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When Empowerment Intensifies Hidden Work and Self-Management Pressure

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Abstract

Empowerment is commonly presented as a transfer of discretion that strengthens motivation, adaptability, and employee influence. Yet discretion can also relocate planning, coordination, monitoring, boundary management, and responsibility to workers without transferring corresponding authority, resources, or organizational accountability. This Critical Viewpoint Article examines that tension and develops an evidence-informed, non-empirical argument about when empowerment may intensify hidden work and self-management pressure. The article distinguishes formal empowerment from enacted autonomy, voice opportunity from consequential influence, technological capability from legitimate authority, and employee visibility from performance. It proposes the Genuine Empowerment Conditions framework as an original conceptual synthesis rather than a validated causal model. The framework identifies five conditions: decision-rights congruence; coordination infrastructure; resource and recovery sufficiency; consequential voice, appeal, and reversibility; and accountable governance with symmetric transparency. When these conditions are weak, discretion may operate through proposed mechanisms of hidden coordination, accountability transfer, self-monitoring, and boundary erosion, producing responsibilized intensification without continuous direct supervision. When the conditions are stronger, discretion may be more consistent with enabled agency and shared accountability. The viewpoint implies that organizational design should examine who performs coordination, who carries residual risk, who can alter decisions, and who remains answerable for system consequences. Its propositions are conditional and require construct validation, longitudinal and multilevel testing, and comparison across occupations, technologies, employment relationships, and institutional contexts. The contribution is a bounded language and decision architecture for separating genuine empowerment from managerial withdrawal disguised as autonomy.

Keywords: The empowerment paradox, Self-management and hidden coordination work, Autonomy as accountability transfer, Work intensification without direct supervision, Empowerment, Intensifies

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Introduction

Empowerment has become an organizing ideal for work that must respond quickly to dispersed expertise, uncertain demands, and digital coordination. The usual promise is straightforward: move decisions closer to those doing the work, reduce avoidable hierarchy, and permit employees to exercise judgment. The organizational problem is that hierarchy performs functions beyond issuing instructions. It allocates authority, integrates interdependent tasks, resolves conflict, absorbs exceptions, and assigns responsibility for trade-offs. Less-hierarchical forms therefore do not eliminate organizing requirements; they redistribute them among roles, teams, technologies, and informal practices [1]. The central question is not



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whether discretion is inherently beneficial or harmful, but whether the surrounding design makes discretion usable without quietly transferring unresolved managerial work and risk to employees.

This question matters because established evidence does not support either a celebratory or uniformly critical account. Empowering leadership is associated with motivational, relational, and performance benefits, while the same broad family of practices can also produce role burden, uncertainty, and heterogeneous responses across followers, tasks, and settings [2, 3]. Average positive associations therefore cannot settle how empowerment is enacted in a particular organization. Formal delegation may expand meaningful choice, but it may also accompany unchanged output expectations, fragmented coordination, opaque evaluation, or demands to remain continuously available. Conversely, demanding self-management need not be exploitative when employees possess real authority, adequate support, recoverable workloads, and credible avenues to challenge priorities. The paradox concerns configurations, not a single practice label.

A work-design perspective sharpens this point. Autonomy is only one characteristic in a broader arrangement that includes task interdependence, knowledge requirements, social support, feedback, workload, temporal structure, and physical or technological context [4]. Treating autonomy as an isolated benefit overlooks who must integrate work across boundaries and how employees obtain information, assistance, and exception handling. It also invites a level-of-analysis error: an individual may report discretion while the team experiences coordination loss, or a policy may advertise flexibility while local routines reward constant responsiveness. The relevant comparison is therefore not empowerment versus control in the abstract. It is among different configurations of discretion, coordination, demands, resources, authority, and accountability as they are enacted over time.

The article also distinguishes autonomy from independence. In self-determination theory, autonomy concerns volition and need-supportive conditions rather than the absence of involvement by others [5]. A worker can act autonomously while relying on clear expectations, competent guidance, and interdependent colleagues; equally, a worker can be left alone yet experience little volition because deadlines, ratings, client dependence, or resource scarcity constrain meaningful choice. This distinction prevents managerial withdrawal from being redescribed as empowerment. It also separates formal permission from substantive power. Permission to decide is limited when employees cannot secure resources, renegotiate goals, refuse unsafe demands, contest evaluation, or obtain a timely decision from someone with legitimate authority.

