

# The Impact of Artificial Intelligence Adoption on Employee Performance in Malaysian SMEs: The Mediating Role of Work Motivation

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**Abstract:** The rapid diffusion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) under the Fourth Industrial Revolution has transformed organizational operations, yet its impact on individual employee performance remains insufficiently understood, particularly in developing economies. This study examines the effect of AI adoption on employee performance in Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), with work motivation as a mediating mechanism. Grounded in Task-Technology Fit (TTF) theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study proposes that AI enhances performance both directly through operational efficiency and indirectly by strengthening employees' intrinsic motivation. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 326 employees in Malaysian SMEs who regularly interact with AI-driven tools. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. The results indicate that AI adoption has a significant positive effect on employee performance and strongly predicts work motivation. Work motivation, in turn, significantly enhances employee performance. Mediation analysis confirms that work motivation partially mediates the relationship between AI adoption and performance, with the indirect effect exceeding the direct effect. The findings highlight that AI's performance benefits are largely transmitted through psychological mechanisms rather than technological efficiency alone. This study contributes to the literature by integrating technological and motivational perspectives and providing empirical evidence from a developing economy context. Practically, the results suggest that SME managers should implement AI in ways that foster employee competence and autonomy to maximize digital transformation outcomes.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence Adoption, Work Motivation, Employee Performance, Malaysian SMEs, Self-determination Theory, PLS-SEM

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) has fundamentally reshaped the global economic landscape, positioning Artificial Intelligence (AI) not merely as a technological novelty but as a critical driver of organizational competitiveness. AI adoption—defined as the integration of machine learning, automation, and data analytics into business processes promises to revolutionize how work is performed by augmenting human capabilities and optimizing operational efficiency (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018).

In the context of the Malaysian economy, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) serve as the backbone of national development. According to SME Corporation Malaysia (2021), SMEs constitute 97.2% of total business establishments, contributing 38.2% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employing nearly half of the nation's workforce. Recognizing the pivotal role of digitalization, the Malaysian government launched the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL) in 2021, explicitly targeting the digitalization of 875,000 MSMEs by 2025 (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). Consequently, Malaysian SMEs are increasingly adopting AI driven tools ranging from automated customer service chatbots to predictive inventory management systems to survive in a post-pandemic market characterized by volatility and intense competition.

However, the integration of AI is not solely a technical challenge; it is profoundly a human one. As organizations pivot toward automation, the nature of job roles evolves. The prevailing narrative often fluctuates between AI as a "threat"

to employment and AI as an "enabler" of productivity. While substantial research has focused on the firm-level financial impacts of AI (e.g., ROI, market share), there is a paucity of research examining how AI adoption influences the individual performance of employees in developing economies like Malaysia. Specifically, the psychological mechanism—how AI tools affect an employee's intrinsic drive or work motivation remains a "black box" that warrants rigorous empirical investigation.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the strategic push for AI adoption, the relationship between technology and employee performance in Malaysian SMEs is complex and often paradoxical. On one hand, the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) theory suggests that when technology matches task requirements, performance improves (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). On the other hand, the introduction of advanced AI tools can trigger "technostress" or job insecurity, potentially demotivating employees who feel their competence is being undermined by algorithms (Tarafdar et al., 2007).

A significant gap exists in the current literature regarding the mediating mechanism that translates AI adoption into higher performance. Most studies assume a direct linear relationship: "Buy AI → Productivity increases." This reductionist view neglects the human element. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that for employees to perform well, their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness must be met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). If AI adoption is perceived as a tool that removes mundane, repetitive tasks (thereby enriching the job), it should theoretically boost Work Motivation, which in turn drives Employee Performance. Conversely, if AI is implemented poorly, it may erode motivation. Furthermore, most empirical studies on AI and performance are conducted in developed Western economies or large multinational corporations (MNCs). Malaysian SMEs, characterized by limited resources and distinct cultural nuances (high power distance, collectivism), may experience AI adoption differently.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate whether Work Motivation acts as a mediating bridge between AI Adoption and Employee Performance within the specific context of Malaysian SMEs. Addressing this gap is crucial for avoiding costly implementation failures where expensive technology yields low human performance due to a lack of psychological buy-in.

