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Redefining the boundaries: The psychological contract in fluid work arrangements in the digital era

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Abstract: This study investigates the changing nature of the psychological contract in the digital era, particularly how fluid work arrangements alter traditional employment dynamics. Utilizing a conceptual approach informed by a narrative review, this study examines the historical development of the psychological contract through foundational studies, while also integrating recent research that highlights the transformative influence of digital platforms in fluid work environments. The key contribution of this study is the innovative model it proposes, which captures the complexities of the psychological contract in modern digital and fluid work settings. This model provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand evolving employer-employee relationships and practical insights for organizations navigating these changes. It represents a significant advancement in both theory and practical application, connecting traditional employment principles with the dynamism of digital-era work.

Keywords: psychological contract; digital platforms; fluid work; gig economy; organizational behavior

1. Introduction

The digital era has brought transformative changes in many areas, especially employment relationships. Central to this transformation is the psychological contract, a concept that has been pivotal in understanding employment dynamics and has left a profound mark on organizational behavior (McParland and Connolly, 2020). Digitalization has reshaped employment dynamics, making the psychological contract more critical than ever in shaping employee expectations during this transition (Ballas et al., 2024). Historically, this contract has witnessed significant shifts. Originating from Menninger's (1958) therapeutic setting, it transitioned to the workplace through the insights of Argyris (1960) and has evolved in response to technological advancements. As the work environment evolved, so did the contract, with contributions from luminaries like (Levinson et al., 1962; Rousseau, 1989; Schein, 1980).

In the context of rapid digital transformation, the psychological contract serves as a vital framework for understanding how digitalization impacts employee expectations and employer obligations (Van Der Schaft et al., 2020). Despite extensive literature, a clear gap emerges, especially when considering fluid work models. While traditional employment contexts have been extensively explored, as evidenced by works of Sherman and Morley (2020), Zhang et al. (2022), the burgeoning digital platforms and the shift towards fluid work have necessitated a reevaluation of the psychological contract (Duggan et al., 2020). Digital platforms introduce new variables into the employment relationship, altering how psychological contracts are

formed and maintained (Tomprou and Lee, 2022). Given these dynamics, algorithms on digital platforms pose challenges, such as feelings of professional isolation among fluid workers (Liu et al., 2020). This evolving landscape has given rise to the concept of multi-party psychological contracts (Costa, 2021). In this paradigm, the employment relationship extends beyond the conventional employer-employee dyad, encompassing a broader spectrum of stakeholders, including platform providers and clients. For instance, a fluid worker on a platform like Uber might have expectations not just from the platform itself but also from riders and third-party service providers (Sherman and Morley, 2020).

The study introduces a novel conceptual framework that captures the evolving nature of the psychological contract in the digital age. Drawing inspiration from existing theories like the Dynamic Adaptation Model (Sherman and Morley, 2020) and the Digital Psychological Contract (Seifried et al., 2023), this framework offers a fresh perspective tailored to the nuances of fluid work environments. It emphasizes the crucial role of the psychological contract in shaping employee expectations amid digitalization, addressing how digital technologies influence mutual obligations. It aims to bridge the gap between traditional employment contexts and the challenges presented by digital platforms, providing insights into how these evolving contracts can be navigated for mutual benefit. By highlighting the intersection of psychological contracts and digitalization, this research contributes to better employment practices and policies for a rapidly evolving workforce.

2. Literature review

2.1. Historical perspectives on the psychological contract

The psychological contract, defined as the unwritten expectations between employees and employers, is pivotal in understanding employment dynamics and has profoundly influenced organizational behavior and outcomes (McParland and Connolly, 2020). Tracing its early roots, the concept can be linked to Karl Menninger's (1958) work, which delved into the unwritten contract between a therapist and patient. Though Menninger's idea was rooted in therapeutic settings, its implications found resonance with organizational theorists, leading Argyris (1960) to adapt it for the workplace.

Building on this foundation, as the business environment underwent transformations in the latter half of the 20th century, becoming more competitive and cost-focused, the psychological contract evolved in tandem. Scholars made distinct contributions in this era: Levinson et al. (1962) explored its emotional aspects; Schein (1980) delved into the deeper, often unspoken, dynamics; and Rousseau (1989) emphasized the nature of the reciprocal exchange agreements of the psychological contract. Transitioning into the 1990s and beyond, the psychological contract began to incorporate more contemporary dimensions (Alcover et al., 2017). A significant shift in this regard was the introduction of the ideology-infused psychological contract, which integrates ethical values and beliefs into the employment relationship (O'Donohue and Nelson, 2009). Recent studies have further emphasized this integration, highlighting its impact on organizational dynamics (Anvari et al., 2023; Bahadır et al., 2024; van den Groenendaal et al., 2023). For instance, Anvari et al.

