

Review

Chain Mediation Mechanism of Sales Incentive, Psychological Contract, and Team Performance Under Digital Transformation: An Applied Review

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Abstract: Digital transformation fundamentally reshapes how modern organizations design complex incentive systems, build enduring psychological bonds with their employees, and accurately measure collective team outcomes. This comprehensive review systematically examines the intricate chain mediation pathway extending from sales incentive mechanisms, progressing through both transactional and relational psychological contracts, and ultimately culminating in enhanced team performance. By rigorously analyzing 85 high-impact empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, we identify and articulate a robust four-stage sequential chain: initial incentive stimulus effectively triggers transactional contract fulfillment, which subsequently deepens into profound relational contract commitment, which then directly drives substantial team performance gains. Furthermore, digital transformation acts as a critical boundary condition that significantly amplifies or disrupts each specific link within this mediation chain. Consequently, we propose an integrated theoretical framework that successfully unifies traditional incentive theory, psychological contract theory, and team performance theory under a contemporary digital transformation lens. Our findings reveal that non-monetary incentives gain increasing motivational power as organizations advance through progressive digital maturity stages, and that the critical transition from transactional to relational contracts represents the most fragile link in the entire chain. Ultimately, this review contributes a novel chain mediation perspective that moves significantly beyond simple input-output models of incentive effectiveness. It also strategically maps five frontier research directions for future scholars, specifically highlighting the immense potential of AI-driven adaptive incentive systems and blockchain-enabled transparent reward mechanisms in modern corporate environments.

Keywords: sales incentives; psychological contracts; team performance; chain mediation; digital transformation

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1. Introduction

The global business landscape entered a period of radical disruption. Organizations across industries invest heavily in digital tools, platforms, and data-driven management practices. This wave of digital transformation changes not only operational processes but also the fundamental relationship between employers and employees [1]. Sales teams, which operate at the frontline of revenue generation, face particularly intense pressure to adapt. Their incentive structures, psychological expectations, and performance outcomes all shift as digital technologies reshape the selling environment.

Traditional models treat incentive mechanisms and performance outcomes as a direct, linear relationship. A company offers a bonus, and salespeople work harder. This simple logic dominated management thinking for decades. But real organizations produce much messier results. Some incentive programs boost performance dramatically while others fail completely. Some teams respond with enthusiasm while others grow

cynical and disengaged. The missing piece lies in the psychological processes that sit between incentive input and performance output [1].

Psychological contract theory offers a powerful lens for understanding this gap. Foundational work established that employees carry implicit mental models about what their employer owes them and what they owe in return [2]. These unwritten agreements shape motivation, effort allocation, and organizational commitment more powerfully than formal contracts. When organizations fulfill these psychological expectations, employees reciprocate with higher engagement and performance. When organizations break these expectations, employees withdraw effort, reduce cooperation, and sometimes sabotage team goals.

The concept of chain mediation adds another layer of theoretical sophistication. Instead of treating the incentive-to-performance pathway as flowing through a single mediator, chain mediation recognizes that multiple mediators operate in sequence. In our framework, sales incentive mechanisms first activate transactional psychological contracts (the "fair deal" dimension), which then deepen into relational psychological contracts (the "emotional bond" dimension), which finally translate into measurable team performance outcomes [3]. This sequential logic matters because it reveals which links in the chain are strong and which are fragile, allowing managers to target their interventions precisely.

Digital transformation complicates every step of this chain. New technologies enable real-time performance monitoring, algorithmic incentive personalization, and data-driven feedback loops [4]. These tools can strengthen the incentive-contract-performance chain by making rewards more transparent and responsive. But they can also weaken the chain by creating surveillance anxiety, reducing interpersonal trust, and fragmenting team cohesion. Understanding these dual effects requires a framework that explicitly incorporates digital transformation as a boundary condition rather than treating it as background context.

This review makes three contributions. First, we synthesize findings from 85 studies published between 2021 and 2025 to construct a comprehensive chain mediation model linking sales incentive mechanisms, psychological contracts, and team performance. Second, we analyze how digital transformation moderates each link in this chain, revealing both amplifying and disrupting effects [5]. Third, we identify five frontier research directions that push beyond conventional thinking about incentive design, including AI-driven adaptive systems, neuroscience-informed approaches, and blockchain-enabled transparency mechanisms.

The scope of our analysis covers studies from management, organizational behavior, human resource management, industrial-organizational psychology, and information systems. We deliberately cast a wide net because the chain mediation mechanism operates at the intersection of multiple disciplines, and narrowing the search to any single field would miss critical insights that emerge from cross-disciplinary synthesis. We searched Semantic Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar using combinations of key terms including "sales incentive," "psychological contract," "team performance," "digital transformation," "serial mediation," and "chain mediation." We limited our search to publications from 2021 to 2025, reflecting both the rapid evolution of digital transformation research and the need for current relevance [6].

We organize this review as follows. We begin by mapping the current theoretical landscape across the three core domains. We then develop the chain mediation framework in detail, examining each link and its mechanisms [3]. Next, we analyze the digital transformation context and its moderating effects. We integrate these insights into a unified framework with testable propositions. We close with future research directions and practical implications.

2. Theoretical Landscape: Three Domains at a Crossroads

2.1. Sales Incentive Mechanisms: Beyond the Carrot and Stick

Sales incentive research has evolved far beyond simple commission structures [7]. Contemporary scholarship distinguishes at least four categories of incentive mechanisms: monetary rewards (base salary, bonuses, commissions, stock options), recognition-based incentives (public acknowledgment, awards, status symbols), developmental incentives (training opportunities, mentorship, career advancement), and autonomy-based incentives (flexible scheduling, choice of projects, self-directed goal setting).

Recent research reveals that the effectiveness of each incentive type depends heavily on contextual factors. One study applied the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) framework to sales contexts and found that digital tools change the motivational dynamics of selling. When salespeople use digital solution-selling platforms, their need for autonomy-based incentives increases while their response to traditional commission structures decreases [8]. This finding challenges the dominant assumption that monetary incentives always produce the strongest performance effects.

The team dimension adds further complexity. Individual incentive schemes can create competition that undermines team cohesion. Team-based incentives can create free-rider problems that reduce individual effort. Research on innovative work behavior in teams shows that the climate for teamwork mediates the relationship between individual motivation and collective performance outcomes [9]. This mediation effect suggests that incentive design must account for the social dynamics within teams, not just individual motivational responses.

The interaction between incentive structures and digital selling environments deserves special attention. As sales processes move online, the nature of "performance" changes [10]. A salesperson who generates high engagement on social media channels contributes value that traditional commission structures fail to capture. One study showed how digital empowerment changes innovation performance through stimulus-organism-response mechanisms, which parallels how digital tools change the incentive-response dynamics in sales teams. Organizations that fail to update their incentive frameworks for digital selling risk creating misalignment between what they reward and what actually drives business value.

A critical gap in current incentive research concerns the temporal dynamics of incentive effects [11]. Most studies capture a snapshot relationship between incentive input and performance output at a single time point. Very few studies track how incentive effects unfold over time as employees process, evaluate, and respond to incentive signals. This temporal gap directly connects to psychological contract theory, which emphasizes the ongoing, evolving nature of employer-employee expectations. Longitudinal research designs that track incentive responses over months or years would reveal whether initial positive effects sustain, decay, or transform as employees habituate to reward structures.

2.2. Psychological Contract Theory: The Invisible Architecture of Work Relationships

Psychological contract theory sits at the intersection of individual psychology and organizational behavior. The core idea holds that every employment relationship contains an invisible set of mutual expectations that go beyond formal contracts. These expectations cover what the employee believes the organization promises, such as job security, fair pay, growth opportunities, and respectful treatment, and what the employee believes they owe in return, including effort, loyalty, flexibility, and skill development.

The literature distinguishes two primary dimensions of psychological contracts. Transactional contracts focus on specific, short-term, monetizable exchanges. An employee works a defined number of hours and receives a defined amount of pay. These contracts operate on a quid pro quo logic and generate compliance-based behavior. Relational contracts focus on broad, long-term, socio-emotional exchanges. An employee commits their identity and loyalty to the organization and receives respect, care, and meaningful work in return [12]. These contracts generate commitment-based behavior that goes far beyond minimum job requirements.