## 2. Research Objectives

To address the aforementioned gaps, this study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- (1) To examine the direct relationship between AI Adoption and Employee Performance in Malaysian SMEs.
- (2) To analyze the impact of AI Adoption on employees' Work Motivation.
- (3) To determine the influence of Work Motivation on Employee Performance.
- (4) To investigate the mediating role of Work Motivation in the relationship between AI Adoption and Employee Performance.

### 2.1 Significance of the Study

**Theoretical Significance:** This study contributes to the body of knowledge by integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the technology adoption literature. By positioning Work Motivation as a mediator, it moves beyond the "technological determinism" view and highlights the psychological pathways through which AI impacts human output. It enriches the understanding of IR 4.0 in developing economies, offering empirical evidence from the Malaysian SME sector.

**Practical Significance:** For SME owners and managers in Malaysia, the findings will provide actionable insights on how to implement AI sustainably. The study suggests that for AI to boost performance, it must be introduced in a way that fosters employee motivation—perhaps by framing AI as a "support tool" rather than a "replacement." This human-centric approach is vital for maximizing the return on digital investments outlined in the MyDIGITAL blueprint.

## 3. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### 3.1 Underpinning Theories

To comprehensively understand the impact of AI adoption on employee outcomes, this study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Task-Technology Fit (TTF). Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000), posits that human motivation is driven by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: Autonomy (control over one's work), Competence (mastery of tasks), and Relatedness (connection with others). In the context of this study, AI adoption is viewed not merely as a technical upgrade but as a structural change that can enhance "Competence" by augmenting human capabilities and "Autonomy" by automating routine tasks, thereby freeing employees to focus on more meaningful work (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Complementing this psychological view is the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) theory (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). TTF argues that technology leads to positive performance impacts only when it matches the tasks that users must perform. For Malaysian SMEs, which often face resource constraints, AI tools that fit specific operational needs (e.g., automated inventory tracking or customer data analysis) reduce the cognitive load on employees, enabling them to perform tasks

more efficiently. By combining SDT (the psychological drive) and TTF (the operational fit), we establish a holistic framework for analyzing AI adoption.

### **3.2 AI Adoption and Employee Performance**

AI adoption in the SME context refers to the deployment of intelligent systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as pattern recognition, problem-solving, and language processing (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018).

Scholars argue that AI enhances individual performance through two primary mechanisms: automation and augmentation (Huang & Rust, 2018). Automation handles repetitive, high-volume tasks with speed and precision, significantly reducing human error. For instance, in Malaysian manufacturing SMEs, AI-driven quality control systems allow employees to process higher volumes of output with greater accuracy. Augmentation, conversely, provides employees with data-driven insights, enabling faster and better decision-making. Empirical studies by Wamba et al. (2017) have shown that firm-level AI capability is positively associated with process performance. Extending this to the individual level, when employees are equipped with AI tools that fit their tasks (aligning with TTF), their ability to execute job responsibilities improves.

*H1: AI Adoption has a significant positive relationship with Employee Performance in Malaysian SMEs.*

### **3.3 AI Adoption and Work Motivation**

The relationship between technology and human motivation is nuanced. While early automation was criticized for "de-skilling" workers, modern AI has the potential to enrich jobs, thereby boosting Work Motivation—defined as the energetic force that originates both within as well as beyond an individual's being, to initiate work-related behavior (Pinder, 2008).

Drawing from SDT, AI adoption can foster intrinsic motivation by satisfying the need for Competence. When employees master new AI tools, they experience a sense of growth and professional development (Kniffin et al., 2021). Furthermore, by delegating mundane, administrative drudgery to AI algorithms (e.g., data entry), employees gain the Autonomy to engage in higher-value, creative, and strategic tasks. This shift from "routine" to "cognitive" work makes the job more interesting and meaningful, which is a core driver of intrinsic motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In the context of Malaysian SMEs, where workforce retention is a challenge, the adoption of modern tools can signal organizational progress, further motivating employees to align with the company's vision.

*H2: AI Adoption has a significant positive relationship with Work Motivation.*

### **3.4 Work Motivation and Employee Performance**

The link between motivation and performance is one of the most robust findings in organizational behavior. Motivated employees direct their energy toward organizational goals, show greater persistence in the face of difficulties, and acquire new skills more readily (Locke and Latham, 2002).