(2023) examined how strategic human resource management practitioners' emotional intelligence and affective organizational commitment in higher education institutions in Georgia are influenced by ethical values embedded in the psychological contract during the post-COVID-19 period. These developments underscore the evolving nature of the psychological contract in the modern workplace.

In tandem with these developments, the dawn of the 21st century heralded the rise of the platform economy, referring to digital platforms like Uber (a ride-sharing service) and Airbnb (a home-sharing service) that facilitate peer-to-peer services (Antipina, 2020). These platforms, which operate outside traditional employer-employee dynamics, have necessitated a reevaluation of the psychological contract's established constructs (She et al., 2020). Despite its evolution and the challenges posed by modern work settings, the psychological contract remains a complex and multifaceted construct (Klein et al., 2020). Breaches in this contract can lead to perceptions of injustice and negative behaviors, emphasizing its continued relevance and influence on strategies, employee satisfaction, and productivity in contemporary organizational settings (Hu et al., 2023).

In wrapping up, as we stand at the crossroads of traditional and fluid work environments, understanding the psychological contract's nuances is more crucial than ever. This insight sets the stage for our upcoming exploration of the contract's role in "traditional vs. fluid work".

2.2. Psychological contract in traditional vs. fluid work

The psychological contract, entrenched in organizational behavior literature, encapsulates the unspoken, implicit agreements and beliefs shared between an employer and an employee (Memon and Ghani, 2020). Historically, this contract has been delineated into two primary dimensions: transactional and relational (Montes and Irving, 2008). The former pertains to quantifiable, short-term exchanges, often economic in nature, while the latter encompasses long-term, socio-emotional commitments (Lam and de Campos, 2014; Seifried et al., 2023). These dimensions have been instrumental in elucidating the nexus between employee attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes (D'Art and Turner, 2006).

With the emergence of the fluid workforce and digital platforms, the traditional understanding of the psychological contract is being reshaped and challenged (Duggan et al., 2020). While these platforms offer a novel work environment, the foundational tenets of organizational behavior, such as the psychological contract, remain pertinent, albeit with unique manifestations (Guest and Isaksson, 2023). In these fluid work environments, fluid workers, devoid of conventional organizational scaffolding, often confront feelings of professional isolation and potential job insecurity (Liu et al., 2020). This evolving landscape has birthed the concept of multi-party psychological contracts (Sherman and Morley, 2020). Here, the employment relationship extends beyond the traditional employer-employee interaction, encompassing multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders are often interconnected through sophisticated algorithms, such as those determining job matches or payment structures. Such algorithms, while enhancing efficiency, can also contribute to feelings of detachment or lack of agency among workers, further complicating the psychological contract

(Sherman and Morley, 2020). Moreover, platforms such as Uber and Airbnb, heralded for revolutionizing the gig economy by providing workers with unprecedented flexibility and autonomy over their work schedules and conditions, inadvertently engender feelings of professional isolation among their workforce (She et al., 2020). This phenomenon has precipitated the rise of online communities, where fluid workers converge for mutual support and networking, a trend underscored by Schmidt et al. (2023) in their nuanced adaptation of the Attraction-Selection-Attrition paradigm, a model that elucidates how individuals are attracted to, selected by, and remain with organizations.

In synthesizing this corpus of literature, it becomes unequivocally clear that while the core essence of the psychological contract remains unchanged, its manifestations and intricacies adapt to the evolving professional milieu. As the demarcations between traditional and fluid work settings become increasingly nebulous, a profound understanding of the psychological contract's evolving dynamics emerges as an indispensable component for both organizations and their workforce. Looking forward, this understanding will be pivotal in guiding organizational strategies and recalibrating worker expectations, ensuring mutual growth and sustainability in an ever-evolving professional landscape. Given these complexities, the impending challenge is to discern how organizations and workers will navigate this terrain and which paradigms of understanding will crystallize in subsequent eras.

2.3. Role of digital platforms in shaping the psychological contract

The advent of digital platforms has profoundly impacted the psychological contract between employers and employees, introducing new dynamics and reshaping traditional work paradigms. Auer et al. (2021), in their exploration of the integration of technology into work processes, highlighted that these platforms democratize work opportunities, emphasizing the newfound autonomy they offer. Zhang et al. (2022), while focusing on the dual-edged nature of digital platforms, discussed the fluid work environment they enable, with their immediacy and transparency fostering trust and mutual respect. Additionally, Pavlou and Gefen (2005), in their study on the role of trust in e-commerce, pointed out that these platforms align with modern worker expectations, particularly in terms of work-life balance.

