

What Pharmaceutical Field Managers Should Not Delegate to AI: Decision Support, Context, and Managerial Judgment

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Abstract- Artificial intelligence can help pharmaceutical field managers find patterns in sales, territory, activity, and performance data. The harder question is what should happen after a pattern is found. This practice-based paper looks at decisions that should remain with managers even when AI provides useful analysis. The discussion focuses on three areas: employee performance and termination, territory and target decisions, and the allocation of managerial attention. The paper draws on the author's experience managing geographically distributed pharmaceutical field teams. In that setting, a termination recommendation from an experienced regional manager could carry considerable weight, but it was not treated as sufficient when sales results contradicted the recommendation or when a personal conflict was suspected. Direct conversation with the employee then became necessary. The same logic applies to AI. A system may identify a decline, an unusual pattern, or a territory that needs attention, but it does not know every fact that gives the situation meaning. The paper argues for a practical boundary: use AI to improve visibility and prepare decisions, while keeping consequential people decisions and final accountability with managers who can examine context, question the recommendation, and speak with the people affected.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; pharmaceutical field management; managerial judgment; decision support; human oversight; performance management; field force

I. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence is becoming easier to use in everyday management. A field manager can now receive alerts about falling sales, unusual territory performance, changes in activity, or employees who appear to be moving away from target. This can save time. It can also create a new problem: once the system produces a recommendation, how much of the decision should the manager hand over to it?

I do not see this as a choice between human judgment and AI. In pharmaceutical field management, there are many tasks where AI can be useful. It can organize large amounts of information, compare periods, find exceptions, and point a manager toward something that deserves attention. The difficulty begins when a signal is treated as if it already contains the answer.

This matters most in decisions about people. Employment and performance decisions affect careers and livelihoods, and research on algorithmic human resource management has raised concerns about fairness, transparency, employee agency, and accountability (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019; Andrieux et al., 2024). Human oversight is often presented as the safeguard. But oversight has value only if the person reviewing the system is willing and able to question it.

This paper takes a practical view of that boundary. It uses examples from pharmaceutical field management to separate tasks that AI can support from decisions that still need managerial ownership.

II. WHAT AI CAN SEE WELL

A pharmaceutical field organization produces a large amount of structured information. Sales can be compared by month, region, product, representative, or customer group. Target realization can be followed over time. Returns, unusual orders, gaps in activity, and changes in territory performance can be flagged. These are good uses for analytical systems because the manager does not need to search every report manually.

In this role, AI is useful as an attention tool. It can tell the manager that something has changed. It can rank issues by urgency. It can also bring together information that would otherwise sit in separate reports.

Recent research in a multinational pharmaceutical company provides an important caution, however. Piezunka and colleagues found that the same AI sales system produced different results depending on how decision authority, work procedures, training, and incentives were arranged around it. Tailored human-AI interaction improved performance, while untailored interaction performed worse than the legacy system. The technology alone did not determine the result.

That finding matches my own view of field management. Information becomes useful only after someone understands what it means in the local situation.

III. A PERFORMANCE SIGNAL IS NOT A TERMINATION DECISION

Consider an employee whose sales have fallen for several months. An AI system can identify the decline quickly. It may also compare the employee with colleagues, previous periods, and territory averages. All of that is useful. None of it, by itself, tells me whether the employee should leave the company.

In my own management practice, the judgment of the regional manager mattered. If a regional manager had worked for several years, had built a record of sound decisions, and I trusted that manager's judgment, I normally gave substantial weight to a recommendation to terminate an employee.

But there were situations where I would not approve the recommendation without looking further. If the employee's sales results were good, the recommendation itself raised a question. The same was true if I thought there might be a personal conflict between the regional manager and the employee. In those cases, I would speak directly with

the employee, by telephone or face to face, before making a decision.

This is the kind of context that a performance model can easily miss. The sales data may be accurate and still be incomplete for the decision. A manager's recommendation may also be sincere and still be influenced by a difficult relationship. Good judgment requires checking the contradiction rather than forcing all available information into one score.

Research on algorithm-based HR decisions has made a similar point from an ethical perspective. Algorithmic systems can appear objective while still creating problems of bias, opacity, and personal integrity (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019). More recent work on generative AI in HRM also stresses that the potential benefit of AI has to be weighed against possible harm when systems are used to support decisions about people (Andrieux et al., 2024).

IV. HUMAN OVERSIGHT HAS TO BE REAL

Simply placing a manager at the end of an automated process does not solve the problem. A manager who clicks 'approve' without examining the recommendation is not providing meaningful oversight.

Evidence from AI-supported decision making shows why this deserves attention. Alon-Barkat and Busuioc (2023) tested how people responded to algorithmic advice in three experiments. They did not find a general tendency to follow algorithms automatically, but they did find selective adherence when advice matched existing stereotypes. Other work on AI-based personnel selection has examined automation bias and the responsibility of human decision-makers to monitor automated recommendations rather than treat them as final decisions (Langer et al., 2023).

There is another practical issue. Managers themselves are not neutral. Experience, trust, conflict, and prior beliefs affect human judgment. Keeping a human in the process is therefore not a claim that humans are always better. The point is that consequential decisions need someone who can be asked why the

decision was made and who can consider information that was not captured by the system.

In my experience, that responsibility sat mainly in the commercial management line. Human Resources had a limited role at the point of departure and asked the departing employee to complete an exit questionnaire about the reason for leaving. The substantive performance judgment was made within commercial management. In an AI-supported system, I would still want the accountable manager to own that judgment rather than shift responsibility to the software.