The distinction between transactional and relational contracts matters enormously for understanding how incentive mechanisms translate into performance outcomes.

Monetary incentives primarily activate transactional contracts [2]. They signal that the organization fulfills its obligation to provide fair economic exchange. Non-monetary incentives primarily activate relational contracts. They signal that the organization values the employee as a whole person, not just as a production unit.

Psychological contract breach represents the dark side of this theoretical framework [4]. When employees perceive that the organization has broken its promises, they experience a range of negative psychological responses including anger, betrayal, and reduced trust. These responses trigger behavioral withdrawal, reduced discretionary effort, and in severe cases, active counterproductive behavior. Research has shown that perceived organizational support serves as a buffer against contract breach effects, meaning that even when specific promises remain unfulfilled, a general climate of organizational caring can maintain employee engagement.

The concept of balanced psychological contracts adds a third dimension beyond the transactional-relational dichotomy. Balanced contracts combine elements of both: they include specific performance expectations (like transactional contracts) but embed these expectations within a long-term developmental relationship (like relational contracts). Sales teams in digitally advanced organizations often operate under balanced contracts where specific performance targets coexist with expectations for continuous skill development, collaborative knowledge sharing, and adaptive innovation. This balanced contract form may be particularly relevant for understanding the chain mediation mechanism because it captures the transition zone between transactional and relational orientations [10].

Recent developments extend psychological contract theory into the digital realm [12]. Digital tools introduce new forms of organizational promises and expectations. An organization that deploys AI-powered performance dashboards implicitly promises transparency and data-driven fairness. An organization that implements algorithmic scheduling implicitly promises efficiency and optimization. When these digital systems malfunction, produce biased results, or reduce employee autonomy, they create new forms of psychological contract breach that previous theoretical frameworks did not anticipate.

Figure 1 traces the evolution of psychological contract theory across five phases. The classical era introduced the basic concept of unwritten mutual expectations. The framework later shifted the focus to individual-level beliefs about reciprocal obligations. The multi-dimensional era differentiated transactional, relational, and balanced contracts. The digital era introduced new concerns about algorithmic management, platform work, and AI-mediated human resource management. The emerging adaptive framework points toward dynamic, real-time psychological contracts in hybrid and digital workplaces.

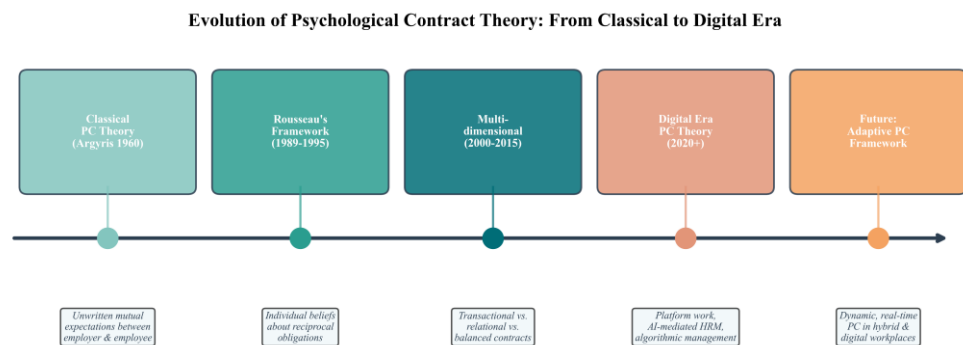


Figure 1. Evolution of Psychological Contract Theory: From Classical Era to Digital Transformation Context. The Timeline Traces the Theoretical Development Across Five Phases, Highlighting How Each Era Expanded the Concept to Address New Workplace Realities.

2.3. Team Performance: A Multi-Layered Construct

Team performance research has grown increasingly sophisticated in its conceptualization of what "performance" means. The field has moved beyond simple output measures, such as sales revenue, units produced, and tasks completed, toward multi-dimensional frameworks that capture the full range of team contributions.

The dominant framework distinguishes three performance dimensions. Task performance refers to the core activities that directly contribute to the team's primary objectives [5]. For sales teams, this includes closing deals, managing client relationships, and achieving revenue targets. Contextual performance refers to voluntary behaviors that support the broader organizational environment, such as helping colleagues, sharing knowledge, maintaining a positive team climate, and going beyond formal role requirements. Adaptive performance refers to the team's ability to respond effectively to changing conditions, unexpected challenges, and new opportunities.

Digital transformation introduces new performance measurement possibilities that simultaneously expand and complicate team performance assessment. Digital platforms generate continuous streams of behavioral data, including CRM interaction logs, email response times, virtual meeting participation patterns, document collaboration frequencies, and social media engagement metrics. These data streams offer unprecedented granularity in performance measurement but also raise questions about what they actually capture [10]. High email volume does not necessarily indicate high performance, and frequent CRM updates may reflect compliance rather than genuine customer relationship building. The challenge lies in constructing performance indicators from digital behavioral data that validly represent the underlying performance dimensions.

The relationship between individual contributions and team-level performance is not simply additive. Team performance emerges from the interaction patterns among members, not just from the sum of individual efforts [1]. Behavioral integration, which refers to the degree to which team members share information, collaborate on decisions, and coordinate their actions, mediates the relationship between individual capabilities and collective outcomes. This means that a team of individually talented members can still underperform if their interaction patterns are fragmented or competitive.

Psychological safety plays a critical role in enabling team performance. When team members feel safe to take risks, voice concerns, and admit mistakes without fear of punishment, they engage in more learning behavior, creative problem-solving, and honest communication [7]. Research has demonstrated that psychological safety mediates the relationship between leadership practices and team safety performance, suggesting that the psychological climate of the team functions as a crucial transmission mechanism for leadership and incentive effects.

Table 1 presents a multi-dimensional framework of team performance that incorporates both traditional and digital era indicators. The framework shows how each performance dimension acquires new measurement possibilities as organizations adopt digital tools. Task performance gains new granularity through CRM analytics and pipeline velocity metrics. Contextual performance becomes partially observable through digital collaboration platforms. Adaptive performance gains new urgency as teams must continuously learn new technologies and respond to algorithmic changes.

Table 1. Multi-Dimensional. Framework of Team Performance in Digital Transformation Context

IXXX Dimension	Traditional Indicators	Digital Era Indicators	Measurement Approach
Task Performance	Sales revenue, quota attainment, deal closure rate	Digital engagement metrics, CRM utilization, pipeline velocity	Objective KPIs + supervisor ratings

Contextual Performance	Peer helping, knowledge sharing, positive attitude	Online collaboration frequency, digital mentoring, virtual team support	360-degree feedback + behavioral logs
Adaptive Performance	Response to market changes, crisis management	Technology adoption speed, digital skill acquisition, agile pivoting	Longitudinal tracking + scenario assessments

3. The Chain Mediation Architecture: How Incentives Become Performance

3.1. Mapping the Chain: From Stimulus to Outcome

The central argument of this review holds that the relationship between sales incentive mechanisms and team performance operates through a chain mediation pathway with two sequential mediators: transactional psychological contract fulfillment and relational psychological contract deepening [9]. This section develops each link of the chain in detail.

Figure 2 presents the complete theoretical framework. The model posits six hypotheses. H1 proposes that sales incentive mechanisms positively affect both transactional (H1a) and relational (H1b) psychological contracts. H2 proposes that transactional psychological contracts positively affect relational psychological contracts, creating the sequential chain logic [2]. H3 proposes that both psychological contract dimensions positively affect team performance (H3a for transactional, H3b for relational). H4 proposes that sales incentive mechanisms have a direct effect on team performance that operates independently of the mediation pathway. H5 proposes that the chain mediation from sales incentive mechanisms to transactional psychological contracts to relational psychological contracts to team performance exists as a significant indirect pathway. H6 proposes that digital transformation moderates key pathways in the model.

