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Doing Ethics Work in Digitalised Welfare: How Discretion and Judgement Are Reconfigured in Everyday Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how social workers enact ethical judgement in digitalised welfare organisations. Drawing on the concept of ethics work, it examines how engagements with digital systems involve ongoing processes of identifying, interpreting and responding to ethically salient aspects of practice. The study is based on an organisational ethnography in Swedish social services, combining 45 interviews with social workers and approximately 200 h of shadowing in child and family services and economic assistance units. The analysis focuses on situations where digital systems generate frictions, ambiguities or risks for clients and explores how practitioners discern what is at stake and adjust, supplement or bypass digital routines. The findings show that discretionary responses to digital friction constitute important sites of ethics work. Digitalization introduces new conditions under which ethics work unfolds: ethical concerns are increasingly triggered by system logics embedded in digital systems and practitioners enact responsibility by interpreting system outputs and mitigating unintended consequences for clients. Rather than replacing traditional forms of ethical judgement, digital systems reconfigure when and how ethics work is enacted in everyday welfare practice.

1 | Introduction

Digitalization has become a defining force in contemporary welfare organisations, reshaping how professional work is organised, assessed and carried out (Bovens and Zouridis 2002; Buffat 2015). Digital systems increasingly mediate core aspects of frontline practice: how professionals access information, make decisions, document cases and interact with clients (Gillingham 2015; Susskind and Susskind 2015; Lester 2020). This transformation has prompted researchers to examine how digital technologies reshape professional discretion, that is, the space for situational decision-making where neither rules nor routines provide clear guidance (Lipsky 2010), and how digital reforms alter the everyday work of public servants.

A key finding from research on professionals' everyday digital work is that digital technologies often challenge core values associated with professional practice, particularly those enacted through discretionary judgement. Much of this concern centres on the relational dimension of human service work: professionals' capacity to attune to clients' emotions, histories and lived realities, which underpins trust, contextual sensitivity and responsible judgement (Lindgren et al. 2019; Jørgensen and Schou 2020; Nordesjö et al. 2022; Løberg and Egeland 2023). Automated classifications, predefined categories and structured interfaces risk obscuring nuances needed to understand vulnerability and need, thereby complicating professionals' responsibility to respond to clients as situated persons (Busch et al. 2018; Busch 2020). These concerns reflect a broader assumption that digitalization amplifies organisational logics of efficiency, standardisation and control, what we here refer to as system logics embedded in digital systems, potentially constraining discretion grounded in relational proximity and contextual responsiveness (Ranerup and Henriksen 2019; Devlieghere et al. 2022).

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As these value-laden tensions between standardised digital procedures and situated professional judgement materialise in everyday practice, they shape professional action. While early accounts often framed digitalization as a force that narrows discretionary space, subsequent research has complicated this view. Across welfare domains, studies show that digital systems do not replace professional judgement; rather, they reconfigure the conditions and scope of discretion through which frontline professionals interpret responsibility and exercise judgement in their interactions with citizens (Marienfeldt 2024). Within these reconfigured conditions, frontline professionals act as mediators in automated welfare encounters, using discretionary judgement to navigate between digital-by-default policy expectations and the lived realities of citizens (Schou and Pors 2019; Pors and Schou 2021; Pedersen and Pors 2023).

In this context, discretionary space is increasingly mobilised to actively compensate for gaps and limitations in digital systems. Such practices include explaining and translating digital procedures for clients, humanising impersonal interactions, correcting automated classifications, supplementing missing or misaligned information and diverting complex cases away from automated flows (see, e.g., Tummers and Rocco 2015; De Witte et al. 2016; Thunman et al. 2020; Løberg 2023; Germundsson et al. 2024; Volckmar-Eeg and Andresen 2025). Importantly, these compensatory efforts are not merely technical responses to system shortcomings. Rather, they are typically undertaken because professionals judge such interventions to be necessary for upholding responsible, fair and client-oriented practice under digitally mediated conditions. Recent conceptualizations have captured this repertoire of discretionary interventions as digital compensatory work (Carlsson et al. 2026).

Despite the growing body of research on compensatory practices, we know relatively little about how professionals themselves understand such situations as matters of professional judgement and responsibility. When digital systems obscure relevant information, produce unfair classifications or limit responsiveness to individual circumstances, professional judgement may acquire an ethical dimension. In these situations, professionals must consider what is at stake for clients and how to act responsibly under digitally mediated conditions.