Liu et al. (2023), in their investigation into the sustainability of digital platforms, provided a nuanced perspective on the evolving nature of the psychological contract in the digital age. As they emphasized the dynamic nature of expectations and obligations, influenced by technological advancements and societal shifts, the challenges posed by digital platforms also become evident. Delving into these intricacies, Cropanzano et al. (2023), who examined the effects of digital platforms on worker well-being, underscored potential feelings of isolation, job insecurity, and blurred work-life boundaries. Alfes et al. (2022), Stewart et al. (2020), both of whom explored the mediating role of digital platforms in employment relationships, further elaborated on the transient nature of many digital jobs, leading to feelings of impermanence and instability. Recent research has further highlighted the impact of artificial intelligence and algorithmic management on worker autonomy and the psychological contract, indicating a shift in control dynamics within digital platforms

(Ballas et al., 2024; Bankins et al., 2024; Kadolkar et al., 2024). Building upon these findings, Wiener et al. (2023) explored the impact of AI-driven algorithms on worker autonomy within digital platforms, revealing a nuanced shift in control dynamics. Their work suggests that as platforms become more sophisticated, the psychological contract is increasingly influenced by non-human actors, adding complexity to expectations and obligations between workers and platforms. This aligns with our argument that technological advancements necessitate a reevaluation of the psychological contract in the digital era. Culiberg et al. (2023); Chen and Wang (2023), in their respective studies on the implications of breaches in the psychological contract, highlighted the profound effects such as decreased trust and commitment, especially when there is a mismatch between worker aspirations and what the platforms offer.

As the role of digital platforms in shaping the psychological contract is further explored, it becomes evident that the fluidity introduced by these platforms extends beyond mere work arrangements. This fluidity, characterized by dynamic expectations, evolving obligations, and the transient nature of digital jobs, sets the stage for a broader discussion on the impacts and implications of the psychological contract in fluid work. Transitioning to the subsequent section, the profound effects of these evolving contracts on both organizations and individuals will be examined, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in this new era of work.

2.4. Impacts and implications of the psychological contract in fluid work

Fluid work, characterized by its adaptable, transient nature and often devoid of traditional employment structures, has become increasingly prevalent in the modern work landscape (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). Central to this shift is the psychological contract, an unwritten set of mutual expectations between employers and employees (Perkins et al., 2022). Seifried et al. (2023) argue that in such fluid work environments, a robust psychological contract can lead to enhanced project outcomes, foster a harmonious freelancer-client relationship, and elevate job satisfaction.

Transitioning to the technological influences on this dynamic, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced the concept of "gigification". Braganza et al. (2022) describe it as a phenomenon where traditional roles transition into more transient, project-based positions due to AI's influence. This shift, while offering flexibility, directly challenges traditional notions of the psychological contract by altering aspects like employment duration, task nature, and remuneration structures. Sherman and Morley (2020) go into the intricacies of these agreements across contexts involving several stakeholders, emphasizing the need to reassess conventional contract paradigms due to the dynamic nature of labor relationships in the fluid workforce.

Duggan et al. (2020); Zhang et al. (2022) delve deeper into the challenges posed by AI and algorithmic management in the fluid workforce. They highlight specific issues such as diminished worker autonomy and potential biases. These challenges, combined with the shifts brought about by "gigification", can lead to a weakening of the psychological contract, emphasizing its fragility in the face of rapid technological advancements. Chen and Wang (2023) further underscore this by suggesting that

breaches in these contracts can even influence areas beyond the workplace, such as increased academic anxiety.

Moreover, Behl et al. (2021) introduce gamification as a potential strategy to rejuvenate the psychological contract in the fluid workforce. By incorporating game elements into work settings, there is potential to realign expectations and boost job satisfaction. In a related context, Mousa et al. (2023) emphasize effective talent management in family-owned businesses, highlighting the importance of maintaining strong psychological contracts even in more traditional work settings, given the broader implications for worker satisfaction and organizational success.

In wrapping up, the psychological contract's role in shaping employee experiences in fluid work environments is undeniable. As these environments continue to evolve, a deeper understanding of the psychological contract becomes imperative. Understanding these shifts has practical implications for businesses, policymakers, and workers, ensuring that evolving work structures remain beneficial for all parties involved. This foundation sets the stage for a more profound exploration of underlying theories in subsequent discussions.

2.5. Theoretical frameworks and models

The psychological contract, a cornerstone of organizational psychology, has undergone rigorous exploration and interpretation across various theoretical frameworks. These frameworks act as lenses, clarifying the intricate dynamics of employee-employer relationships, especially amid rapid technological and societal changes. Sherman and Morley (2020) positioned themselves as pioneers with their introduction of the Dynamic Adaptation Model. This model transcends being merely a theoretical construct; it serves as a clarion call for organizational agility. It accentuates the imperative of adaptability, suggesting that as technological terrains transform, the mutual expectations and obligations between employees and employers must concurrently evolve. The model highlights that the psychological contract is not static but a malleable agreement adapting to shifting circumstances, particularly in the digital age.