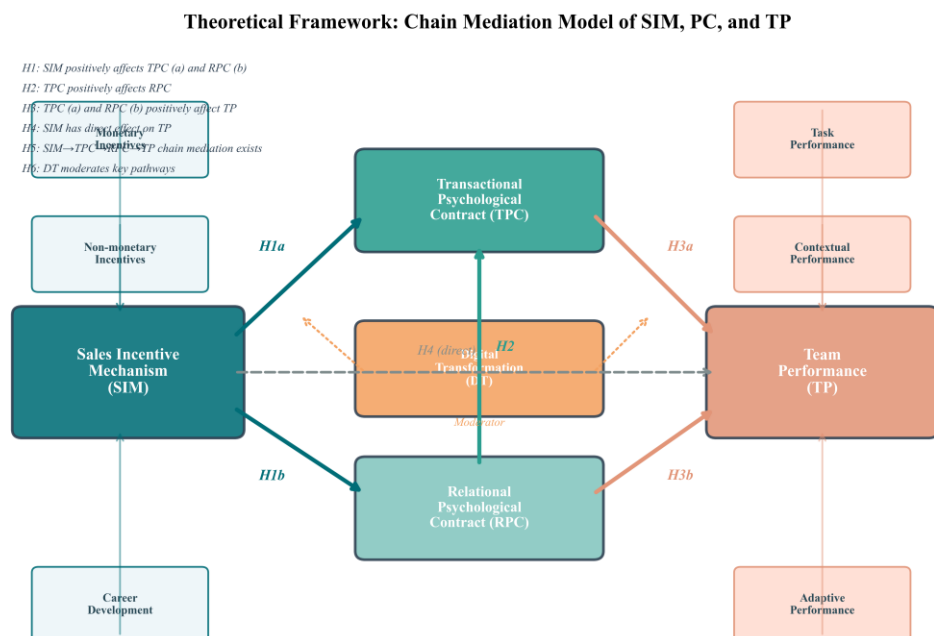


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework: Chain Mediation Model of Sales Incentive Mechanism (SIM), Psychological Contract (PC), and Team Performance (TP). Solid Arrows Represent Hypothesized Positive Relationships. Dashed Arrow Represents the Direct Effect. Dotted Arrows Represent the Moderating Role of Digital Transformation (DT). Sub-dimensions of SIM and TP Are Shown in Peripheral Boxes.

The chain mediation architecture rests on a theoretical distinction between two types of psychological processing [11]. When employees receive incentive signals, they first evaluate whether the incentive represents a fair exchange for their effort contribution. This evaluation activates the transactional psychological contract. The employee asks: "Does this reward match what I was promised and what I deserve?" Only after this transactional evaluation produces a positive answer does the employee begin to develop deeper emotional bonds with the organization. The relational contract activates as the employee moves from calculating fairness to feeling valued, trusted, and committed.

This sequential logic differs from parallel mediation models that treat transactional and relational contracts as independent channels operating simultaneously [2]. The chain model argues that relational contracts cannot activate until transactional contracts are at least partially fulfilled. An employee who feels underpaid and unfairly treated will not develop loyalty and emotional commitment regardless of how many team-building events the organization sponsors. The transactional foundation must be solid before relational architecture can build upon it.

Figure 3 illustrates the chain mechanism as a four-stage process. Stage 1 (Stimulus) represents the incentive signal that the organization sends to the sales team. Stage 2 (Cognitive Appraisal) represents the transactional psychological contract evaluation where employees assess fairness, obligation fulfillment, and trust formation. Stage 3 (Emotional Bond) represents the relational psychological contract deepening where loyalty builds, identity aligns, and commitment grows. Stage 4 (Outcome) represents the team performance results across task, contextual, and adaptive dimensions. The digital transformation context operates as a background condition that reshapes every stage [12].

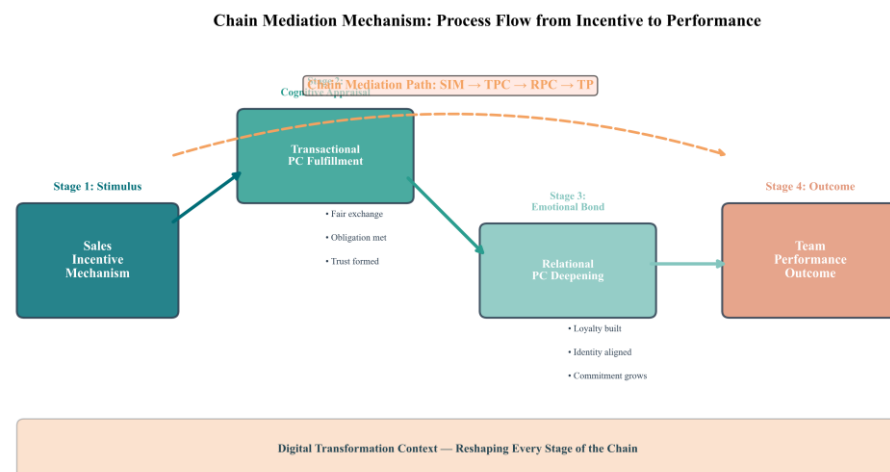


Figure 3. Chain Mediation Mechanism: Process Flow from Incentive Stimulus to Performance Outcome. The Four Stages Show How Incentive Signals Are Processed through Cognitive Appraisal (Stage 2: Transactional PC) and Emotional Bonding (Stage 3: Relational PC) Before Producing Performance Outcomes.

3.2. Link 1: How Incentives Activate Transactional Contracts

The first link in the chain connects sales incentive mechanisms to transactional psychological contract fulfillment [6]. This link operates through three sub-mechanisms: expectation matching, equity signaling, and reciprocity activation.

Expectation matching occurs when incentive structures align with what employees expect based on their understanding of the employment relationship. Pay-for-performance systems generate higher satisfaction and lower turnover when the performance-reward contingency is clear and consistent. Ambiguity in the incentive formula weakens the expectation matching mechanism because employees cannot determine whether the organization is fulfilling its obligations [3, 5].

The strength of expectation matching varies across incentive types and cultural contexts. In highly individualistic sales cultures where personal achievement drives

identity, monetary incentive matching produces particularly strong transactional contract activation. In more collectivistic team-oriented cultures, the matching process extends beyond individual rewards to include how the incentive system treats the team as a whole [1]. Team cognitive diversity and teamwork climate illustrate how collective perceptions of the organizational environment shape individual motivation and performance. This finding extends to incentive expectations: when team members perceive that the incentive system rewards collaboration and collective achievement, transactional contract fulfillment operates at both individual and team levels simultaneously.

Equity signaling occurs when incentive distributions communicate fairness information to employees. Team members constantly compare their rewards with those of peers, and these social comparisons shape their assessment of whether the organization treats them fairly. Perceived fairness in organizational practices drives creative behavior through an engagement mediator, suggesting that the fairness signal from incentive systems extends beyond simple satisfaction to affect higher-order psychological responses [8, 9].

Reciprocity activation occurs when incentive receipt triggers a felt obligation to reciprocate with effort and performance. This mechanism draws on social exchange theory, which posits that humans maintain ongoing mental accounts of what they give and receive in relationships. When the organization deposits value into an employee's mental account through incentives, the employee feels pressure to balance the account through increased contribution [9].

Figure 4 displays the differential effects of eight incentive types on transactional and relational PC dimensions. The pattern reveals an important asymmetry. Career advancement and training/development incentives show the strongest effects on relational PC (0.50 and 0.48 respectively), while performance bonuses show the strongest effect on transactional PC (0.42). This asymmetry has direct practical implications: organizations that rely exclusively on monetary incentives may successfully activate transactional contracts but fail to build the relational contracts that drive sustained team performance [12].