Demand-resource reasoning provides a further boundary. Discretion can be a resource, but its value depends on the demands it accompanies and on the resources available for learning, coordination, recovery, and social support [6]. The same discretion may enable adaptation in one setting and intensify self-management in another. This Critical Viewpoint Article therefore proposes, rather than validates, an integrative explanation of when empowerment becomes responsabilized. It develops three linked mechanisms—hidden coordination work, accountability transfer, and work intensification without direct supervision—and then specifies conditions under which empowerment may be more plausibly regarded as genuine. The argument is evidence-informed but non-empirical, selective rather than exhaustive, and bounded against causal proof or universal prescription.

Self-management and hidden coordination work

Self-management refers here to the planning, prioritization, monitoring, adjustment, and boundary regulation that employees perform to direct their own work. Hidden coordination work is proposed as the subset of integration activity that makes decentralized work function but is incompletely represented in job descriptions, schedules, workflow systems, or performance accounts. It can include finding information, translating across specialties, arranging handoffs, repairing misunderstandings, maintaining availability, chasing decisions, and absorbing exceptions. Research on remote and digitally mediated work shows that location flexibility can coincide with communication difficulties, altered collaboration networks, and employee-created routines for sustaining coordination [7-9]. These findings support the existence of changed coordination demands; they do not establish that all such work is invisible, burdensome, or caused by empowerment.

The term hidden is therefore actor-relative. Coordination may be visible to the employee performing it while remaining weakly visible to managers, clients, or systems that count only final outputs. It may also be recognized but uncompensated, or distributed unevenly toward employees with relational knowledge, lower formal power, or reputations for reliability. The critical issue is not whether collaboration occurs, but whether the time, attention, and emotional regulation required to produce coordination are acknowledged in workload and authority arrangements. Where formal structures are reduced, employees may become local schedulers, integrators, interpreters, and conflict absorbers. That additional work may be worthwhile and developmental, but describing it as empowerment without examining its allocation obscures an organizational design choice. Digital visibility can add a related layer of self-presentation work. A within-person field experiment found that camera use in virtual meetings increased fatigue in the studied setting, with downstream associations for engagement and voice during the workday [10]. The narrow finding should not be generalized to all meetings or monitoring. It nevertheless illustrates a broader distinction: being observable is not the same as contributing, and requirements intended to signal availability or engagement can consume cognitive and emotional resources. Similar caution applies to message responsiveness, status indicators, activity

logs, and copied communications. These tools may support coordination, but they can also turn uncertainty about contribution into a demand for continuous demonstrability.

Remote-work evidence also resists a single outcome claim. A multidimensional systematic review identified favorable and unfavorable implications across affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic domains, with variation by work arrangement and support [11]. Hidden coordination should therefore not be inferred simply from reported strain, nor should flexibility be presumed to remove it. Household conditions, pandemic disruption, occupational selection, team interdependence, managerial competence, and technology quality offer alternative explanations. The proposed category is most useful as a measurement and design question: what integration work is required, who performs it, how much discretion accompanies it, and whether it is resourced, recognized, and recoverable. Evidence at the employee level cannot by itself establish team or organizational consequences.

Autonomy as accountability transfer

Autonomy as accountability transfer is proposed as a configuration, not an established scale. It occurs when employees receive discretion or apparent choice while also assuming responsibility for planning, availability, compliance, client demands, coordination failures, or results without commensurate authority, resources, recourse, or residual managerial answerability. The construct does not imply that responsibility is inherently harmful. Legitimate delegation normally joins authority with answerability. The concern is incongruence: employees are held responsible for outcomes they cannot materially shape, or flexibility is made conditional on absorbing costs previously carried by the organization. Qualitative evidence from home-based telework shows that flexibility can be negotiated in exchange for acceptance of intensified work expectations [12]. That configuration is possible, not inevitable.

Platform work makes the distinction between task discretion and substantive power especially visible. Workers may choose when or how to complete tasks while platforms retain control over access to work, pricing, ratings, information, and account continuity. Comparative qualitative evidence describes autonomy coexisting with algorithmic control, market competition, insecurity, and work intensification [13]. The employment setting is institutionally distinctive, so the evidence should not be transferred wholesale to standard employment. Its analytical value lies in showing that autonomy has multiple objects. Discretion over task execution does not necessarily include authority over goals, evaluation criteria, workload, risk allocation, or the terms under which discretion can be exercised.

Accountability transfer also concerns recourse. In an online work setting characterized by algorithmic evaluation, workers retained forms of agency but operated within substantial information and power asymmetries [14]. This evidence cautions against technological determinism: workers are not passive, and control is never produced by code alone. Yet constrained agency differs from consequential authority. When employees cannot inspect a consequential evaluation, identify who can correct it, or appeal without retaliation, formal choice may coexist with limited capacity to alter the conditions governing outcomes. Voice opportunity is similarly insufficient if no actor is obliged to respond, explain, or reconsider. Accountability is genuinely shared only when organizational decision makers remain answerable for rules and exceptions.