In the specific context of SMEs, where supervision structures are often flatter and less formal than in MNCs, self-driven motivation is critical. Employees with high work motivation are more likely to exhibit "extra-role behavior" and adaptability, which are essential for performance in the dynamic digital economy. Cerasoli et al. (2014) found in a meta-analysis that intrinsic motivation is a strong predictor of quality of performance. Therefore, we posit that higher levels of motivation among SME employees will directly translate into superior task performance.

*H3: Work Motivation has a significant positive relationship with Employee Performance.*

### **3.5 The Mediating Role of Work Motivation**

While H1 proposes a direct link between AI and performance, this study argues that the relationship is more complex. The "Black Box" of AI adoption suggests that technology alone does not guarantee performance; it is the human reaction to that technology that determines the outcome.

We propose that Work Motivation acts as a crucial mediator. AI adoption creates the conditions for high performance (by providing tools and data), but it is the increase in motivation (stemming from job enrichment and perceived competence) that drives the actual improvement in performance. If AI is adopted but employees feel demotivated (e.g., due to fear or complexity), performance gains will be minimal. However, if AI adoption successfully boosts motivation by removing drudgery and empowering employees, this heightened motivational state will propel performance to higher levels. Thus, AI improves performance through the mechanism of enhanced work motivation.

*H4: Work Motivation significantly mediates the relationship between AI Adoption and Employee Performance.*

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm, which emphasizes the use of empirical evidence and statistical analysis to test causal relationships between variables. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design is employed to investigate

the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption on employee performance through the mediating lens of work motivation. The cross-sectional approach is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for the capture of employees' psychological states and performance metrics at a single point in time amidst the rapid digital transformation of Malaysian SMEs. By utilizing an explanatory research framework, this study moves beyond mere description to clarify the underlying mechanisms (the "black box") that translate technological tools into human output.

## 4.2 Population and Sampling Procedure

### 4.2.1 Target Population

The target population consists of full-time employees within Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), specifically those operating in the services and manufacturing sectors. These sectors are chosen due to their high integration of IR 4.0 technologies and their significant contribution to Malaysia's GDP (SME Corp, 2021). To ensure data relevance, the population is narrowed to employees who interact with AI-driven tools (e.g., automated CRM, AI analytics, or robotic process automation) in their daily work routines.

### 4.2.2 Sampling Technique and Size

A purposive sampling technique is utilized to ensure that all respondents possess the necessary experience with AI technologies to provide meaningful insights. This non-probability sampling method is effective when specific criteria (i.e., AI usage) must be met for the study's objectives.

To determine the required sample size, an A-priori Power Analysis was conducted using G\*Power 3.1.9.7. Based on a medium effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), an alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.05, and a power ( $1-\beta$ ) of 0.95 for a model with three main predictors, a minimum sample of 119 is required. However, to enhance the robustness of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and to account for potential non-response bias, this study targets a final sample of more than 300 valid responses.

## 4.3 Instrumentation

The survey instrument is developed by adapting validated scales from established literature to ensure content validity. All items are measured using a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

**AI Adoption:** Measured by 6 items adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003) and Goodhue & Thompson (1995). The scale focuses on "Task-Technology Fit" (TTF), assessing how AI features match the requirements of the employee's tasks and the ease of integration into work processes.

**Work Motivation:** Measured by 12 items from the Work Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale (WEIMS) developed by Tremblay et al. (2009). Grounded in SDT, this scale evaluates intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, capturing the "psychological buy-in" of employees.

**Employee Performance:** Measured by 8 items from the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) by Koopmans et al. (2011), focusing on task performance and adaptive performance in a digitalized environment.

## 4.4 Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was carried out with SmartPLS 4.0 via the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method. The application of PLS-SEM is justified by its suitability for complex mediation models and its resilience to non-normal data distributions typical in social science surveys. A two-stage analytical approach was implemented:

### 4.4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Before testing the hypotheses, the measurement model (outer model) is evaluated for reliability and validity:

**Reliability:** Assessed via Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with a required threshold of  $> 0.70$ .

**Convergent Validity:** Assessed via Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which must exceed 0.50.

**Discriminant Validity:** Verified using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), where values must stay below 0.85 to ensure each construct is empirically distinct.