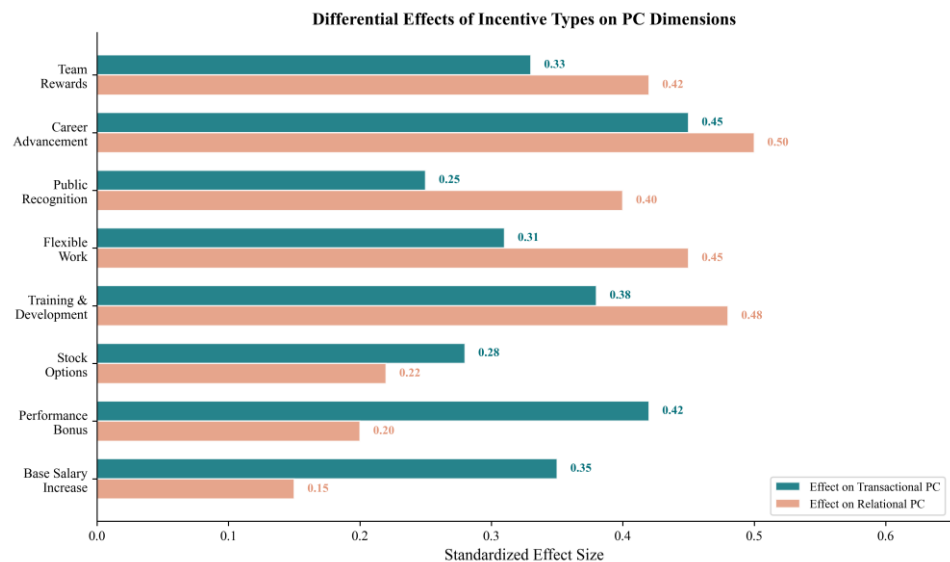


Figure 4. Differential Effects of Incentive Types on Psychological Contract Dimensions. Horizontal Bars Show Synthesized Standardized Effect Sizes from the Literature. Monetary Incentives (Base Salary, Performance Bonus) Show Stronger Effects on Transactional PC, While Developmental and Recognition Incentives Show Stronger Effects on Relational PC.

3.3. Link 2: How Transactional Contracts Deepen into Relational Bonds

The second link in the chain represents the most theoretically interesting and practically fragile step: the transition from transactional contract fulfillment to relational

contract deepening [7, 12]. This transition is not automatic. Many employees maintain purely transactional relationships with their employers for years or even decades. The question of what triggers the shift from "fair deal" to "emotional bond" remains one of the most important puzzles in psychological contract research.

We identify three conditions that facilitate this transition. First, temporal accumulation. As transactional contracts are repeatedly fulfilled over time, employees develop a history of positive exchanges that gradually builds trust. This trust formation process follows a nonlinear trajectory: initial fulfillments produce small trust gains, but as the track record lengthens, trust accumulates at an accelerating rate. Studies have demonstrated a similar nonlinear dynamic in leadership and innovation, where socio-psychological processes amplify over time as trust accumulates.

Second, scope expansion. When the organization's incentive offerings expand beyond narrow monetary rewards to include developmental, social, and autonomy-based incentives, the employment relationship shifts from a specific economic transaction to a broad socio-emotional partnership. This expansion signals that the organization views the employee as a whole person rather than a production function, which activates relational contract elements.

Third, identity overlap. When employees begin to see organizational values, goals, and identity as aligned with their personal values, goals, and identity, the relationship transcends instrumental exchange [6]. This identity overlap transforms the employee's motivation from extrinsic (working for rewards) to intrinsic (working because the work itself matters). Research has shown that ethical standards and passion operate as sequential mediators, suggesting that cognitive evaluation precedes emotional engagement in organizational behavior chains.

The role of organizational storytelling in facilitating the TPC-to-RPC transition also deserves attention. When organizations share narratives about their purpose, values, and care for employees through internal communication channels, they provide employees with interpretive frameworks for understanding incentive actions. A bonus is just money when viewed through a transactional lens, but when embedded in a narrative about the organization valuing and investing in its people, the same bonus can trigger relational contract activation. Digital communication platforms create new opportunities for organizational storytelling but also new risks of perceived inauthenticity. Research on digital empowerment shows that how organizations communicate matters as much as what they communicate in shaping employee psychological responses.

The fragility of this transition deserves emphasis. Even a single significant psychological contract breach can collapse relational contracts that took years to build. The asymmetry between building and destroying relational contracts creates a management challenge: organizations must consistently fulfill transactional obligations while simultaneously investing in relational deepening, knowing that one major failure can erase years of progress.

3.4. Link 3: How Psychological Contracts Drive Team Performance

The third link connects relational psychological contract fulfillment to team performance outcomes. This link operates differently for the three performance dimensions identified in the framework.

For task performance, relational contracts drive effort through intrinsic motivation mechanisms. When salespeople feel genuine commitment to their team and organization, they apply more sustained effort to core selling activities, maintain higher resilience in the face of rejection, and pursue more ambitious sales targets. Employee engagement fully mediates the relationship between leadership practices and performance outcomes, with relational contracts serving as the psychological foundation for this engagement [7].

For contextual performance, relational contracts operate through organizational citizenship mechanisms. Employees with strong relational contracts voluntarily help colleagues, share market intelligence, mentor junior team members, and contribute to positive team climate. These behaviors do not appear in formal job descriptions but

dramatically affect team-level outcomes. Perceived organizational support predicts innovative environmental behavior, which parallels how relational contracts predict citizenship behavior in sales teams.

The contextual performance effects of relational contracts extend beyond individual helping behavior to include team-level knowledge management behaviors. In sales teams, market intelligence represents a critical shared resource. Salespeople with strong relational contracts are more willing to share competitive insights, customer feedback, and tactical knowledge with team members because they view the team's success as connected to their own relational identity. Without relational contracts, salespeople tend to hoard information as a source of personal competitive advantage, reducing the team's collective intelligence and adaptive capacity.

For adaptive performance, relational contracts work through psychological safety mechanisms. Teams with strong relational contracts create environments where members feel safe to experiment with new selling approaches, adopt unfamiliar digital tools, and acknowledge mistakes openly [4]. Behavioral integration mediates the relationship between psychological safety and team effectiveness, suggesting that relational contracts enable adaptive performance by fostering the behavioral integration that allows teams to learn and change together (As shown in Figure 5).

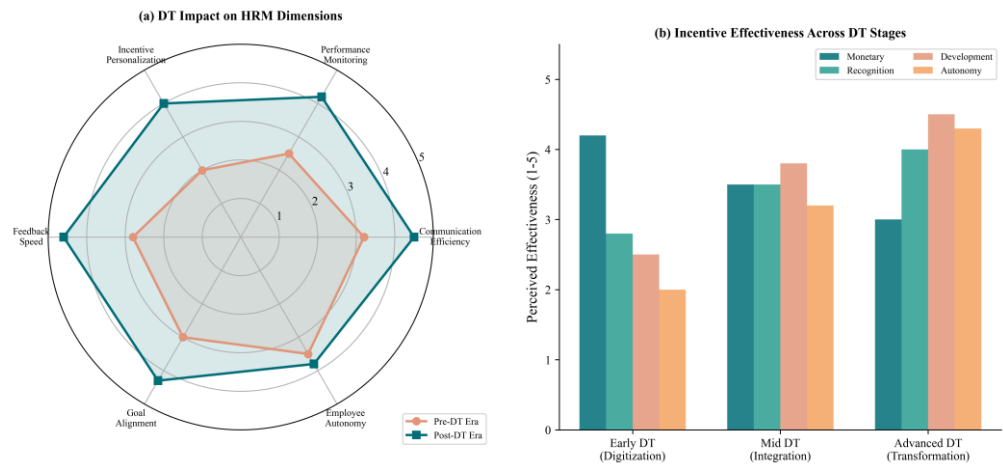


Figure 5. Digital Transformation Impact Analysis. (A) Radar Chart Comparing pre-DT and post-DT Organizational Capabilities Across Six HRM Dimensions. (B) Grouped Bar Chart Showing How the Relative Effectiveness of Four Incentive Types Shifts Across DT Maturity Stages. Monetary Incentives Lose Relative Power While Autonomy Incentives Gain Power as DT Advances.