Street-level research has long emphasised that frontline workers are not mere implementers of rules, but moral agents who interpret, adapt or occasionally resist procedures in response to situational demands and perceived responsibility towards clients (Lipsky 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2012; Tummers and Rocco 2015). Yet these accounts only partially capture the ambiguities introduced by digital systems, where the ‘rules’ to be interpreted are embedded in data fields, automated pathways and interface constraints rather than articulated as explicit directives. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how professional discretion in digitalised welfare work constitutes an ongoing site of ethics work.

Drawing on Banks' (2016) ethics-work perspective, ethical judgement is conceptualised not as the application of abstract principles, but as a situated and relational process through which professionals identify, interpret and respond to morally salient aspects of digitally mediated practice. Against this backdrop, the study asks: *How do frontline professionals enact ethical judgement and responsibility through discretionary practices when engaging with digital systems?*

The study draws on Swedish social services as a particularly relevant setting. Social work is widely recognised as ethically intensive, involving complex judgements and value conflicts in close interaction with clients (cf. Reamer 2013; Banks 2016). At the same time, social workers operate as street-level public servants under organisational and procedural constraints (Trappenburg et al. 2020). This dual positioning makes social services a salient context for exploring how ethical judgement is enacted under digitally mediated conditions.

The article contributes to research on digitalization, professional discretion and ethics in welfare organisations by showing how digital systems reshape the conditions under which ethics work unfolds. It demonstrates how system logics embedded in digital systems, such as automated classifications, standardised data fields and system-generated routines (e.g., Buffat 2015), introduce new sources of ethical salience in everyday practice. In doing so, the study refines theoretical understandings of ethics work in digitalised welfare settings.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical framework, drawing on Banks's concept of ethics work. The method section outlines the multi-site ethnographic design and empirical material. The analysis examines how social workers enact ethical judgement through discretionary engagements with digital systems. Finally, the discussion considers broader implications for understanding ethics and discretion in digitalised welfare organisations.

2 | Theoretical Framework: Discretion, Ethics and Digitalization

Discretion constitutes a central precondition for professional ethical practice. When rules or guidelines fail to provide unequivocal answers, practitioners must interpret situations, weigh competing values and make judgements that are reasonable in relation to client needs (Lipsky 2010). Such moments become ethically salient when they involve choices between alternative courses of action with potentially harmful consequences for those affected, particularly when what is at stake concerns values such as justice, risk, privacy or care. Discretion therefore serves as the arena in which professionals determine what is defensible and how different principles should be prioritised (Evans and Hardy 2017). Professional ethics functions as a normative resource in navigating such situations: practitioners must balance responsibilities towards clients, the organisation and society and make decisions whose consequences directly affect others (Banks 2009).

While professional ethics is often portrayed as a stable system of guiding principles, this principle-based view has been widely criticised for overlooking the ambiguity, uncertainty and relational complexity. An alternative perspective conceives ethics as something that emerges through practice: ethical considerations are shaped through relationships, emotions and organisational expectations and what counts as an appropriate decision is

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always situated (Banks 2009). Building on this ‘empirical turn’ in ethics (Pols 2015), Banks' concept of ethics work directs attention to the everyday efforts through which professionals identify ethically salient aspects of situations, interpret what is at stake and justify their actions in practice. This perspective is particularly useful for the present study, as it allows us to examine how ethical considerations emerge within routine professional practices and organisational constraints, rather than appearing only as clearly articulated moral dilemmas.

Sarah Banks (2009, 2013, 2016) advances a practice-oriented view of ethics through her concept of everyday ethics and ethics work, highlighting the situated work professionals undertake when they ‘do ethics’ in daily practice. While ethical action is shaped by values, principles and organisational guidelines, these do not determine what counts as ethical; rather, they are interpreted and negotiated in specific situations. Ethics is therefore not inherent in situations but constructed in practice, as professionals identify what is at stake, consider potential consequences and weigh competing values. Ethics work thus includes both recognising morally salient aspects of situations and working out and justifying what constitutes a defensible course of action. As Banks puts it:

> ‘Ethics work’ refers to the effort people put into seeing ethically salient aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done (Banks 2016, 3).

Banks distinguish several forms of ethics work, such as framing, role, emotion, identity, performance, reason and relationship work. However, these are intended as analytical distinctions rather than empirically separate activities. In our material, the different forms were often closely intertwined and difficult to separate in a consistent way. For example, emotional work and relational work frequently unfolded simultaneously within the same interaction, as did framing and reasoning processes.

To address this, we group Banks's forms into three broader and interrelated dimensions: *ethical identification*, *ethical orientation* and *ethical action*. This clustering is used as an analytical device to support a process-oriented analysis of ethics in digitally mediated practice. It does not replace Banks's framework but provides a way to analyse how different aspects of ethics work are combined in everyday professional action.