### 4.4.2 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model (inner model) is assessed to test the hypothesized relationships (H1 to H4):

**Path Coefficients ( $\beta$ ):** The significance and strength of the direct relationships are determined.

**Mediation Analysis:** The indirect effect of AI Adoption on Performance via Work Motivation is tested using the Preacher and Hayes (2008) Bootstrapping method (5,000 resamples). A 95% confidence interval that does not include zero indicates a significant mediating effect.

**Predictive Power:** Evaluated through the Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ ) and the Effect Size ( $f^2$ ).

## 5. Data Analysis and Results

### 5.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The data collection process yielded a total of 326 valid responses from employees in Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) after data cleaning and screening for outliers. The demographic profile of the respondents is summarized in Table 1.

The sample was fairly balanced between the Services (56.4%) and Manufacturing (43.6%) sectors, reflecting the structure of the Malaysian SME landscape. Notably, the majority of respondents (69.3%) reported using AI tools either "Daily" or "Weekly," indicating a sufficient level of exposure to the technology to validate the study's context.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile (N=285)

Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	178	54.6
	Female	148	45.4
Age	20-29 years	96	29.4
	30-39 years	142	43.6
	40-49 years	65	19.9
	50 years and above	23	7.1
Education level	High school / diploma	45	13.8
	Bachelor's degree	215	66.0
	Master's/ PhD	66	20.2
Industry sector	Manufacturing	142	43.6
	Services	184	56.4
Organizational tenure	Less than 2 years	58	17.8
	2 - 5 years	125	38.3
	More than 5 years	143	43.9
Frequency of AI usage	Daily	136	41.7
	Weekly	90	27.6
	Monthly	68	20.9
	Rarely	32	9.8

## 5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The assessment of the measurement model was conducted using SmartPLS 4. This step involves examining Internal Consistency Reliability, Convergent Validity, and Discriminant Validity.

### 5.2.1 Reliability and Convergent Validity

As presented in Table 2, the factor loadings for all items exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.708. The Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs (AI Adoption, Work Motivation, Employee Performance) were above 0.70, ranging from 0.852 to 0.915, indicating excellent internal consistency. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded the 0.50 threshold, confirming that the constructs explain more than 50% of the variance of their indicators.

**Table 2.** Reliability and validity statistics

Construct	Items	Factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	VIF
AI adoption	AIA1	0.845	0.884	0.915	0.683	1.842
	AIA2	0.812				1.765
	AIA3	0.796				1.698
	AIA4	0.824				1.812
	AIA5	0.855				1.905
Work motivation	WM1	0.865	0.902	0.927	0.716	2.102
	WM2	0.854				2.054
	WM3	0.832				1.956
	WM4	0.780				1.685
	WM5	0.898				2.315
Employee performance	EP1	0.881	0.915	0.936	0.745	2.451
	EP2	0.875				2.385
	EP3	0.866				2.215

EP4	0.778	1.752
EP5	0.910	2.568

5.2.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), which is considered superior to the traditional Fornell-Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, establishing that AI Adoption, Work Motivation, and Employee Performance are empirically distinct concepts.

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity (HTMT ratio criteria)

Construct	AI adoption	Employee performance	Work motivation
AI adoption			
Employee performance	0.612		
Work motivation	0.685	0.742	

Note: All HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015).

**5.3 Structural Model (Inner Model)**

5.3.1 Explanatory Power and Predictive Relevance

The model explains 35.4% of the variance in Work Motivation ( $R^2 = 0.354$ ) and 52.8% of the variance in Employee Performance ( $R^2 = 0.528$ ). This indicates a moderate-to-strong explanatory power. Using PLS-predict, the  $Q^2$  values for Employee Performance were greater than zero ( $Q^2 = 0.382$ ), confirming the model's predictive relevance.

5.3.1 Hypothesis Testing (Direct Effects)

The structural path coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and significance levels were generated using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The results are summarized in Table 4.

H1 Supported: AI Adoption has a significant positive direct effect on Employee Performance ( $\beta = 0.215$ ,  $t = 3.842$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

H2 Supported: AI Adoption has a strong positive effect on Work Motivation ( $\beta = 0.595$ ,  $t = 12.651$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting the SDT view that effective tools enhance competence and autonomy.

H3 Supported: Work Motivation significantly influences Employee Performance ( $\beta = 0.542$ ,  $t = 9.874$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming it as a critical driver of output.