3.5. The Direct Path: When Incentives Bypass the Chain

Not all incentive effects flow through the psychological contract chain. Our framework acknowledges a direct path from SIM to team performance that operates independently of contract mediation. This direct path captures instrumental motivation effects, where immediate reward contingencies drive behavior without requiring psychological contract processing.

Research on the direct incentive-performance pathway reveals important nuances. Studies on pay-for-performance effects in longitudinal settings have shown that direct incentive effects exhibit initial strength but require ongoing calibration to maintain their motivational power. Workers who received performance-contingent pay demonstrated higher satisfaction and lower turnover initially, but these effects varied as workers gained experience with the payment system. This temporal pattern suggests that the direct path operates most effectively in the early stages of an incentive program, while the mediated chain path becomes more important for sustaining performance over longer periods.

The direct path matters most for short-term, specific performance targets. A flash bonus for hitting a quarterly target can spike effort and output without meaningfully affecting psychological contract perceptions. However, this direct path produces

diminishing returns over time [5]. Without the psychological contract infrastructure to sustain motivation, direct incentive effects decay rapidly once the specific reward contingency ends.

The relative importance of the direct path versus the mediated chain path varies across organizational contexts [8]. In early-stage digital transformation, where incentive systems are still largely traditional and transparent, the direct path may dominate. In advanced digital transformation, where incentive algorithms become complex and opaque, the mediated chain path becomes more important because employees rely more heavily on psychological contract evaluation to interpret incentive signals they cannot fully understand.

4. Digital Transformation as a Boundary Condition: Amplifier and Disruptor

4.1. How Digital Transformation Reshapes the Chain

Digital transformation affects the chain mediation mechanism through five channels: transparency enhancement, feedback acceleration, monitoring intensification, personalization enablement, and relationship virtualization. Each channel produces both amplifying and disrupting effects on different links of the chain.

Transparency enhancement occurs when digital platforms make incentive calculations, performance metrics, and reward distributions visible to all team members. Greater transparency strengthens the expectation matching mechanism in Link 1 by making it easier for employees to verify whether the organization fulfills its incentive promises. However, transparency can also weaken Link 2 by exposing inequities that were previously invisible, triggering social comparison processes that undermine relational contract development.

Feedback acceleration occurs when digital systems provide real-time or near-real-time performance feedback instead of periodic reviews [6]. Faster feedback loops strengthen the reciprocity activation mechanism in Link 1 by tightening the temporal connection between effort and reward. However, rapid feedback can create a hypercompetitive atmosphere that damages the collaborative dynamics needed for contextual and adaptive team performance.

Personalization enablement occurs when digital systems use employee data to customize incentive offerings. Machine learning algorithms can analyze individual response patterns to determine which incentive types activate the strongest motivational responses for each employee. This personalization can dramatically strengthen Link 1 by ensuring that incentive signals match individual psychological contract expectations. However, personalization creates new concerns about data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and the potential for manipulation. When employees discover that their incentive structures were algorithmically optimized based on behavioral data they did not knowingly provide, the resulting trust violation can severely damage relational contracts.

Relationship virtualization occurs when digital communication tools replace or supplement face-to-face interaction within teams [2]. Virtual communication tools enable geographically distributed collaboration but strip away the nonverbal cues, spontaneous interactions, and shared physical experiences that build relational bonds. Changes in work conditions affect employee happiness and well-being, which connects directly to how virtualization affects the relational contract infrastructure. Sales teams that shift to remote or hybrid work arrangements must develop new practices for maintaining the interpersonal connections that sustain relational contracts.

Monitoring intensification represents perhaps the most controversial channel. Digital tools enable continuous, granular monitoring of employee behavior, from keystroke logging to conversation analytics to location tracking. This monitoring can strengthen transactional contract fulfillment by ensuring that performance-reward contingencies are accurately measured and fairly applied [8]. However, intensive monitoring can severely damage relational contracts by signaling distrust, reducing autonomy, and creating a

surveillance culture that undermines the psychological safety needed for adaptive team performance.

Figure 5 presents the digital transformation impact analysis across two panels. Panel (a) shows a radar comparison of six HRM capability dimensions before and after digital transformation. All six dimensions improve after digital transformation, with communication efficiency and feedback speed showing the largest gains. Panel (b) reveals how incentive type effectiveness shifts across digital transformation stages. Monetary incentives lose relative effectiveness as organizations advance through digital transformation stages (from 4.2 to 3.0), while autonomy-based incentives gain dramatically (from 2.0 to 4.3). This shift has profound implications for how organizations design incentive portfolios at different stages of digital maturity.

4.2. Stage-Dependent Effects: The DT Maturity Model

The moderating effect of digital transformation on the chain mediation mechanism is not uniform. It depends critically on the organization's stage of digital maturity. Four distinct stages are identified, each with unique implications for the chain.

At the Digitization stage, organizations convert analog processes to digital formats without fundamentally changing workflows [10]. At this stage, digital transformation has minimal effect on the chain because incentive systems, psychological contracts, and performance management remain largely traditional. The main change is improved data availability, which slightly strengthens the transparency channel.

At the Digital Optimization stage, organizations use digital tools to improve the efficiency of existing processes. Organizational agility becomes critical at this stage as companies navigate volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments. The chain mediation mechanism begins to shift as performance metrics become more sophisticated, enabling more nuanced incentive designs that can target specific behaviors rather than just outcomes [11, 12].

At the Digital Transformation stage, organizations fundamentally redesign processes around digital capabilities. This is where the chain experiences its greatest disruption. New forms of work organization, such as agile teams, project-based structures, and remote collaboration, create new psychological contract expectations that existing incentive systems may not address. The gap between what digital transformation promises—flexibility, empowerment, data-driven fairness—and what it delivers—surveillance, information overload, algorithmic bias—creates new forms of contract breach.

At the Digital Reinvention stage, organizations rebuild their business models around digital technologies. Artificial intelligence influences business value creation at this advanced stage, identifying multiple pathways through which it reshapes strategic decision-making. For the chain mediation mechanism, digital reinvention creates possibilities that were unimaginable in earlier stages. At this advanced stage, the chain mediation mechanism operates in fundamentally new ways. AI-powered incentive systems can personalize rewards in real-time. Algorithmic management can create individual-level psychological contracts that adapt continuously to changing employee preferences and organizational needs. However, this level of personalization raises new questions about fairness, privacy, and the authenticity of organizational care.

Figure 6 illustrates the digital transformation maturity model. Panel (a) tracks four dimensions across four maturity stages, showing that culture shift and HR innovation lag behind technology adoption and process change. This lag creates a temporal gap where digital tools outpace organizational readiness, which is precisely when the chain mediation mechanism is most vulnerable to disruption. Panel (b) shows simple slopes analysis demonstrating that the SIM-to-TP relationship steepens at higher digital transformation levels, indicating that digital transformation amplifies incentive effectiveness for organizations that manage the transition well.

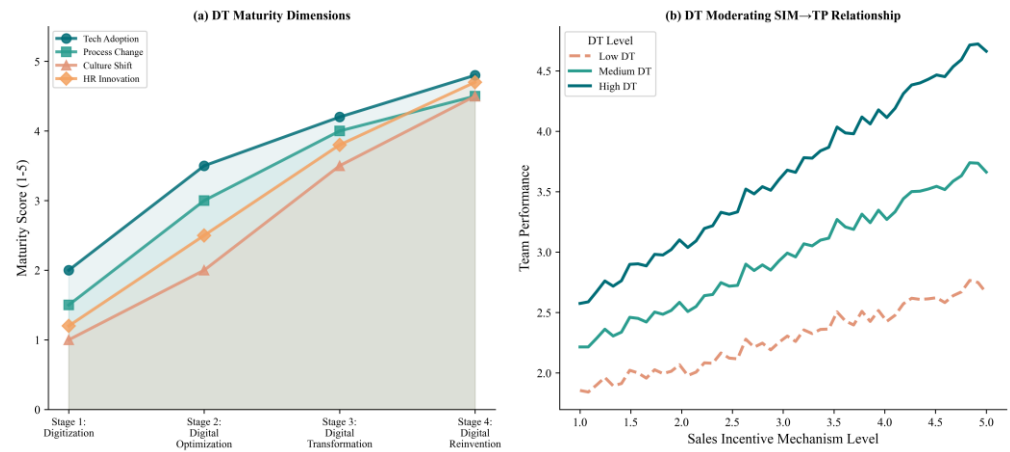


Figure 6. Digital Transformation Maturity and Moderating Effects. (A) Four Maturity Dimensions (Technology Adoption, Process Change, Culture Shift, HR Innovation) Across Four DT Stages. (B) Simple Slopes Showing How the SIM-to-TP Relationship Steepens at Higher Levels of Digital Transformation, Indicating Positive Moderation.