The first dimension, ethical identification and interpretation, concerns how professionals frame situations as ethically significant and discern what is at stake, particularly in relation to risks of error, unfairness or harm. This dimension encompasses processes of framing, reasoning and recognising moral salience in practice. The second dimension, ethical orientation, captures how professionals position themselves in relation to clients, organisational expectations and professional roles. This includes the management of emotions, relationships and professional identity as part of ongoing ethical engagement. The third dimension, ethical action, refers to how ethical considerations are translated into concrete decisions, strategies and justifications in practice.

Taken together, these dimensions highlight ethics work as an ongoing and situated process in which professionals identify morally salient situations, orient themselves ethically and act in ways they consider defensible.

3 | Method

3.1 | Research Design and Setting

To capture recurring patterns in how ethical and discretionary practices take shape in everyday work, the study employed a multi-site ethnographic design (Falzon 2016). The aim was not to compare municipalities but to build a cumulative understanding of how similar forms of practice emerge across contexts shaped by digital systems. Here, digital systems refer to the interconnected software platforms, communication tools and automated routines that mediate and coordinate everyday casework, structuring what can be seen, interpreted and acted upon through predefined categories, data models and workflows (cf. Henman 2010).

Fieldwork was conducted over 1 year in three child and family services units and three economic assistance units across five Swedish municipalities. Social services in Sweden are municipally organised within a national legal framework, which grants a universal right to assistance while allowing significant local discretion. As a result, digitalization varies in scope and maturity, yet the sector has been a central site for public-sector digital transformation.

The selection of economic assistance and child and family services was strategic. Previous research identifies these areas as two central sites of digitalization within Swedish social services (Ranerup and Henriksen 2019; Scaramuzzino and Hjärpe 2021). Economic assistance has often been identified as the domain where digitalization has advanced furthest, including the use of automated decision support, standardised e-applications and extensive data integration. Child and family services, while historically less digitalised, have in recent years experienced increasing digitalization in areas such as documentation and communication.

Across the participating units, digital environments differed, but several systems consistently formed the core of the setting in which everyday work was carried out. These included case-management systems (Viva and Lifecare), the national data service SSBTEK, automated import routines for e-applications, digital scanning tools and a range of communication platforms used for both internal and external meetings. Together, these systems constituted the environment within which the observed ethical practices took shape.

3.2 | Data Collection

A total of 43 interviews were conducted with practicing social workers. Interviews were individual, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They explored social workers' experiences of working with digital systems, their reasoning in complex cases and situations in which they felt compelled to

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TABLE 1 | Overview of the empirical material collected across six participating municipal units.

Agency	Child and family service	Child and family service	Child and family service	Economic assistance	Economic assistance	Economic assistance	Total
Interviews	14 social workers	4 social workers	5 social workers	3 social workers	13 social workers	6 social workers	45 interviews
Shadowing	50 h	38 h	2 h	10 h	57 h	40.5 h	197.5 h shadowing

adjust, supplement or diverge from routines. In addition, we conducted approximately 200 h of shadowing (Czarniawska-Joerges 2007), following social workers during half-day and full-day shifts. Observations focused on computer-based work, documentation practices, digital communication and informal conversations. Participants were encouraged to 'think aloud' while navigating digital systems, which made visible how they interpreted system outputs, weighed alternatives and justified discretionary choices. All names mentioned in analysis are pseudonyms. An overview of the empirical material is presented in Table 1.

3.3 | Analytical Approach

The analysis followed an abductive approach, moving iteratively between empirical observations and the theoretical lens of ethics work (Banks 2016). The analysis examined how discretionary practices around digital friction become moments of ethical practice. Drawing on Banks' notion of ethics work, these situations were approached as ones where system conditions raised questions about what might be at stake for clients and how professionals should act responsibly under digitally mediated conditions.

In a first step, the material was coded for situations in which frontline professionals encountered tensions in their engagement with digital systems. Automated updates, structured data fields and digital interfaces were treated as features shaping how cases are represented and acted upon. Instances in which such system logics, as interpreted by professionals, created potential risks for clients were coded as situations of moral salience, that is, moments in which technical arrangements became relevant to questions of fairness, responsibility, dignity or possible harm. Drawing on Banks (2016), we thus focus analytically on situations where digital system conditions render normative questions practically salient. In this sense, we do not treat all instances of responsive or client-oriented practice as ethics work, but specifically those in which professionals confront digital conditions that raise questions about how to act responsibly in relation to clients. What is central to the analysis is therefore not interaction as such, but how professionals interpret what is at stake for clients and act in response.

In a second step, the analysis examined how professionals interpreted and responded to these situations in practice. While social workers did not always explicitly frame these situations as ethical dilemmas, the analysis drew on Banks' (2016) concept of ethics work to interpret how they as professionals recognised what might be at stake for clients, assumed responsibility and adjusted their actions in response to system constraints.