Expanding upon this foundation, Seifried et al. (2023) unveiled the Digital Psychological Contract. Though it might seem like a contemporary rendition of the psychological contract, its implications are profound. This framework signifies a paradigmatic shift, advocating for a comprehensive reassessment of traditional psychological contracts. In this view, the digital era does not merely modify the psychological contract; it fundamentally redefines it. Digital tools, platforms, and interactions become paramount in shaping how employees and employers perceive and meet their mutual obligations. Furthermore, Schmidt et al. (2023) reconfigured the traditional attraction-selection-attrition framework for the rising fluid workforce, highlighting the essence of community, collaboration, and connectivity in fluid-based roles.

Addressing the challenges of current work dynamics, the fluid essence of modern employment, marked by its evanescent nature, flexibility, and digital intermediation, offers both prospects and challenges for the implementation of existing theoretical frameworks. With employment gradually detaching from traditional infrastructures

and anchoring more to digital platforms, the relevance of longstanding frameworks in grasping new work realities becomes an urgent issue. Cropanzano et al. (2023) broached this territory with their Digital Trust Framework. Yet, their view contrasts starkly with Thomas and Baddipudi (2022), who assert in their Technological Mediation Model that technology does not just enable; the psychological contract is actively shaped by it. Compounding this multifaceted scenario, Watson et al. (2021) spotlighted the hurdles posed by ambiguities in defining the fluid workforce.

Delving into the metamorphoses of the work milieu, there is increasing acknowledgment that prevailing theoretical frameworks might not entirely capture the subtleties of today's work environments. Heeks et al. (2021) pioneered the fair-work framework, bridging traditional employment standards with the distinctive trials of the fluid workforce. Pereira et al. (2022) cautioned against an excessive dependence on technology in sculpting the psychological contract, pointing out potential pitfalls. Echoing this sentiment, Duggan et al. (2020) accentuated the indispensability of human touchpoints, even in predominantly digitized work settings.

In summation, the scrutiny of theoretical paradigms in the realm of the psychological contract marks a significant crossroads in organizational psychology. The digital epoch, laden with its transformative prowess, has redrawn the boundaries of the psychological contract. Looking ahead, it's crucial to contemplate how these theoretical models can be refined or broadened. The forthcoming journey, pinpointing lacunae and delineating prospective avenues, promises to be both intricate and gratifying as the panorama of the psychological contract in the digital epoch persists in its evolution.

2.6. Identified gaps and future directions

The literature on the psychological contract reveals pronounced gaps, particularly within the realms of digital and fluid work. Traditional employment contexts have been well-articulated, with studies like Sherman and Morley (2020) emphasizing conventional settings and Zhang et al. (2022) exploring the dynamics of traditional employer-employee relationships. However, the rise of digital platforms and the fluid workforce, as underscored by Liu et al. (2023) and Mousa et al. (2023), signals a paradigm shift. This evolution underscores not only the need for a fresh perspective but also research that transcends regional confines. For instance, while Sivarajan et al. (2021) offer insights into specific regional dynamics, the globalized nature of fluid work often remains overlooked, emphasizing the imperative for a broader, cross-cultural lens. This study directly addresses the contextual gap by investigating the changing nature of the psychological contract in the digital era, specifically focusing on how fluid work arrangements alter traditional employment dynamics. By examining these modern contexts, our research provides a fresh perspective that captures the complexities of employer-employee relationships in digital and fluid work settings.

Methodologically, there is a discernible inclination towards quantitative approaches, as evidenced by Löffert and Diehl (2023) and Seifried et al. (2023). These methods, while providing pivotal statistical insights, might fall short in capturing the intricate, subjective experiences inherent to the psychological contract. This suggests

a potential avenue for qualitative or mixed-methods research. Our study addresses the methodological gap by employing a conceptual approach informed by a narrative review. This methodology allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, integrating diverse perspectives and capturing the nuanced, subjective experiences associated with the psychological contract in the digital age. By moving beyond purely quantitative methods, we offer a more holistic understanding that encompasses both theoretical and practical dimensions.

Furthermore, while studies like those by Costa (2021), Harpur and Blanck (2020) predominantly anchor their findings in psychological or organizational behavior paradigms, the psychological contract's multifaceted nature in today's digital age beckons for a more interdisciplinary approach. Insights from sociology could offer a societal perspective, anthropology might provide cultural contexts, and the digital humanities could shed light on the technological implications. Responding to this interdisciplinary gap, our research integrates concepts from sociology, organizational behavior, and digital humanities to develop an innovative model of psychological contract. This model encapsulates the technological, cultural, and societal influences that shape employer-employee relationships in modern digital and fluid work environments. By adopting an interdisciplinary lens, we provide a more comprehensive theoretical framework that bridges traditional employment principles with the dynamism of digital-era work.