The proposed construct extends beyond platforms. Algorithmic management can automate allocation, monitoring, evaluation, and discipline while shifting employment risks and administrative responsibilities toward workers [15]. Internal employees may face analogous patterns when dashboards, targets, or workflow systems specify outputs but leave employees to reconcile incompatible priorities, correct data errors, coordinate dependencies, and manage customer consequences. The technology is not the sole cause; managerial choices, staffing, contracting, regulation, and local norms shape how it is used. Accordingly, accountability transfer should be assessed through a decision-rights test: who can set or change goals, obtain resources, authorize exceptions, revise metrics, and bear the consequences when system demands conflict?

Algorithms also redesign work characteristics rather than serving as neutral coordination devices [16]. They may increase feedback and consistency, or reduce discretion, social support, task identity, and transparency. This makes technological capability distinct from legitimate authority. A system can recommend, allocate, or evaluate without possessing moral or organizational answerability. The proposed accountability-transfer lens asks whether management uses technical capability to support employee judgment or to make employees responsible for reconciling system limits. No selected source validates this lens as a causal construct. Its value is diagnostic: it identifies where apparent autonomy may mask asymmetry between responsibility and control, while leaving open alternative explanations such as employee preference, occupational norms, or temporary implementation problems.

Work intensification without direct supervision

Work intensification without direct supervision refers to increased effort density, simultaneous demands, temporal extension, cognitive preoccupation, self-presentation, or accelerated learning and decision requirements that occur without continuous face-to-face oversight. Direct supervision may recede while control remains embedded in deadlines, output targets, customer ratings, digital traces, peer dependence, or internalized obligations. National survey evidence has associated remote working

with greater work effort and mixed well-being and work-life consequences [17]. Because workers and jobs are not randomly assigned to remote arrangements, this evidence does not establish that distance itself causes intensified effort. It does establish that reduced physical oversight is compatible with, rather than opposed to, higher effort.

Temporal flexibility can likewise shift rather than remove control. Longitudinal evidence from Germany found that some flexible working-time arrangements were associated with difficulty cognitively switching off, with differences between women and men [18]. The finding is bounded by arrangement type, national institutions, occupations, household conditions, and selection. Still, cognitive spillover matters because work intensity is not exhausted by hours recorded. Employees can carry unresolved coordination, anticipation, and self-evaluation into nonwork time. Flexibility that permits schedule choice but leaves workload, response norms, and deadline density unchanged may relocate the timing of work while weakening opportunities for recovery. The critical comparison is between control over time and control over the demands placed within that time.

Longitudinal demand-resource research supports temporal relationships among job demands, resources, strain, and motivation while also identifying heterogeneous effects and reciprocal processes [19]. This evidence strengthens the case for treating intensification as a process rather than a static perception, but it does not test empowerment as its cause. Employees experiencing exhaustion may perceive fewer resources; high performers may be granted more autonomy and more work; organizations may introduce empowerment during restructuring or understaffing. Robust testing therefore requires within-person and multilevel designs that separate policy, enacted discretion, workload, coordination episodes, recovery, and outcomes across time. Without that separation, self-management pressure can be confused with ordinary workload or with individual differences in coping and preference.

A recent critical synthesis describes work intensification as multidimensional and commonly associated with adverse employee outcomes, while emphasizing heterogeneous measures and the prevalence of cross-sectional evidence [20]. The present viewpoint consequently does not claim that empowerment produces a universal intensification effect. It proposes a conditional pathway: when employees receive responsibility without aligned authority, coordination infrastructure, resources, recovery protection, or consequential voice, they may compensate through extra integration, self-monitoring, availability, and effort. The pathway remains conceptually plausible rather than empirically validated. Its organizational relevance lies in revealing how strong control can operate through responsabilization even when direct supervision appears minimal.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for when empowerment intensifies hidden work and self-management pressure.