In a third step, a condensed version of Banks' framework guided the analysis of how professionals 'do ethics' in practice. Following our analytical grouping of Banks' elements into three dimensions, ethical identification, ethical orientation and ethical action, the analysis examined how professionals identified what was at stake, oriented themselves through roles, relationships and emotions and translated these considerations into action.

In the final step, the material was organised into three recurring types of tensions generated by digital systems: standardised system logics, relational distance and digital accessibility. Within each category, the analysis illustrates how social workers enacted ethics work when navigating these tensions in everyday practice.

4 | Analysis

4.1 | Navigating Standardised System Logics in Ethical Practice

During fieldwork, it became clear that many social workers experienced the standardised logic embedded in case management systems as problematic. In often subtle and routine situations, they engaged in additional work to navigate this logic. These efforts included protecting clients from the negative consequences of simplified system categories, taking individual circumstances into account and reintroducing nuance from clients' lived situations into assessments and supportive interventions. In this category, standardisation is understood not only as fixed templates or predefined categories but also as automated routines through which standardised assumptions are reinforced in everyday practice.

Our first example illustrates how ethics work emerges when practitioners interpret the consequences of system logic and intervene to prevent potential harm for clients. It concerns system updates that regularly retrieve information from the Swedish Tax Agency. Designed to refresh data accurately and efficiently, these updates in cases involving children in foster care repeatedly reinstated biological parents as the primary contact person, replacing the foster home. Social workers described this not merely as a technical error risking information being sent

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to the wrong recipient, but as a situation raising concerns about children's safety and the emotional consequences for adults, both when information failed to reach the intended caregiver and when it was sent to someone for whom it was not intended. During fieldwork at a family service unit, the social worker Anna described spending considerable time reviewing school-platform information after each Tax Agency update to ensure that the correct caregiver was listed.

> Then the guardians reappear [in the system], and it's quite a lot of work for the schools—and for me—to make sure the foster families receive the information instead. [...] We've also had cases where the guardians receive information, and if it's an absence tracking system from schools, the guardians get notifications about the child's absence—which becomes a big deal and causes stress for them: Why aren't they in school!? These are the things I find most difficult for our placed children. It becomes so clear that they don't fit the standard template, that the systems simply aren't flexible enough. Then I have to contact them and the person responsible for the system at the school must go in and make a manual change. (Social worker Anna, child and family services, shadowing)

From one perspective, this automated procedure offers an efficient way to maintain up-to-date contact information. Yet, as Anna explained during the shadowing, this standardised logic aligns poorly with the complex family constellations of child welfare work. Operating on an assumption that children reside with their biological parents, each automatic update risks reinstating the wrong caregiver as the primary contact, potentially causing worry, confusion or distress for both children and adults. In response, Anna routinely checks and corrects these entries. In the shadowing, she described this as a necessary part of handling the mismatch between the system's standardised logic and the realities of children's care arrangements. Through these repeated adjustments, she can be understood as taking responsibility for preventing system-generated errors from affecting clients. In Banks's terms, this may be interpreted as ethics work in the sense that she attends to what may be at stake for clients and responds through corrective action in everyday practice.

Another recurring example of how standardised system logics prompted social workers to depart from routines concerned the automatic interpretation of financial transactions. In economic assistance, assessments often rely on a binary classification whereby deposits are registered as income and automatically converted into deductions. Such a situation arose while shadowing Sara, a social worker in economic assistance. While reviewing a client's bank statement, Sara noticed several Swish transactions totaling approximately SEK 10,000 and paused to question what the transfers represented. Although the system logic would have triggered an automatic deduction, Sara, drawing on her knowledge of the client's situation, assessed that this might have serious consequences for the family. She therefore called the client to clarify the transactions and adjusted the deduction accordingly.

> As the social worker reviews the bank statement, she reasons aloud. She explains that she knows the client from previous encounters and is aware that a deduction of SEK 10,000 would have serious consequences for the family's daily life. She also recognizes the pattern of transactions from earlier cases, where legitimate explanations had been provided. On this basis, she decides to call the client to obtain further contextual information that might justify avoiding the deduction in full or in part. At the same time, she notes that an automated system—lacking this relational and contextual understanding—would simply have carried out the deduction. (Social worker Sara, economic assistance, shadowing)

Sara's way of acting can be interpreted as a deviation from the standardised procedure, prompted by concern that the system's automatic classification did not adequately capture the client's situation. The binary logic through which incoming transactions are treated as income reflects a standardised approach aimed at equal treatment. In this case, however, Sara judged that such a classification risked overlooking important aspects of the client's circumstances. Her response was therefore to seek further clarification and adjust the deduction in light of that information. In this sense, the example illustrates how ethics work may unfold through practitioners' assessments of what may be at stake for clients and their discretionary interventions in situations where standardised routines appear insufficient.