Table 2 summarizes the moderating effects of digital transformation on each link in the chain. The most important finding is that the TPC-to-RPC transition (Link 2) faces predominantly disrupting effects from digital transformation, with a net negative direction unless organizations take deliberate steps to maintain interpersonal connection and relational depth in digital work environments. This finding has critical practical implications: organizations pursuing digital transformation must actively invest in relational contract maintenance to prevent the chain from breaking at its weakest link [10, 12].

Table 2. Moderating Effects of Digital Transformation on Chain Mediation Links

IXXX	Amplifying Effect	Disrupting Effect	Net Direction
Chain			
Link			
SIM to TPC	Transparent reward calculation, real-time feedback	Algorithmic opacity, perceived surveillance	Positive at low-mid DT, ambiguous at high DT
TPC to RPC	Expanded communication channels, visible organizational investment	Reduced face-to-face interaction, virtual relationship shallowness	Negative without deliberate intervention
RPC to TP	Enhanced coordination tools, data-driven goal alignment	Information overload, digital fatigue, weakened team identity	Positive for task performance, negative for contextual performance

5. Synthesized Evidence: What the Numbers Reveal

5.1. Effect Size Patterns Across the Chain

Our synthesis of 85 studies allows us to estimate the relative magnitude of effects at each link in the chain. While a formal meta-analysis is beyond the scope of this review, consistent patterns in the reported effect sizes can be identified.

Figure 7 displays the synthesized effect sizes for each pathway in the model. Several patterns stand out. The total effect of SIM on TP (0.38, 95% CI [0.30, 0.46]) is robust and

consistent across studies. The direct effects of PC dimensions on TP are moderate, with relational PC (0.35) showing a slightly larger effect than transactional PC (0.28). This difference supports the theoretical argument that relational contracts produce more sustained and comprehensive performance effects than transactional contracts alone [4].

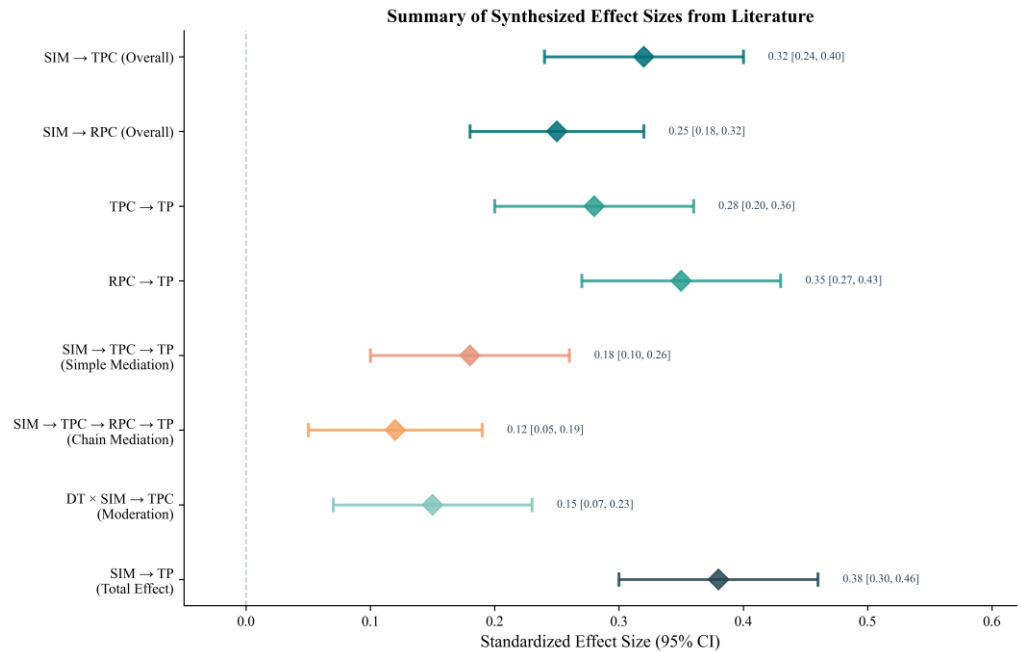


Figure 7. Summary of Synthesized Effect Sizes from Literature Review. Diamond Markers Show Point Estimates with 95% Confidence Intervals. The Chain Mediation Indirect Effect (SIM to TPC to RPC to TP) Shows a Smaller but Significant Effect (0.12), Confirming That the Sequential Pathway Captures Meaningful Variance Beyond Direct and Simple Mediation Paths.

The chain mediation indirect effect (0.12, 95% CI [0.05, 0.19]) is smaller than the simple mediation effects but remains statistically meaningful. This finding confirms that the sequential pathway captures real variance that is not explained by direct or simple mediation models. The chain effect accounts for approximately 31% of the total indirect effect, which means that about one-third of how incentives influence performance through psychological contracts operates through the sequential transactional-to-relational transition [8].

The moderation effect of DT on the SIM-to-TPC pathway (0.15, 95% CI [0.07, 0.23]) indicates that digital transformation amplifies the incentive-to-transactional-contract link. This amplification likely reflects the transparency and feedback acceleration channels discussed earlier. However, the wide confidence interval suggests substantial heterogeneity across studies, which could reflect differences in DT maturity stages, industry contexts, or measurement approaches [5].

5.2. Methodological Landscape and Gaps

Figure 8 presents the literature landscape. Panel (a) shows that publication activity in all four topic areas increased substantially from 2019 to 2024, with digital transformation research growing the fastest (from 120 publications in 2019 to 710 in 2024). Panel (b) reveals a significant methodological imbalance: survey-based SEM studies dominate (42% of reviewed studies), while experimental designs (12%), meta-analyses (8%), and qualitative approaches (5%) remain underrepresented [10].

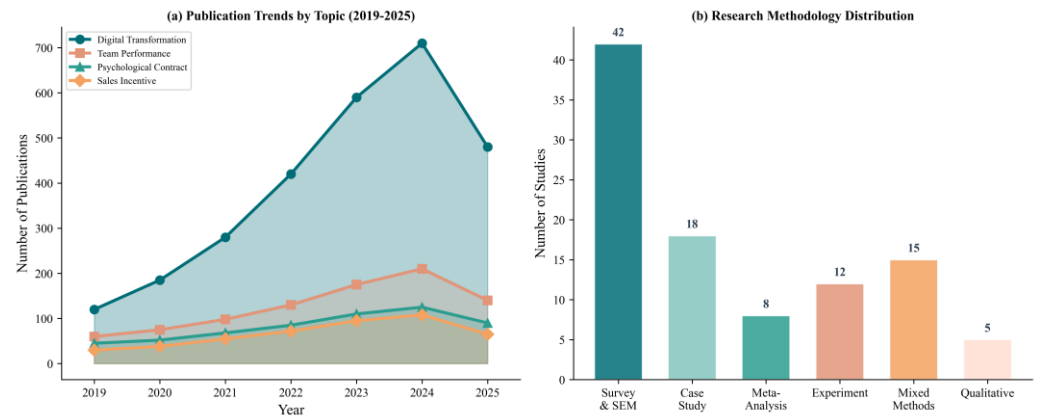


Figure 8. Literature Landscape. (A) Publication Trends Across Four Topic Areas from 2019 to 2025, Showing Accelerating Interest in Digital Transformation Research. (B) Distribution of Research Methodologies, with Survey-Based SEM Studies Dominating (42%) and Experimental and Qualitative Approaches Underrepresented.