Table 1. Core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for When Empowerment Intensifies Hidden Work and Self-Management Pressure.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Formal empowerment	Declared delegation, participation, or discretion.	Policy may not equal enacted authority.	Not psychological empowerment or actual decision power.	Input, not sufficient condition.	Implementation and interpretation vary.	Formal permission does not establish beneficial outcomes.
Enacted autonomy	Experienced, supported volition and discretion.	Choice can coexist with abandonment.	Not independence or task choice alone.	Component of genuine empowerment.	Usually measured at employee level.	Autonomy cannot offset unlimited demands.
Hidden coordination work	Proposed category: uncounted integration, translation, handoffs, availability, and repair.	Coordination costs may shift to employees.	Not collaboration generally; hidden is actor-relative.	Proposed mechanism.	Direct validated measures are limited.	Remote-work evidence is context-bound.
Self-management pressure	Proposed pressure to plan, monitor, present, motivate, and recover oneself.	Self-direction can become internalized supervision.	Not healthy self-regulation.	Proposed proximal mechanism.	Temporal order remains uncertain.	Measure separately from autonomy and performance.
Accountability transfer	Proposed transfer of responsibility without matched authority, resources, recourse, or managerial answerability.	Delegation may become abandonment.	Not legitimate delegation or shared accountability.	Proposed diagnostic construct.	No validated scale or threshold.	Coexisting control and autonomy do not prove exploitation.

Work intensification without direct supervision	Denser effort, extension, spillover, or decision demand without continuous oversight.	Low visible supervision can conceal strong control.	Not hours or productivity alone.	Evidence-supported outcome domain; proposed pathway endpoint.	Causal evidence is incomplete.	Empowerment is not established as a universal cause.
Consequential voice	Proposed capacity for safe expression, response, appeal, and possible influence.	Voice opportunities may be symbolic.	Not speaking frequency or a formal channel.	Proposed condition.	Response and influence need direct measurement.	Voice does not guarantee changed decisions.
Coordination and resource infrastructure	Time, staffing, information, routines, support, escalation, and recovery protection.	Autonomy cannot replace missing infrastructure.	Not surveillance or ad hoc coping.	Proposed organizational condition.	Appropriate bundle is context-specific.	No universal resource threshold is claimed.
Genuine empowerment	Proposed configuration matching discretion with authority, support, resources, voice, recoverability, and accountable governance.	Policy labels can conceal responsabilization.	Not formal empowerment or managerial withdrawal.	Principal proposed framework.	Integrated configuration is unvalidated.	Conceptual plausibility is not implementation readiness.

Note: Evidence-basis entries identify selected support for component constructs. "Proposed" marks original synthesis developed in this Critical Viewpoint Article; no row states a measured effect size, validated threshold, or universal causal relationship.

Conditions for genuine empowerment

Genuine empowerment is proposed here as an organizational configuration in which discretion is matched by usable authority, coordination capacity, adequate resources, recoverability, consequential voice, and accountable governance. It is not equivalent to a favorable attitude, a leader's stated intention, or a policy granting participation. Psychological safety, distinct forms of voice, and the separation of voice opportunity from managerial response and actual influence show that participation is multistage rather than self-executing [21-23]. Employees may feel safe enough to speak yet remain unable to obtain a reasoned response, appeal an automated judgment, or change an infeasible target. Genuine empowerment therefore requires not only expression but an answerable process through which relevant concerns can affect decisions.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for conditions for genuine empowerment, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