A final example of this pattern became visible during shadowing at a financial assistance unit. Although the everyday work was organised around Viva, the e-application system and the communication platform, social workers frequently opened a separate Word or Excel document. These parallel overviews contained information they regarded as necessary for sound case handling but that had no place in the standardised system logic. During an interview, Ayla described how she used such a document:

> I keep another overview as well, in Word, not in Viva (the case management system). Here I note down the cases and what the client is doing: sick leave, unemployment, how often payments should be made, how the clients prefer that contact take place—for example, by email if there are mental health issues and they don't dare or have the energy to answer the phone. Or whether there is a possibility of sickness benefits, or any new treatment in progress. It helps me gather my thoughts about the cases. This is more about reflecting on what could be done for our clients going forward. They are all so different. (Social worker Ayla, economic assistance, interview)

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The excerpt illustrates how Ayla maintains a parallel documentation system for information that is difficult to incorporate into the standardised logic of the case management system. This includes, for example, notes on clients' mental health, preferred modes of contact and signs of vulnerability. Such information points to forms of relational and situational knowledge that are not easily captured within the formal system, yet appear to matter in everyday practice. The system is organised around standardised categories that promote consistency, but that may leave limited room for the variability that characterises client work. In this sense, maintaining parallel documentation can be interpreted as a form of ethics work through which practitioners preserve contextual and relational aspects of cases that might otherwise be lost.

4.2 | Navigating Relational Distance in Ethical Practice

During fieldwork, digital meetings emerged as an integral part of social workers' everyday routines. In interviews and informal conversations, social workers repeatedly described how such tools helped address practical challenges: they made it easier to gather multiple professionals, enabled contact with clients who lived far away or had difficulty coming to the office and saved both time and administrative effort. This flexibility was often presented as valuable in a pressured work environment. At the same time, social workers also described situations in which they deliberately chose not to use digital communication. In cases where they felt that physical distance might make it harder to perceive emotional cues, affect the relationship or create distance in the encounter, they instead preferred face-to-face contact.

A recurring situation of ethics work in relation to relational distance, in both child and family services and economic assistance, was that social workers consciously left their laptops behind when meeting clients. Although bringing the computer would have facilitated real-time documentation and thus reduced the amount of administrative work afterwards, several social workers described this choice as necessary in situations where the device was experienced as disrespectful or distancing. In the example below, the social worker Lisa deliberately refrains from using a computer during a client meeting. Although she recognises that digital documentation would increase efficiency, she chooses to rely on pen and paper, as she regards the presence of a laptop as diminishing the quality of the encounter.

> When I meet with clients, I only use paper. I don't bring a computer—it becomes like a barrier. It feels undignified. I just can't do it! Even though I wish I could… I write sloppily and can barely read my own notes. I wish I could use a computer, but I just can't bring myself to. (Social worker Lisa, child and family services, shadowing)

Lisa's account suggests that the presence of the computer is not experienced as neutral in the client encounter. Rather, it may come to represent forms of distance that sit uneasily with relational aspects of social work. Although she notes that digital documentation would ease her workload and improve the quality of her notes, she describes this as less important than being present with the client in the moment. Her decision to leave the computer behind and instead rely on pen and paper can therefore be interpreted as a way of prioritising relational presence over administrative efficiency. In Banks's terms, this may be understood as ethics work in the sense that considerations about the client relationship are translated into situated professional action.

Another example arose when we followed Eva, a social worker in a child and family services unit, as she deliberated whether to schedule a digital or an in-person meeting with a client. She explained that, in this case, she would opt for a physical meeting and described why she considered this the preferable choice, even though it required more time for both parties and involved a certain amount of everyday small talk before and after the meeting. For Eva, situations marked by anxiety, vulnerability or uncertainty called for a form of presence and relationship-building that, in her view, were better supported in a physical meeting than through digital means.

> If it concerns very sensitive matters, or a family that is anxious or nervous, or has waited a long time for contact with the social services, or when it feels important to be present and show that we want to listen, then I think it's preferable to meet in person. You need to sit together, especially in the beginning when we talk about what this will mean and what the situation looks like and really try to dispel the fear of social services that often exists. Physical meetings are needed for that, I believe. (Social worker Eva, child and family services, shadowing)

Eva's reasoning illustrates how the digitalization-related values of efficiency, time-saving and easier coordination do not always align with the relational considerations she foregrounds in this situation. Here, the digital meeting appears as an option that, in her view, risks creating distance in an encounter marked by anxiety, vulnerability or uncertainty. Her choice of a physical meeting can, therefore, be understood as a way of prioritising presence and relational attentiveness over practical convenience. In this sense, the example illustrates how ethics work may involve judging how the conditions of interaction shape the encounter and responding in ways intended to support the client's sense of safety.

