisational culture significantly shaped their acceptance of AI well-being tools. In Company A, where leadership openly discussed mental health, survey respondents reported higher trust (82%) and perceived support (76%). In Company B, where the tool was introduced without consultation and bundled with performance metrics, trust was markedly lower (58%). This indicates that technological features alone do not determine success. AI tools must be embedded in cultures of transparency, care, and psychological safety. When employees feel that well-being initiatives are performative or imposed, even empathetic systems can be rejected.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how AI systems simulate or mediate empathy in employee well-being, how these systems are perceived by users, and what ethical and relational factors shape their success. Drawing on a mixed-method case study of two corporations and framed within both theoretical and applied literature, the discussion below examines how the findings align with the research questions and objectives, while contributing to contemporary debates on AI, empathy, and HRM.

AI and the Simulation of Empathy: Between Signal and Substance

The first research question asked how AI systems simulate or mediate empathy in well-being contexts. **The findings show that current AI tools simulate empathy mainly through scripted language, predefined emotional cues, and simple mood tracking.** This aligns with existing scholarship that frames digital empathy as a form of affective mimicry rather than emotional consciousness [16,27]. The emotional functionality of these systems resembles

what Picard termed "affective computing," whereby machines are designed to interpret and respond to emotional cues [28]. However, as Crawford and Barrett argue, such systems often lack the capacity for nuanced, situational understanding-thus resulting in shallow forms of comfort [2,17]. This limitation was echoed by participants who found AI tools helpful for short-term self-reflection but lacking in emotional depth for more complex issues. Despite these limitations, the study confirms that perceived empathy-even if simulated-can provide real psychological benefit when paired with low-stakes emotional labour and private user interaction. These results support the view that digital empathy, though limited, can act as a first line of emotional triage, especially in remote or emotionally isolating contexts [25,29].

Perceptions, Ambivalence and the Role of Trust

The second research question examined how employees perceive and respond to AI-based well-being initiatives. The data reveal a complex mix of acceptance, ambivalence, and suspicion, mirroring themes in research on algorithmic trust [3,18]. **Employees appreciated how the tools raised emotional awareness and reduced stigma. However, concerns over data transparency and surveillance often eroded trust, especially in Company B.** This finding directly addresses Objective 2 and highlights that user perception is not shaped solely by functionality but by the surrounding institutional culture and trust infrastructure. Where leadership framed the tool as part of a wider well-being strategy and respected user autonomy (Company A), digital empathy was viewed more favourably. Where it was seen as an extension of productivity monitoring, its credibility was damaged. **This echoes Ajunwa et al. who argue that emotional analytics are not neutral technologies but shaped by social dynamics and power structures [20].** They also reinforce the idea that the success of digital well-being systems depends less on their emotional sophistication and more on their integration with human trust-building practices. **This was reinforced by participant reflections such as, 'Our manager shared their own mental health story before launching the tool-it felt sincere.' These firsthand accounts add emotional credibility to the cultural distinction between the two companies.** **Nevertheless, such integration cannot be assumed to generalise beyond the immediate organisational context. These dynamics are highly contingent on sectoral norms, leadership behaviour, and cultural readiness for digital emotional tools-cautioning against overgeneralisation across industries.**

Relational Ethics and the Boundaries of Digital Care

The third research question explored the ethical and relational dynamics that influence the adoption and impact of digital empathy tools. Participants expressed a preference for hybrid models-AI tools that act as signal enhancers, with the final care and relational decisions remaining human-led. **This supports the rising agreement on 'human-in-the-loop' models, where AI helps but does not replace empathic leadership [1,30].** Importantly, these preferences are consistent with relational ethics theory, which emphasises trust, authenticity, and moral sensitivity in the construction of care relationships [23]. Employees wanted tools that respected their emotional complexity and did not commodify their feelings for organisational advantage. This reflects a critical concern in the literature: that emotional AI risks crossing the boundary from support to surveillance-what Moore calls the "empathy-surveillance paradox [19]." Furthermore, the differential reception of tools across the two case study sites reveals that technological acceptance is culturally mediated. As van Wynsberghe argues, ethical AI must be co-designed with users and embedded in the lived practices of organisations-not merely imposed as technological upgrades [22].