**Table 4.** Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	$\beta$	T-value	P-value	Decision	$f^2$
H1	AI adoption → Employee performance	0.215	3.842	0.000	Supported	0.065
H2	AI adoption → Work motivation	0.595	12.651	0.000	Supported	0.548
H3	Work motivation → Employee performance	0.542	9.874	0.000	Supported	0.402

**5.4 Mediation Analysis**

To test H4 (the mediating role of Work Motivation), the specific indirect effects were analyzed. As shown in Table 5, the indirect effect of AI Adoption on Employee Performance via Work Motivation is statistically significant.

Indirect Effect:  $\beta = 0.322$

Confidence Interval: The 95% Bias-Corrected Confidence Interval (LL = 0.245, UL = 0.405) does not include zero, confirming the existence of a mediation effect.

Since both the direct effect (H1:  $\beta = 0.215$ ) and the indirect effect (H4:  $\beta = 0.322$ ) are significant and point in the same positive direction, this represents a Complementary Partial Mediation. This suggests that while AI Adoption directly improves performance (likely through automation efficiency), a significant portion of its impact (approx. 60% of the total effect) is transmitted through the psychological mechanism of enhanced Work Motivation.

**Table 5.** Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	$\beta$	T-value	P-value	95% Confidence interval (BC)
H4	AI adoption → Work motivation → Employee performance	0.322	7.653	0.000	LL Supported UL
					0.245 0.405

Note: LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit. Since the confidence interval [0.245, 0.405] does not contain 0, the mediation effect is significant.

The analysis validates the proposed conceptual framework. All hypotheses (H1 to H4) are supported, highlighting that in Malaysian SMEs, the integration of AI tools not only directly enhances performance but significantly boosts employee motivation, which serves as a crucial mediator in maximizing productivity.

## 6. Discussion

This study examined the impact of AI adoption on employee performance in Malaysian SMEs, with work motivation as a mediating mechanism. All hypotheses (H1-H4) were supported, and the results offer several key insights.

First, AI adoption has a significant positive direct effect on employee performance. This supports Task-Technology Fit (TTF) theory, suggesting that when AI tools align with job requirements, employees perform more efficiently. However, the relatively modest direct effect indicates that technology alone is insufficient to maximize performance outcomes. AI enhances productivity not merely through automation, but through how employees respond to it.

Second, AI adoption strongly predicts work motivation. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes the importance of competence and autonomy. By automating repetitive tasks and providing intelligent support, AI tools appear to enhance employees' sense of capability and job meaningfulness. In Malaysian SMEs—where resources are limited and multitasking is common—such enrichment effects may be particularly salient.

Third, work motivation significantly improves employee performance. This confirms that motivated employees are more persistent, adaptive, and engaged in their roles. In SME contexts characterized by flatter hierarchies and greater individual responsibility, intrinsic motivation becomes a critical driver of output.

Most importantly, work motivation partially mediates the relationship between AI adoption and performance. The indirect effect is stronger than the direct effect, indicating that a substantial portion of AI's performance impact operates through psychological mechanisms. This finding challenges technological determinism and demonstrates that digital transformation is fundamentally human-centered. AI improves performance not only because it is intelligent, but because it motivates people to work better.

Theoretically, this study integrates TTF and SDT, bridging technological and psychological perspectives. Empirically, it contributes individual-level evidence from a developing economy context, extending the AI-performance literature beyond Western multinational corporations.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between AI adoption and employee performance within Malaysian SMEs, with a specific focus on the mediating role of work motivation. Based on PLS-SEM analysis of 326 valid responses, the results confirm that AI adoption enhances employee performance both directly and indirectly via increased work motivation.

The findings indicate that a considerable portion of AI's overall influence on performance operates through motivational pathways. This underscores that the success of AI integration is contingent not only on technological advancement but also on employees' psychological readiness and acceptance.

For SME practitioners, it is recommended that AI implementation be designed to promote feelings of competence and autonomy achieved through training initiatives, open communication, and inclusive integration processes. Framing AI as a facilitative tool rather than a substitute for human effort is essential to optimize performance outcomes.

Overall, the study underscores a central insight: in the era of digital transformation, technology does not replace human contribution; it reshapes and amplifies it. Sustainable competitive advantage in Malaysian SMEs will depend on aligning intelligent systems with motivated human capital.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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