4.3 | Navigating Digital Accessibility in Ethical Practice

Across both economic assistance and child and family services, organisations sought to lower access thresholds through e-applications, communication platforms and multiple contact channels beyond phone and e-mail, such as Messenger, SMS and chat-like systems. On paper, these solutions expanded entry points and increased accessibility. In everyday practice, however, social workers often limited their use of these tools and at times deliberately chose not to engage with

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certain channels. While some concerns related to confidentiality, social workers more often emphasised that these digital tools risked constraining rather than enhancing access, particularly, for clients lacking technology, digital competence or confidence in using such systems, raising concerns about exclusion from welfare support.

One example of how these tensions manifested in practice and of how ethics work took shape, emerged when we followed Lana in an economic assistance unit. While processing a paper-based application, she narrated the client's situation aloud as she worked. She explained that the client had no access to digital devices and, following a stroke, also experienced significant cognitive and motor impairments. As a result, she, together with colleagues, had been making regular home visits to support him in completing his applications.

> We've made several home visits to help this client with the application. His computer is broken, and due to impaired vision, he can't see what's on the smartphone, so he's unable to complete the application there. Despite having suffered a stroke, the client has been denied sickness benefits and is now turning to economic assistance. The client requires extensive support from several agencies. He has cognitive difficulties that make it hard to complete either a digital or paper application. (Social worker Lana, economic assistance, shadowing)

Lana's account illustrates how digital tools intended to enhance accessibility can instead create distance for certain clients. For her, this is not simply a technological issue but an ethical one: the client risks exclusion from essential support because he lacks both access to digital devices and the ability to use them. Her decision to conduct home visits and provide hands-on assistance can thus be understood as an expression of professional responsibility in situations where practitioners interpret what is at stake for clients and how far their responsibility extends under digitally mediated conditions. While supporting clients is part of social work practice, digital application systems often introduce situations that are not fully specified in existing procedures. In such cases, practitioners must interpret how far their responsibility extends when clients are unable to navigate the digital process on their own. Although Lana does not articulate this explicitly, her actions can be interpreted as reflecting concern about what might happen if such support were not provided. The ethical dimension becomes visible in how she identifies the risk of exclusion for the client and translates this concern into concrete supportive action.

This type of ethics work concerning digital application and communication channels recurred consistently among the social workers we shadowed. As one social worker in economic assistance put it, the scale of this work is substantial.

> This month, only two out of sixteen digital applications were complete when submitted. The rest required additional help from us. It's not that most clients refuse to hand in the necessary information—sometimes there's just too much of it, and in other cases, they don't understand what's required. There are significant language barriers, and for older clients, limited digital literacy. (Social worker Maria, economic assistance, shadowing)

Maria's account suggests that digital application procedures may become situations in which clients' access to welfare support is made more uncertain. While she does not describe this explicitly in ethical terms, her way of working points to an effort to make the process more manageable for clients. In practice, this involves calling clients to remind them, completing applications on their behalf and at times contacting companies themselves to obtain mandatory documents that would otherwise delay the process. These interventions, shaped by her understanding of clients' circumstances, can be interpreted as forms of responsibility-taking through which practitioners seek to prevent clients from being disadvantaged by digital routines.

In a final example, from the child and family services unit, the social worker Monica explained in an interview why she often chooses to call foster-placed children to read aloud the child protection committee's decision on continued care under the LVU (Care of Young Persons Act). The routine procedure would otherwise be to print the decision directly from the case management system and send it by post in its standardised form. However, the social worker described the phone call as necessary: a way of translating the system's formal language into something comprehensible and of meeting the child in a more caring and attentive manner.