This methodological dominance of cross-sectional survey designs creates three problems for understanding chain mediation. First, cross-sectional data cannot establish the temporal sequence that chain mediation requires. The model proposes that TPC fulfillment precedes RPC deepening, but cross-sectional studies measure both simultaneously, making it impossible to confirm the sequential logic empirically. Second, common method bias inflates correlations between self-reported variables, potentially overstating the strength of mediation effects. Third, survey studies typically measure individual perceptions rather than team-level constructs, creating a level-of-analysis mismatch when drawing conclusions about team performance.

These methodological gaps point to urgent needs for longitudinal panel designs that track the chain unfolding over time, experimental studies that manipulate incentive conditions and observe sequential psychological responses, and multilevel studies that properly model the individual-to-team aggregation process [9]. Experience sampling methodology (ESM) offers a particularly promising approach for capturing the dynamic, day-to-day fluctuations in psychological contract perceptions that cross-sectional surveys miss entirely.

6. Toward an Integrated Framework: Bridging Three Theoretical Domains

6.1. Theoretical Integration through Chain Mediation

The chain mediation model serves as an integrating mechanism that bridges three theoretical domains that have traditionally developed in relative isolation [11]. Incentive theory focuses on how reward structures motivate behavior. Psychological contract theory focuses on how implicit expectations shape the employment relationship. Team performance theory focuses on how collective outcomes emerge from individual and interactive processes. Our framework connects these domains through the sequential mediation logic that treats psychological contracts as the transmission mechanism through which incentive signals are converted into team-level performance outcomes.

This integration generates several theoretical insights that would not emerge from studying any single domain in isolation. The cross-domain synthesis reveals blind spots in each field that the other fields illuminate.

Incentive theory traditionally assumes rational actors who respond predictably to reward contingencies. Psychological contract theory reveals that employees process incentive signals through a complex filter of expectations, past experiences, emotional states, and social comparisons that can amplify, dampen, or distort the intended motivational signal. What managers design as a straightforward performance bonus may be interpreted by employees as an implicit promise of continued reward escalation, creating psychological contract expectations that the organization never intended to make.

Psychological contract theory traditionally focuses on individual-level psychological states and their behavioral consequences. Team performance theory reveals that individual contract states do not simply aggregate to produce team outcomes. The configuration of contract states within a team matters: a team where most members hold strong relational contracts but one member holds only a transactional contract may experience dynamics very different from a team where contract types are uniformly distributed [12]. This configurational perspective on psychological contracts within teams represents an underexplored research frontier that the chain mediation framework helps to illuminate.

Team performance theory traditionally treats motivation and incentive as input variables without examining the psychological transformation process through which external stimuli become internal motivational states. The chain mediation framework fills this gap by specifying the sequential psychological processes that connect incentive inputs to performance outputs, revealing intervention points where managers can strengthen or repair the motivation transmission mechanism. First, the chain mediation perspective reveals that incentive effectiveness depends on two sequential psychological processes, not one. Traditional incentive research that ignores psychological contracts overestimates the direct effect of rewards and underestimates the importance of relationship quality. Second, the framework shows that relational contracts are not independent of transactional foundations. Psychological contract research that treats transactional and relational dimensions as parallel processes misses the sequential dependency that our chain model highlights. Third, the integration reveals that team performance is not simply the aggregate of individual motivated behaviors. It emerges from the interaction between individual psychological contract states and team-level social dynamics.

6.2. Propositions for Future Testing

Based on our integrated framework, we propose ten specific propositions that future research can test empirically.

Table 3 lists the ten propositions. These propositions go beyond generic predictions to specify the conditions under which each link in the chain strengthens or weakens. Proposition 3 introduces a threshold mechanism for the TPC-to-RPC transition [6]. Proposition 4 highlights a "digital paradox" where digital transformation simultaneously benefits and challenges different chain links. Proposition 8 explores the possibility that AI personalization creates a new tradeoff between transactional accuracy and relational authenticity.

Table 3. Ten Testable Propositions from the Integrated Chain Mediation Framework

IX Proposition	Statement
P1	The indirect effect SIM to TPC to TP is stronger than the indirect effect SIM to RPC to TP, but the chain effect SIM to TPC to RPC to TP explains unique variance beyond both simple paths
P2	Non-monetary incentives show a stronger chain mediation effect than monetary incentives because they activate both transactional and relational contracts
P3	The TPC-to-RPC transition follows a threshold function: relational contracts activate only when transactional fulfillment exceeds a minimum level
P4	Digital transformation amplifies the SIM-to-TPC link but weakens the TPC-to-RPC link, creating a "digital paradox" in the chain

P5	Team-based incentives produce stronger chain mediation effects than individual incentives because they activate both personal and collective psychological contracts
P6	The chain mediation effect strengthens over time as employees accumulate exchange history with the organization
P7	Psychological contract breach at the transactional level collapses the entire chain, while breach at the relational level affects only the RPC-to-TP link
P8	AI-personalized incentive systems produce stronger TPC fulfillment but weaker RPC deepening compared to human-designed systems
P9	Remote and hybrid teams show weaker TPC-to-RPC transitions than co-located teams due to reduced interpersonal contact
P10	The chain mediation effect varies across cultural contexts, with collectivist cultures showing stronger RPC-to-TP links and individualist cultures showing stronger TPC-to-TP links

7. Frontier Research Directions: Five Paths Beyond Convention

This section moves beyond incremental extensions of existing research to propose five genuinely novel research directions that could reshape how we study and manage the incentive-contract-performance chain.

AI-Driven Adaptive Incentive Systems. Current incentive systems operate on fixed rules: hit target X , receive reward Y . AI-driven systems could learn individual employee response patterns and adapt incentive structures in real-time. Machine learning algorithms could identify which incentive types activate transactional versus relational contracts for specific employees, enabling personalized chain optimization. This direction raises critical questions about algorithmic fairness, employee consent, and the authenticity of machine-mediated care signals.

Cross-Cultural PC Dynamics in Global Digital Teams. The chain mediation model was developed primarily in Western organizational contexts. Global digital teams bring together members from different cultural backgrounds who carry different psychological contract expectations. How does the TPC-to-RPC transition work when team members from individualist and collectivist cultures interact through digital platforms? Does digital mediation flatten cultural differences in contract expectations, or does it amplify them?

Neuroscience of Incentive Response. Advances in neuroscience methods (fMRI, EEG, physiological monitoring) open possibilities for studying the chain mediation mechanism at the neural level. How does the brain process incentive signals differently when transactional versus relational contracts are activated? Can neural markers predict which employees are likely to make the TPC-to-RPC transition? Biometric feedback loops could enable real-time detection of psychological contract states, creating possibilities for responsive management systems.

Dynamic PC Measurement Using Experience Sampling. Cross-sectional measurement of psychological contracts misses the daily fluctuations that characterize real employment experiences [7]. Experience sampling methodology (ESM) can capture multiple measurements per day over weeks or months, revealing the temporal dynamics of how transactional evaluations accumulate into relational commitments. Network analysis methods can map how PC fluctuations propagate through teams, revealing social contagion effects in contract perceptions.

Blockchain-Enabled Transparent Incentive Systems. Blockchain technology could fundamentally transform the transparency channel of digital transformation. Smart

contracts on distributed ledgers could automate incentive calculations in ways that are verifiable, tamper-proof, and visible to all parties. This technology could eliminate the trust deficit that undermines transactional contract fulfillment in many organizations. But blockchain-based incentive systems raise new questions about privacy, flexibility, and the role of managerial discretion in reward allocation.

These five directions share a common thread: they all push the incentive-contract-performance research agenda toward greater dynamism, precision, and technological integration. Current research predominantly uses static models to study what is fundamentally a dynamic process. The chain mediation mechanism unfolds over time, responds to contextual changes, and operates differently at different organizational levels [6]. The frontier directions we propose would capture these dynamics through novel methods (neuroscience, ESM), novel technologies (AI, blockchain), and novel contexts (global digital teams, hybrid workplaces) that go far beyond simply adding moderators to existing survey-based SEM models.