V. TERRITORY AND TARGET DECISIONS NEED CONTEXT TOO

The same problem appears in territory and target decisions. Historical sales and market data are useful starting points. An AI system could compare growth, customer concentration, previous realization, product mix, or territory potential much faster than a manager working manually.

But target allocation is not only a calculation. In field management, I also considered how long a representative had worked in the territory, the strength of customer relationships, previous performance, local conditions, and what had changed from the prior year. Equal distribution was not automatically fair distribution.

Suppose two territories show similar historical sales. One representative may have spent years building customer relationships, while another has only recently taken over a difficult territory. A model can be given more variables, but there will still be situations where the manager knows something relevant that is not represented well in the data.

This does not mean the manager should ignore the model. A good system can challenge the manager. If my proposed target distribution is very different from what the data suggest, I should be able to explain why. That is a better use of AI than allowing the system to make the final allocation without discussion.

VI. AI CAN HELP DECIDE WHERE TO LOOK

One of the most useful roles for AI in a large field organization is deciding where managerial attention may be needed first.

A senior field manager cannot spend equal time on every representative, every regional manager, and every territory. Signals can help identify where the gap between expected and actual performance is growing, where returns are unusual, or where a previously stable territory has changed direction.

The manager can then investigate. Sometimes the explanation will be straightforward. Sometimes it will not. A weak result may come from poor execution, but it may also reflect customer access, a territory change, a management problem, or a previously successful employee losing motivation.

This is why I would use AI to narrow the manager's field of attention rather than narrow the manager's judgment. The system can help answer 'Where should I look?' The manager still has to answer 'What is happening here?' and 'What should we do about it?'

VII. TRUST SHOULD DEPEND ON THE DECISION

Managers do not need the same level of caution for every AI output. If a system summarizes last month's sales or identifies a mathematical variance, the risk is relatively limited. If it recommends terminating an employee, changing compensation, or making another decision with a direct effect on a person's career, the standard should be much higher.

Research published in 2026 continues to show the importance of human oversight, transparency, and employee autonomy in AI-enabled HRM. Gnankob and Nanda (2026), using survey data from employees working with AI-enabled HRM systems, found that human-in-the-loop oversight was associated with stronger trust and lower technostress. Chen (2026) likewise argues that algorithmic HRM changes the distribution of decision authority and can reduce human agency when automation replaces meaningful involvement.

For field managers, the practical lesson is not to distrust AI. It is to match the level of human review to the consequence of the decision. A low-risk analytical suggestion may need only a quick check. A decision affecting someone's employment should require a much deeper review and, where relevant, direct contact with the person involved.

VIII. A PRACTICAL BOUNDARY FOR FIELD MANAGEMENT

I would draw the boundary in a simple way. AI is well suited to finding, comparing, and organizing signals. It can show that performance has changed, identify an unusual territory, or point out that a manager's proposed action does not match the available numbers.

The manager's work starts where the signal becomes a decision. The manager should test the explanation, look for missing context, consider the history of the employee or territory, and decide whether direct conversation is needed. For high-consequence decisions, the manager should also be able to explain the reasoning without saying that the system made the choice.

This distinction leaves room for AI to become more capable. Better models may improve forecasts and produce more useful recommendations. The boundary is not based on the idea that AI will always be technically weaker than a manager. It is based on the nature of managerial responsibility. When a decision requires interpretation of conflicting information, affects an employee directly, or depends on facts outside the available data, the final judgment should remain identifiable as a human decision.

IX. DISCUSSION

Much of the discussion about AI at work asks whether machines will replace human decisions. In field management, that question is too broad. Some parts of a decision can be automated or supported without handing over the whole decision.

The more useful question is what kind of contribution the system is making. A sales alert is not the same as

a recommendation to dismiss an employee. A forecast is not the same as a target allocation. A ranked list of territories is not the same as a coaching plan. Treating these as equivalent hides the difference between analysis and responsibility.

Human involvement also needs to be designed carefully. Research has shown that people can follow algorithmic advice selectively, and that simply requiring a human reviewer does not guarantee that discriminatory or poor recommendations will be corrected (Alon-Barkat and Busuioc, 2023; Gaudeul et al., 2024). The manager therefore needs enough authority, information, and time to challenge the system.

For pharmaceutical field organizations, I see the strongest use of AI in improving managerial visibility. A system can help senior leaders see patterns earlier and spend attention more intelligently. That is valuable. But the final decision becomes more important, not less, when the system makes the analysis faster.

X. LIMITATIONS

This paper is practice-based and conceptual. It does not test an AI system or compare AI-supported decisions with human-only decisions. The examples come from pharmaceutical commercial management experience and should not be treated as evidence that the same decision process will work in every company or market.

The paper also focuses on managerial use of AI rather than technical model design. Questions such as model accuracy, data quality, privacy, regulatory compliance, and validation require separate treatment.

Future field research could test different levels of AI involvement in pharmaceutical sales management. Useful comparisons might include AI alerts without recommendations, AI recommendations with mandatory managerial review, and systems in which managers must record why they accepted or rejected a recommendation.

XI. CONCLUSION

AI can make a field manager faster at finding problems. It should not make the manager less responsible for deciding what those problems mean. In pharmaceutical field management, performance data, territory information, and activity patterns can all benefit from better analysis. But decisions about termination, targets, coaching, and other consequential actions often depend on history, relationships, local conditions, and conversations that are not fully represented in the data.

My preferred boundary is therefore practical. Let AI improve visibility. Let it challenge assumptions. Let it show the manager where to look. When the decision has a serious effect on a person or requires interpretation of conflicting information, the manager should still own the judgment and be able to explain it.

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