> I think it is important to talk about what's written, and it creates an opportunity to try … to help them reflect and understand, because it's not very accessible. […] Sometimes I read it aloud—I've done that a lot with… assessments of placed youth that are submitted to the board every six months. Then I always read them over the phone, because they don't always want to come in. It has to be communicated. So, I read it aloud over the phone… asking, did that feel okay, do you recognize yourself, and I check in with them. (Social worker Monica, child and family services, interview)

Monica emphasised that she seldom sends decisions directly from the system to young clients. In her account, the issue was not only whether the decision was delivered, but also whether the child could understand it and engage with it in a meaningful way. She described the digitally generated text as stiff, formal and difficult and expressed concern that receiving it without explanation could cause anxiety or misunderstanding. Instead, she calls the children and reads the text aloud, pausing to explain and check their understanding. This practice can be understood as a way of mediating between the system's formal language and the child's situation. While communicating decisions is part of routine casework, the standardised format generated by the system leaves room for professional judgement regarding how such information is conveyed. In Monica's case, this involved going beyond

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simply sending the decision and instead making time to explain and talk it through. Although she does not frame this explicitly in ethical terms, her practice suggests attentiveness to how standardised communication may be experienced by the child. More broadly, the example points to a recurring pattern in the field: professionals respond to the limitations of standardised digital communication by adapting how information is conveyed in order to support clients' understanding and engagement.

5 | Discussion: Ethics Work in Digitalised Welfare organisations

This section discusses how digital systems reshape the conditions for ethics work in welfare organisations. In particular, it shows how digitalization introduces new sources of ethical salience, reconfigures discretionary judgement and reshapes aspects of professional responsibility.

5.1 | Digital Values and Ethical Tensions in Everyday Social Work

Our analysis shows that digital systems embed values that reshape the conditions under which frontline ethical judgement is exercised in practice. Social work offers a clear illustration of these dynamics. While digital systems may enhance efficiency and consistency, fieldwork shows how system values collide with core professional commitments such as contextual understanding, relational proximity, attentiveness and sensitivity to clients' everyday circumstances. It is in this tension zone that everyday ethics work becomes visible. Social workers' discretionary engagement with digital systems exemplifies a broader pattern of frontline ethics work in digitalised welfare settings, where practitioners navigate the ethical consequences of automation, categorisation and interface constraints while protecting clients' interests and sustaining relational foundations of care.

Viewed through Banks' (2016) lens, digital tools woven into everyday social work not only support casework but also generate situations practitioners perceive as ethically problematic. When automated updates risk misdirecting sensitive information, when standardised categories fail to capture lived realities or when digital meetings create relational distance, these situations are interpreted as ethically charged. In response, social workers assess what is ‘right’ to do for a particular client and act accordingly by correcting system outputs, contacting clients, establishing parallel routines, opting out of digital meetings or reinterpreting digital information to prevent worry or misunderstanding.

In this work, professionals assume roles resembling Banks' description of ethics in practice: acting as advocates when protecting clients from misclassifications or inadequate system support and as caregivers when compensating for relational losses created by digital interfaces. These roles express what professionals judge to be ethically required in the moment, to safeguard clients, create stability and prevent digitalization from undermining justice or dignity. They also legitimate their actions by explaining, for example, why a decision must be read aloud, why a home visit is necessary or why binary classifications require contextual supplementation. Through such justifications, professional ethics become visible and shape how practitioners navigate the consequences of digitalization.

These patterns resonate with prior research on digital frictions in welfare organisations, but our analysis shows that digitalization does more than add new tasks: it actively generates situations practitioners interpret as ethically significant, thereby activating ethics work.

5.2 | Extending Existing Research

Prior research shows that digitalization reshapes the conditions for frontline professionals by introducing new constraints and dilemmas that reorganise when, how and on what grounds discretion can be exercised in everyday practice (Ranerup and Henriksen 2019; Pors and Schou 2021; Pedersen and Pors 2023). Our analysis extends these insights by showing that these constraints also generate new sites of discretionary engagement. Digital frictions do not merely add layers to professional judgement they redirect its focus. In line with distinctions between the constraining and enabling effects of digitalization (Buffat 2015; Marienfeldt 2024), we show how digital systems simultaneously narrow discretion by standardising information and automating processes while also fostering discretion as an ethical, corrective practice. Digital rules, categories and automatizations become triggers for ethical discernment, prompting practitioners to interpret consequences, adjust system outputs and assume responsibility when system logics risk harming clients.

At the same time, our findings extend existing research on digital compensatory practices by showing that such interventions are often grounded in ethical judgement rather than merely functional or procedural concerns (cf. Carlsson et al. 2026). Prior studies document various forms of professional intervention when digital systems fall short, including client guidance, mediation, the humanization of standardised digital encounters and corrections of automated classifications (De Witte et al. 2016; Ranerup and Henriksen 2019; Schou and Pors 2019; Nordesjö et al. 2022; Løberg 2023; Germundsson et al. 2024). While this literature demonstrates how professionals make digital welfare processes function in practice, our analysis shifts attention to how these actions are ethically understood and justified. In doing so, the study makes explicit the ethical reasoning that has remained largely implicit in prior research.