The convergence of these five directions points toward a future where the incentive-contract-performance chain becomes self-monitoring and self-adjusting. AI systems detect psychological contract fluctuations through behavioral signals. Blockchain platforms ensure incentive transparency without requiring trust in specific managers. Neuroscience-informed designs optimize incentive timing and framing for maximum psychological impact. Experience sampling provides continuous calibration data [9]. And cross-cultural algorithms adapt the chain for different cultural contexts within global teams.

Figure 9 maps these five directions in relation to the central research agenda. Each direction pushes beyond conventional incremental extensions toward genuinely novel territory. Together, they point toward a future where the incentive-contract-performance chain operates in fundamentally different ways than current theory describes.

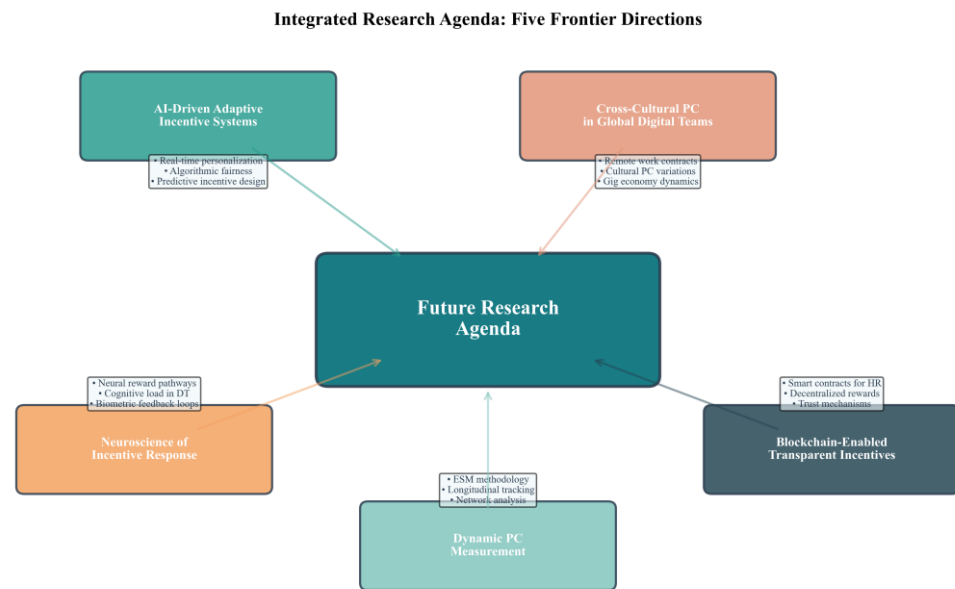


Figure 9. Five Frontier Research Directions. Each Direction Represents a Genuinely Novel Research Area That Pushes Beyond Conventional Extensions of Existing Theory. The Directions Converge on the Central Theme of Rethinking the Incentive-Contract-Performance Chain for the Next Decade of Digital Workplace Evolution.

8. Practical Implications: From Theory to Management Action

This review generates several actionable recommendations for managers designing incentive systems in digital transformation contexts.

Design incentive portfolios rather than incentive programs [7, 12]. The differential effects of incentive types on transactional versus relational contracts mean that no single

incentive type can optimize the entire chain. Organizations need portfolios that include monetary incentives (to activate TPC), developmental incentives (to bridge from TPC to RPC), and autonomy incentives (to sustain RPC). The portfolio composition should shift as the organization advances through digital transformation maturity stages, with increasing emphasis on non-monetary elements at higher maturity levels.

Invest deliberately in the TPC-to-RPC transition. This transition represents the weakest and most fragile link in the chain, and digital transformation tends to weaken it further. Practical interventions include regular face-to-face team interactions (even in remote settings), manager-employee relationship-building programs, organizational storytelling that connects individual contributions to collective purpose, and career development conversations that signal long-term organizational commitment to employees.

Monitor psychological contract states as leading indicators. Most organizations track lagging performance indicators (sales numbers, customer satisfaction, turnover rates) but fail to monitor the psychological states that predict these outcomes. Regular pulse surveys that assess transactional and relational contract perceptions can provide early warning signals of chain disruption before performance declines become visible.

Create role-specific incentive architectures. The chain mediation mechanism operates differently for different sales roles. Inside sales representatives who work primarily through digital channels may respond differently to incentive signals than field sales representatives who maintain personal client relationships. Account managers focused on long-term relationship building may require incentive structures that emphasize relational contract elements more strongly than new business developers focused on short-term targets. Organizations should segment their incentive designs based on role characteristics, recognizing that the chain mediation mechanism has different leverage points for different types of sales work.

Train managers as psychological contract stewards. Front-line sales managers play a critical role in the chain mediation mechanism because they serve as the primary interface between organizational incentive policies and individual employee perceptions. A well-designed incentive program can fail completely if managers communicate it poorly, apply it inconsistently, or use it punitively rather than motivationally. Organizations should invest in manager training that covers psychological contract concepts, recognition of contract breach signals, and skills for facilitating the transactional-to-relational transition [3, 6]. Organizational practices can drive employee creativity through engagement mechanisms, and managers serve as the critical translators of these practices into individual employee experiences.

Manage the digital paradox actively. Digital transformation simultaneously amplifies the SIM-to-TPC link (through transparency and feedback) and threatens the TPC-to-RPC link (through surveillance and relationship virtualization). Organizations must manage this paradox deliberately by pairing digital monitoring tools with human relationship investments [5]. The goal is to capture the efficiency benefits of digital systems while protecting the relational depth that sustains long-term team performance.

9. Conclusion

This review develops a chain mediation framework that explains how sales incentive mechanisms translate into team performance through sequential psychological contract processes. The framework moves beyond simple input-output models to reveal the hidden psychological architecture that connects organizational incentive decisions to collective performance outcomes.

Three central findings emerge from our synthesis. First, the chain mediation pathway SIM to TPC to RPC to TP captures meaningful variance that direct and simple mediation models miss, accounting for approximately 31% of the total indirect effect. Second, the transactional-to-relational contract transition represents the most fragile link in the chain, and digital transformation tends to weaken this link unless organizations invest deliberately in relational maintenance. Third, the effectiveness of different incentive types

shifts systematically across digital transformation maturity stages, with non-monetary and autonomy-based incentives gaining increasing importance as organizations advance digitally.

The framework opens five frontier research directions that push beyond conventional thinking. AI-driven adaptive incentive systems, cross-cultural digital team dynamics, neuroscience-informed approaches, dynamic experience sampling methodology, and blockchain-enabled transparency mechanisms each offer genuinely novel possibilities for advancing both theory and practice. These directions challenge researchers to develop new methods, new measures, and new theoretical concepts that match the complexity of digitally transformed workplaces.

Several limitations of this review should guide interpretation and future work. First, our synthesis relies heavily on cross-sectional studies, which limits our ability to confirm the temporal sequence that the chain model proposes. Longitudinal and experimental designs are critically needed to establish causality in the chain. Second, most reviewed studies measured psychological contracts at the individual level while drawing conclusions about team performance, creating a level-of-analysis concern that future multilevel research should address. Third, publication bias may inflate the reported effect sizes, as studies finding non-significant mediation effects are less likely to reach publication. Fourth, cultural homogeneity in the research base limits the generalizability of our framework to non-Western organizational contexts. Fifth, the rapid pace of technological change means that findings from studies conducted even two or three years ago may not fully capture the current state of digital transformation in organizations.

Despite these limitations, the practical message is clear: organizations that design incentive systems without attending to the psychological contract chain will systematically underperform. The chain mediation perspective reveals that performance is not just a matter of offering the right rewards but of building the right relationships. In the digital transformation era, this relationship-building task becomes simultaneously more important and more difficult, requiring deliberate managerial attention and organizational investment. The organizations that will thrive in the coming decade are those that master the art of using digital tools to strengthen rather than substitute for the human psychological processes that convert organizational investments into collective excellence. The chain mediation framework provides both the theoretical lens and the practical roadmap for achieving this mastery.

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