The pressing need for cultural sensitivity in research, especially as illuminated by Liu et al. (2023), cannot be overstated. Consider a multinational corporation navigating the psychological contract with employees from diverse cultural backgrounds; a one-size-fits-all approach could lead to misunderstandings, misaligned expectations, and potential conflicts. Remote work and digital connectivity have given rise to the omnipresent nature of work, where the boundaries between professional and personal life blur, making work accessible and often inescapable at all hours (Liu et al., 2023). Our study addresses the cultural gap by emphasizing the importance of a globalized, cross-cultural perspective in understanding the psychological contract. Through our narrative review, we incorporate studies from diverse cultural contexts, highlighting how cultural sensitivity influences employer-employee expectations and obligations in fluid work settings. This cross-cultural analysis enriches our proposed model, ensuring its applicability and relevance across different cultural landscapes.

In summation, as the contours of work continue to transform, it is crucial that academic understanding evolve in tandem. By explicitly addressing these identified gaps, contextual, methodological, interdisciplinary, and cultural, our study not only advances theoretical knowledge but also provides practical insights for organizations navigating the complexities of the digital era. The innovative model we propose represents a significant advancement in both theory and practical application, underscoring the urgent need for continued research in these areas.

2.7. Conclusion for the literature review

The literature review offers a comprehensive exploration of the psychological contract, tracing its evolution from its early roots in therapeutic settings (Menninger, 1958) to its profound influence on organizational behavior (McParland and Connolly,

2020). As the business environment transformed, scholars like Levinson et al. (1962), Schein (1980), Rousseau (1989) made significant contributions to its understanding. The rise of digital platforms and the fluid workforce has necessitated a reevaluation of this contract, especially with the emergence of multi-party psychological contracts (Sherman and Morley, 2020) and feelings of professional isolation among fluid workers (Liu et al., 2020). Theoretical frameworks, such as the Dynamic Adaptation Model (Sherman and Morley, 2020) and the Digital Psychological Contract (Seifried et al., 2023), have provided fresh perspectives on this evolving concept. However, gaps remain, particularly concerning the globalized nature of fluid work and the need for a broader, cross-cultural research approach. Building on these insights, this study aims to delve deeper into the psychological contract's intricate nuances within fluid work settings, setting the stage for a more profound exploration in subsequent sections.

3. Theoretical synthesis

3.1. Re-conceptualization

The psychological contract, a cornerstone of understanding employment dynamics, has historically encapsulated the unspoken, implicit agreements and beliefs shared between an employer and an employee (Memon and Ghani, 2020). Rooted in organizational behavior literature, this contract has traditionally been delineated into two primary dimensions: transactional and relational (Montes and Irving, 2008). The transactional dimension pertains to quantifiable, short-term exchanges, often economic in nature, while the relational dimension encompasses long-term, socio-emotional commitments (Lam and de Campos, 2014; Seifried et al., 2023). These dimensions have been instrumental in elucidating the nexus between employee attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes (D'Art and Turner, 2006).

However, with the dawn of the 21st century and the rise of the platform economy, the traditional understanding of the psychological contract has been reshaped and challenged (Duggan et al., 2020). Platforms like Uber and Airbnb, operating outside the traditional employer-employee dynamics, have introduced a new paradigm of work. In these fluid work environments, fluid workers, devoid of conventional organizational scaffolding, often confront feelings of professional isolation and potential job insecurity (Liu et al., 2020). This evolving landscape has birthed the concept of multi-party psychological contracts (Sherman and Morley, 2020). Here, the employment relationship extends beyond the traditional employer-employee interaction, encompassing multiple stakeholders.

Historically, scholars like Levinson et al. (1962) explored the emotional aspects of the psychological contract, while others like Schein (1980) delved into its deeper, often unspoken dynamics. Rousseau (1989) emphasized the nature of the reciprocal exchange agreements in the psychological contract. As the business environment underwent transformations, becoming more competitive and cost-focused, the psychological contract evolved in tandem. Transitioning into the 1990s and beyond, the psychological contract began to incorporate more contemporary dimensions, such as the "ideology-infused" psychological contract, which integrates ethical values and beliefs into the employment relationship (O'Donohue and Nelson, 2009).

In synthesizing this corpus of literature, it becomes clear that while the core essence of the psychological contract remains unchanged, its manifestations and intricacies adapt to the evolving professional milieu. As the demarcations between traditional and fluid work settings become increasingly nebulous, a profound understanding of the psychological contract's evolving dynamics emerges as an indispensable component for both organizations and their workforce. The re-conceptualization of the psychological contract for fluid workers underscores the need to understand the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the digital era. The multi-party nature of these contracts, combined with the influence of digital platforms, necessitates a broader, more nuanced understanding of the mutual expectations and obligations between workers and employers.