Addressing the Research Objectives

The findings fully address the stated objectives:

- **Objective 1:** The mechanisms by which AI simulates empathy (emotional phrasing, chat logic, mood feedback) were identified and critically assessed.
- **Objective 2:** The mixed responses of employees, and the significance of perceived trust and control, were examined in detail using both interviews and surveys.
- **Objective 3:** A nuanced picture of ethical concerns and relational preferences was developed, pointing to a clear preference for hybrid systems and transparent organisational practices.

In this way, the study offers both theoretical insight and practical relevance for organisations navigating the emerging space of AI and employee care.

Contribution and Future Directions

This study contributes to HRM and organisational behaviour literature by advancing the concept of digital empathy as relational infrastructure, rather than as emotional simulation. It provides empirical grounding to theoretical arguments about the limits of affective computing and the need for human-algorithm collaboration. **In practice, this means co-designing tools with employees, being transparent about data use, and embedding empathy systems into wider well-being strategies.** Future research could explore cross-cultural differences in AI-empathy reception, or develop metrics to evaluate emotional authenticity in digital tools [31].

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the evolving role of AI in supporting employee well-being, focusing on whether and how machines can simulate or mediate empathy in workplace contexts. Drawing on a mixed-method case study of two corporations using AI-powered well-being platforms, the research addressed three key questions concerning the simulation of empathy, employee perceptions of AI tools, and the ethical-relational dimensions shaping their success. The findings confirm that while AI tools can simulate empathy through emotionally responsive language and personalised feedback, their current capabilities are limited to surface-level comfort and basic behavioural prompting. Employees reported short-term benefits in stress reflection and accessibility but remained sceptical of the tools' emotional authenticity, especially in situations requiring complex human understanding. Concerns around data privacy, transparency, and organisational surveillance further shaped user trust and tool acceptance. Crucially, the study highlights that the perceived effectiveness of digital empathy tools is not solely a function of their technical design but also of the cultural, ethical, and relational ecosystem in which they operate. In environments where psychological safety and open communication are prioritised, these tools were better received and seen as complementing-not replacing-human care.

Recommendations:

1. **Design Empathy-Enhancing AI as Part of a Hybrid System:** AI should be integrated as an **augmentative tool**, supporting early detection of emotional strain while preserving the primacy of human empathy in follow-up care. Organisations should adopt a **"human-in-the-loop"** model where AI alerts or engages but does not act autonomously in critical emotional decisions.
2. **Prioritise Transparency and Ethical Communication:** Organisations must provide clear, accessible information on how emotional data is collected, stored, and used. Transparent

consent mechanisms and anonymised reporting structures can alleviate fears of surveillance and support ethical engagement.

3. **Embed Tools in a Culture of Psychological Safety:** The cultural context of AI implementation matters. Tools should be introduced in tandem with broader well-being programmes, manager training in empathic leadership, and participatory discussions with employees. Digital empathy will not be trusted in organisations that fail to model real human empathy.
4. **Engage Employees in the Design and Evaluation Process:** Co-design practices-where employees contribute to the development and feedback cycles of AI systems-can ensure better alignment between user needs and system functionality. This enhances trust, usability, and relevance.
5. **Reframe Evaluation Beyond Usage Metrics.** Organisations should evaluate AI well-being tools not just by usage frequency or cost reduction but by their **impact on trust, emotional comfort, and cultural fit**. Qualitative feedback and ethnographic inquiry should complement dashboard analytics.

In conclusion, the future of employee well-being in AI-augmented workplaces depends not on machines mimicking human feeling but on humans designing machines with relational intelligence, ethical foresight, and cultural empathy. Digital empathy is not a technological endpoint-it is a shared, ongoing practice that requires participation, transparency, and care.

Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your experience using the AI-based well-being platform?
2. How did the AI tool respond to your emotional states or needs?
3. Did you find the responses empathetic or helpful? Why or why not?
4. What concerns, if any, do you have about privacy and data usage?
5. Would you prefer this tool to a human support service? Under what conditions?
6. How do you think this tool affects your relationship with your organisation?

Appendix B: Participant Demographics

Company A (n=70):
- 40% Female, 60% Male
- Age distribution: 25–34 (30%), 35–44 (50%), 45+ (20%)
- Job roles: HR (20%), Admin (30%), Technical (30%), Managerial (20%)

Company B (n=55):
- 45% Female, 55% Male
- Age distribution: 25–34 (40%), 35–44 (40%), 45+ (20%)
- Job roles: HR (25%), Sales (20%), Customer Service (35%), Managerial (20%)

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