5.3 | How Digitalization Reconfigures Ethics Work in Welfare organisations

Returning to our earlier discussion of how digitalization reshapes both the conditions and the focus of discretionary judgement, the analysis suggests that digital systems do more than introduce new dilemmas: they reconfigure the very processes through which ethical issues are identified, interpreted and acted upon. In light of this, we argue that digitalization transforms ethics work in three main ways.

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TABLE 2 | A summary of the three analytical shifts identified in this study.

Dimension	Ethics work (Banks 2016)	Ethics work in digitalised welfare organisations
Ethical triggers	Situations where practitioners recognise ethically salient aspects of practice, often involving tensions between rules, norms and client needs.	System logics embedded in digital systems: automation, classifications and interface constraints.
Forms of ethics work	Ongoing, situated interpretation and negotiation of professional responsibility in everyday practice.	Ethical engagement intertwined with navigating digital frictions, including interpreting system outputs and adjusting standardised processes.
Configuration of responsibility	Responsibility primarily enacted through the practitioner's professional judgement.	Responsibility enacted through practitioners' mediation of system logics within technical work arrangements.

First, ethical dilemmas are increasingly triggered through the operational logics embedded in digital systems rather than arising solely from conflicts between formal rules, professional norms and client needs. In classical street-level bureaucracy, tensions often emerge when practitioners interpret rules in relation to professional values and the circumstances of individual clients (Lipsky 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2012; Banks 2016). While bureaucratic standardisation and rule-based administration have long shaped social welfare work, digital systems transform how these logics operate by embedding classifications and routines directly into technical systems. In digitalised settings, tensions may therefore arise not only from rule interpretation but also from the way rules and classifications are operationalised within digital systems. Automated updates may risk harming clients, categorical structures may misrepresent their circumstances and digital interfaces may create relational distance. These situations still require discretionary interpretation, but they also require practitioners to judge what is ethically at stake and how responsibility should be enacted in response to system-produced outcomes. Digitalization thus shifts some of the moral tensions from the interpretation of explicit rules towards managing ambiguities produced by digital systems and their standardised logics.

Second, digitalization reshapes how ethics work becomes visible and enacted in everyday practice. Banks (2016) conceptualises ethics as embedded in everyday practice, where practitioners continuously interpret what is at stake and work to sustain professional values in situated encounters. Our findings extend this perspective by showing how digitalization introduces new sites for such everyday ethics work. Rather than appearing as bounded moments of choice, ethical issues in digitalised welfare work often emerge through small, recurring frictions in interactions with digital systems. These include interpreting automated classifications, compensating for rigid data structures or adjusting communication formats to protect clients' understanding and dignity. In this sense, ethics work becomes closely intertwined with the ongoing adjustments required to navigate digital system logics. This resonates with research on invisible work and digital repair (Star and Strauss 1999; Justesen and Plesner 2024; Gräfe et al. 2024), suggesting that seemingly technical adjustments may also constitute ethical acts through which practitioners protect clients and sustain relational and contextual integrity.

Third, digital systems shift how ethical responsibility is configured by shaping what information appears relevant, which options seem available and how decisions are structured (cf. Bovens and Zouridis 2002; Buffat 2015). Professionals therefore take responsibility not only for interpreting rules but also for interpreting system behaviours: identifying when automated outputs are misleading, when digital templates obscure clients' needs or when interfaces risk relational harm. Ethical responsibility is enacted through these ongoing evaluations of system logic, making responsibility increasingly enacted within human–technology arrangements. Practitioners remain moral agents, but the terrain on which responsibility is enacted is reshaped.

Table 2 summarises these shifts and clarifies how digitalization reshapes the conditions of ethics work in welfare organisations.

These findings suggest that digitalization transforms the terrain on which ethics work unfolds by introducing system-generated situations that require continuous interpretive engagement. While ethics work has long been embedded in everyday professional practice (Banks 2016), digital systems increasingly generate situations in which practitioners must interpret system outputs, compensate for rigid classifications and assess how digital routines affect clients. In this sense, ethical engagement becomes closely tied to the ongoing management of system-generated constraints.

6 | Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates how digitalization makes ethics work increasingly intertwined with the interpretation and management of digital system logics. Ethical engagement often emerges through practitioners' efforts to interpret system outputs, adjust standardised routines and mitigate unintended consequences for clients. Recognising these dynamics is essential for understanding professional judgement in digitalised welfare settings and for designing organisational arrangements that support ethical practice.

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Future research could further examine how different types of digital systems shape the conditions for ethics work across welfare domains and how organisations can design digital work arrangements that support professionals in exercising ethical judgement.

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Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Etikprövningsmyndigheten) [Dnr 2023–03624-01]. All participants provided informed consent and the research was conducted in accordance with national ethical guidelines.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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