3.2. Influence of digital technologies

The digital epoch, with its transformative prowess, has redrawn the boundaries of the psychological contract, marking a significant crossroads in organizational psychology (Duggan et al., 2020). The advent of digital platforms has profoundly impacted the psychological contract between employers and employees, introducing new dynamics and reshaping traditional work paradigms (Auer et al., 2021). These platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, democratize work opportunities, emphasizing the newfound autonomy they offer. Yet, their dual-edged nature becomes evident when considering the fluid work environment they enable, with their immediacy and transparency fostering trust and mutual respect (Zhang et al., 2022).

However, the influence of digital technologies on the psychological contract is multifaceted. Liu et al. (2023) emphasized the dynamic nature of expectations and obligations, influenced by technological advancements and societal shifts. As employment detaches from traditional infrastructures and anchors more to digital platforms, the relevance of longstanding frameworks in grasping new work realities becomes an urgent issue. Cropanzano et al. (2023) broached this territory with their Digital Trust Framework, suggesting that trust, a cornerstone of the psychological contract, is intricately linked with digital interactions. Yet, their view contrasts starkly with Thomas and Baddipudi (2022), who assert in their Technological Mediation Model that technology does not just enable; the psychological contract is actively shaped by it.

Delving deeper into these intricacies, the potential challenges posed by digital platforms become evident. Feelings of isolation, job insecurity, and blurred work-life boundaries are underscored by Cropanzano et al. (2023). The transient nature of many digital jobs, leading to feelings of impermanence and instability, has been further elaborated upon by (Alfes et al. 2022; Stewart et al. 2020). These sentiments echo the indispensability of human touchpoints, even in predominantly digitized work settings (Duggan et al., 2020).

The scrutiny of digital technologies in the realm of the psychological contract reveals a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. As the panorama of the psychological contract in the digital epoch persists in its evolution, it's crucial to contemplate how these theoretical models can be refined or broadened, ensuring mutual growth and sustainability in an ever-evolving professional landscape.

4. Theoretical synthesis

The evolving landscape of work, particularly in fluid settings, necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the psychological contract's dynamics. Drawing from the synthesized literature, a conceptual framework emerges, aiming to encapsulate the intricate interplay between key elements, mediators, and potential outcomes in these settings.

The key elements of the psychological contract in fluid work environments are distinct from traditional settings. Central to this is the concept of multi-party agreements, where the contract extends beyond the dyadic employer-employee relationship to encompass multiple stakeholders, such as digital platforms, fluid workers, and consumers (Sherman and Morley, 2020). The transient nature of fluid roles, characterized by short-term engagements without long-term commitments, further differentiates this contract (Liu et al., 2020). This ephemerality is juxtaposed with the professional autonomy that fluid roles offer, allowing workers unparalleled flexibility in choosing when, where, and how they work (Duggan et al., 2020). However, this autonomy often comes at the cost of professional isolation, where workers, devoid of conventional organizational support, may experience feelings of detachment (Zhang et al., 2022).

Acting as mediators in this evolving contract are several pivotal factors. Digital platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, have emerged as powerful intermediaries, shaping the psychological contract by determining work dynamics and payment structures (Auer et al., 2021). The inherent characteristics of fluid work, with its emphasis on flexibility and autonomy, play a significant role in mediating the expectations and obligations between workers and employers (Seifried et al., 2023). The Technological Mediation Model, proposed by (Thomas and Baddipudi, 2022), suggests that technology does not merely enable but actively shapes the psychological contract. Complementing this is the Digital Trust Framework by Cropanzano et al. (2023), which underscores the role of digital interactions in the formation and sustenance of trust.

The culmination of these elements and mediators leads to several potential outcomes. Job satisfaction in fluid roles is influenced by a myriad of factors, ranging from remuneration to platform support (Stewart et al., 2020). Worker well-being, encompassing both mental and physical health, is significantly impacted by the nature of fluid work, with factors like job security and work-life balance playing crucial roles (Alfes et al., 2022). Lastly, performance, a metric of the efficiency and effectiveness of fluid workers, is shaped by platform algorithms, job matches, and the inherent skills of the workers (Duggan et al., 2020).

In synthesizing these insights, the framework shown in **Figure 1** offers a structured lens to navigate the complexities of the psychological contract in fluid work settings, providing a foundation for future research and organizational strategies in the digital era.
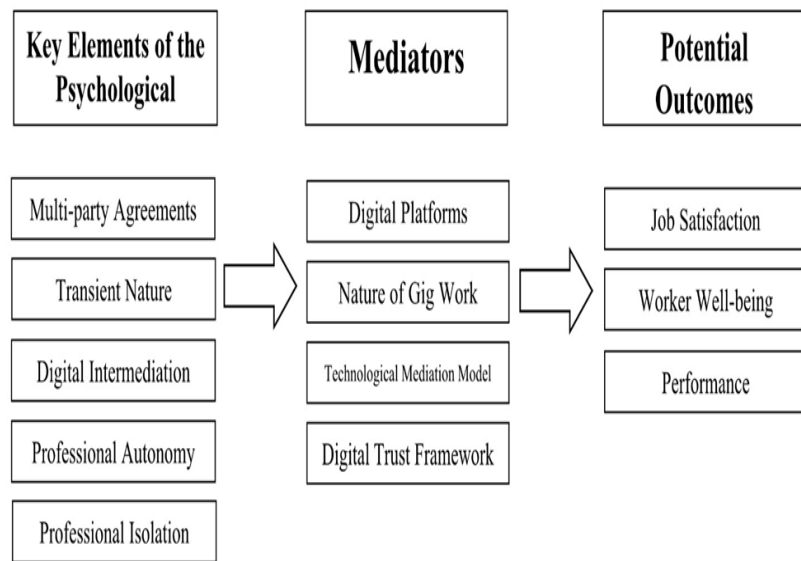
Figure 1. Psychological contract in fluid work settings conceptual framework.

5. Theoretical implications

The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of literature in several significant ways, offering theoretical implications that extend the understanding of the psychological contract in the age of digital and fluid work. First, the study underscores the transformative shifts the psychological contract has undergone with the rise of the platform economy. Digital platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, have democratized work opportunities, but they have also introduced challenges (Hein et al., 2020). These platforms, which operate outside traditional employer-employee dynamics, have necessitated a reevaluation of the psychological contract's established constructs (She et al., 2020). Moreover, feelings of isolation and job insecurity have become more prevalent, and there's a growing debate about the responsibility these platforms might have in ensuring the psychological well-being of their workers (Auer et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Second, the research sheds light on the "gigification" phenomenon catalyzed by the integration of AI into the workplace. The findings reveal that AI-driven platforms blur the lines between traditional employment and freelance work, leading to a hybrid model where workers often juggle multiple roles. This new work structure introduces uncertainties regarding job security, benefits, and career progression. The psychological contract, in this context, becomes more fluid and dynamic, requiring both employers and employees to continuously renegotiate terms and expectations (Braganza et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Third, in response to these shifts, the study introduces and elaborates on several theoretical frameworks. The Dynamic Adaptation Model, as discussed in the findings and also introduced by Sherman and Morley (2020), emphasizes the need for organizational agility. Concurrently, the research provides a deep dive into the Digital Psychological Contract proposed by Seifried et al. (2023). This framework posits that digital tools and interactions fundamentally reshape mutual obligations between employees and employers. It underscores the importance of understanding how digital

interactions, feedback mechanisms, and platform-driven performance metrics influence the perceptions and realities of the psychological contract in the digital age.

Fourth, the study identifies pronounced gaps in the literature, especially concerning digital and fluid work. While there is extensive research on traditional employment contexts, the findings highlight overlooked areas, such as the implications of fluid work on mental health or the role of cultural differences in shaping the psychological contract in global platforms. This observation is in line with the pioneering work of Heeks et al. (2021) and the emphasis on a broader, cross-cultural lens by Liu et al. (2023).

6. Practical Implications

The digital transformation of the work landscape has introduced a new era of employment dynamics, profoundly affecting various stakeholders, from organizations and leaders to policymakers and fluid workers (Kozanoglu and Abedin, 2021). Our study reveals that the integration of AI and digital platforms has significantly altered the psychological contract between employers and fluid workers, leading to challenges such as professional isolation, job insecurity, and a sense of detachment from organizational values. Grasping the practical implications of these shifts becomes crucial for navigating the challenges and opportunities of the digital epoch.

For organizations, our findings indicate a pressing need to implement transparent AI systems. Organizations in this digital milieu must recognize the changing dynamics of the psychological contract, especially as platforms like Uber and Airbnb redefine traditional employer-employee relationships (Gandini, 2019). Specifically, organizations should develop AI tools with explainable algorithms to maintain trust, as our research shows that lack of transparency erodes the psychological contract. For these entities, it is essential to actively address feelings of professional isolation and potential job insecurity that workers in fluid work environments might experience (Wilson and Schieber, 2022). We recommend creating virtual community platforms, such as internal social networks or forums, to foster a sense of belonging among fluid workers. By fostering community-building initiatives, organizations can play a pivotal role in strengthening the psychological contract and enhancing worker satisfaction (Bi, 2019). Furthermore, with the integration of AI and algorithms, organizations should prioritize transparency in decision-making processes, ensuring that the psychological contract remains robust and relevant (Felzmann et al., 2020). As organizations adapt to these challenges, the role of leadership in implementing and communicating these changes becomes even more critical.

Leaders play a crucial role in bridging the gap between fluid workers and organizational goals, as highlighted by our study. Leaders, who uphold and communicate organizational values, have a significant role in shaping and maintaining the psychological contract (Chang et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that regular virtual check-ins and open communication channels significantly improve engagement and reduce feelings of isolation among fluid workers. They must actively engage with their teams, especially those in fluid work environments, to understand and address their unique challenges. While organizations lay the foundation for community-building, leaders are responsible for its actualization, ensuring that such

initiatives are effectively implemented and resonate with the workforce. Additionally, leaders should receive training on the latest digital collaboration tools and AI technologies to effectively manage and support their teams, addressing the identified gap in digital leadership skills. Moreover, staying updated on technological advancements, especially AI, becomes crucial. Leaders should ensure that the implications of such technologies on the psychological contract are understood and addressed. With leaders steering the organizational response, policymakers must ensure that the broader environment is conducive to these evolving dynamics.

Fluid Workers, central to the fluid workforce, face a distinct set of challenges and opportunities (Caza et al., 2022). Digital platforms, while offering flexibility, also introduce feelings of professional isolation and potential job insecurity. Our review underscores the importance for fluid workers to proactively manage their careers by diversifying their skill sets. It is essential for these workers to establish clear communication channels, set boundaries, and manage expectations with multiple stakeholders (Li et al., 2023). We recommend that fluid workers engage in continuous learning opportunities, such as online courses and workshops, to enhance their adaptability in the transient work landscape. Diversifying skill sets and continuously seeking professional development opportunities become crucial in this transient work landscape (Mousa and Chaouali, 2023). Joining online communities for mutual support can further enhance their experience in the fluid workforce, providing a platform for sharing experiences and best practices. In the context of the psychological contract, the integration of AI and algorithms in decision-making processes can lead to feelings of detachment or lack of agency among fluid workers (Felzmann et al., 2020). Therefore, fluid workers should actively seek feedback mechanisms and advocate for greater transparency in how AI affects their work, reinforcing their role in the evolving digital landscape. Ensuring that there is a strong connection between technological advancements and the psychological contract is vital, highlighting the interconnectedness of all stakeholders in this evolving digital work landscape.

7. Future research

Building on the proposed conceptual framework presented in this study, we invite scholars and practitioners to delve deeper into the intricacies of the psychological contract in fluid work settings. It is imperative to continue examining and validating empirically the interplay between key elements, mediators, and potential outcomes. As multi-party agreements become more prevalent, extending beyond the traditional employer-employee relationship, the nuances of these multi-stakeholder contracts, especially with the increasing influence of digital platforms as intermediaries, as highlighted by Auer et al. (2021), warrant further exploration. The transient nature of fluid roles, juxtaposed with the autonomy they offer (Duggan et al., 2020), raises pertinent questions about their long-term implications, particularly in relation to professional isolation (Zhang et al., 2022). The influential role of these digital platforms not only facilitates but also reshapes the dynamics of work arrangements, integrating insights from the Technological Mediation Model (Thomas and Baddipudi, 2022) to explain how digital interactions mediate traditional and emerging forms of the psychological contract. This approach is further supported by the Digital Trust

Framework (Cropanzano et al., 2023), which underscores the need for deeper exploration into how technology shapes and redefines employer-employee relationships. Furthermore, understanding the myriad factors influencing outcomes such as job satisfaction, worker well-being, and performance through this technologically mediated lens (Alfes et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2020) remains paramount as the fluid workforce continues its expansion. As the work landscape undergoes rapid transformation, empirical research is essential to explore and validate how these mediated interactions affect the psychological contracts, ensuring the well-being and success of both workers and organizations.

8. Conclusion

The document delves into the evolution of the psychological contract, especially within the context of the digital age and fluid work environments. Historically rooted in unwritten expectations between employees and employers, the psychological contract has seen significant transformations with the advent of digital platforms and the fluid workforce. While its foundational essence remains intact, its manifestations and intricacies have adapted to the changing professional landscape. The role of digital platforms in shaping this contract is explored, emphasizing both the opportunities and challenges they introduce. The research not only scrutinizes various existing theoretical frameworks but also proposes a new conceptual framework, highlighting the need for adaptability and redefinition amidst rapid technological and societal shifts. Notable gaps, especially concerning digital and fluid work, are identified, suggesting a need for more expansive, cross-cultural perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. As the boundaries of the psychological contract continue to shift in the digital era, the importance of understanding its evolving dynamics for both organizations and their workforce is underscored.

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