When Empowerment Intensifies Hidden Work and Self-Management Pressure

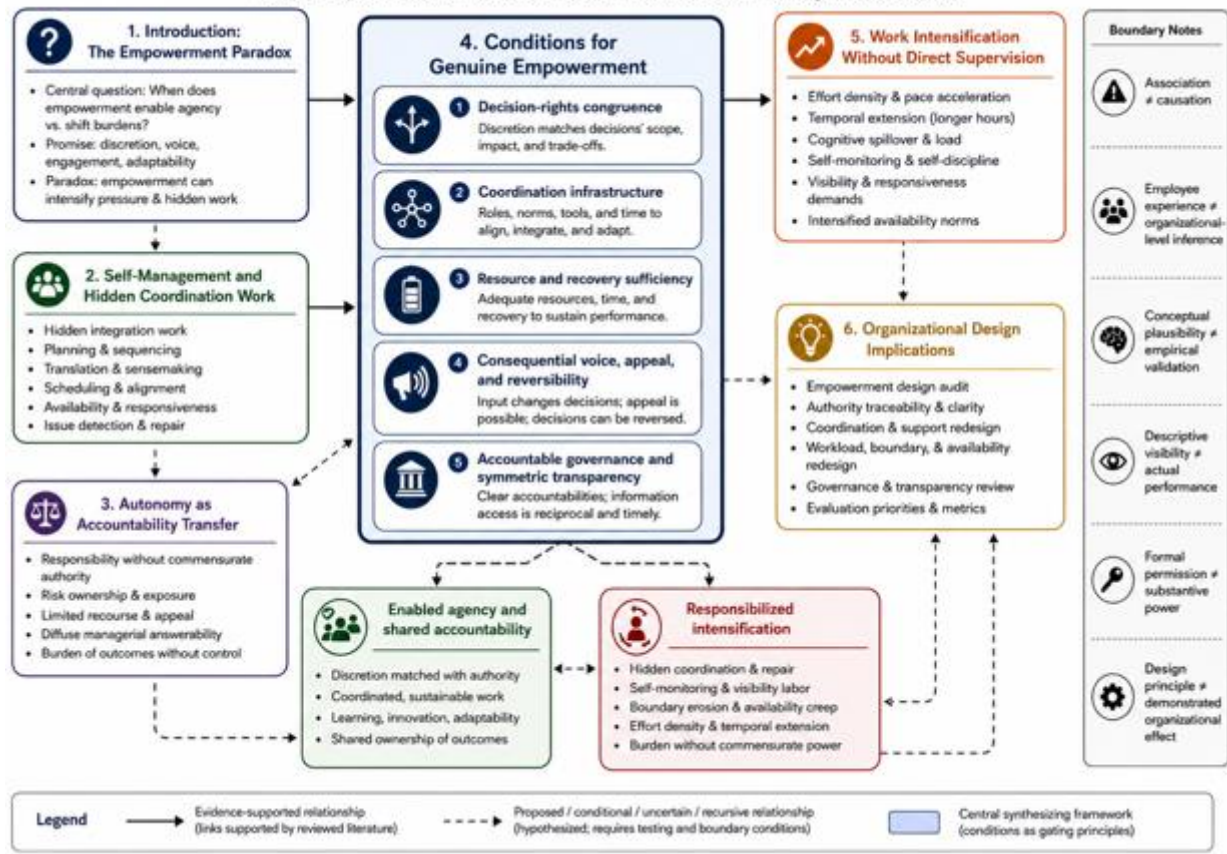


Figure 1. Conditions for Genuine Empowerment

The first condition, decision-rights congruence, asks whether responsibility is matched by authority over goals, priorities, resources, exceptions, and evaluation. The second, coordination infrastructure, asks whether decentralized actors receive time, information, routines, and integration support instead of being expected to improvise them indefinitely. The third, resource and recovery sufficiency, treats autonomy as conditional on manageable demands and credible opportunities to detach. These conditions are proposed as jointly relevant, not as a validated checklist or fixed threshold. Their required form will vary with interdependence, worker expertise, employment security, technology, and institutional protections.

The fourth condition joins consequential voice, appeal, and reversibility. Meta-analytic evidence associates leader autonomy support with need satisfaction and favorable work outcomes, but autonomy support is relational and active rather than managerial absence [24]. An empowered employee should be able to question assumptions, report coordination costs, contest consequential evaluation, and reverse a locally harmful arrangement without carrying retaliation risk alone. The fifth condition, accountable governance with symmetric transparency, requires organizations to explain how decisions are made while avoiding one-sided visibility in which employees are continuously observable but managerial rules remain opaque. These are normative design principles inferred from component evidence; their combined effectiveness remains untested.

The framework proposes two possible enacted pathways. Where the five conditions are reasonably present, discretion may support enabled agency and shared accountability. Where they are weak, employees may compensate through hidden integration, intensified availability, self-monitoring, and boundary erosion. The arrows are conditional and potentially recursive: intensification can reduce capacity to exercise voice, while credible voice can reveal missing infrastructure and trigger redesign. Alternative explanations remain important. Selection into autonomous jobs, capable leadership, supportive teams, or favorable labor institutions may produce both stronger conditions and better outcomes. Testing must therefore distinguish employee perceptions, team coordination, formal policy, and organizational consequences over time.

A further boundary concerns levels of analysis and evidence. An employee's felt discretion may coexist with team-level coordination deficits, while a team's local adaptability may depend on uncompensated work performed elsewhere. Similarly, a voice mechanism may increase opportunities to speak without changing managerial response or resource allocation [23]. Empirical tests should therefore measure formal policy, experienced authority, coordination episodes, response quality, recovery, and redistributed consequences separately. They should also examine who benefits, who performs repair work, and whether burdens move across occupational, contractual, or demographic boundaries. These requirements prevent a favorable individual perception from being treated as proof of genuine empowerment at the organizational level.

Organizational design implications

The proposed framework shifts organizational attention from whether empowerment exists to how decision rights, coordination costs, and residual accountability are distributed. First, organizations should audit forms of direction, evaluation, and discipline that remain active when direct supervision becomes less visible. Research on algorithmic control describes a contested terrain in which systems structure action while workers accommodate, resist, or work around them [25]. A design audit should therefore identify who defines metrics, who can inspect or correct data, who authorizes exceptions, and who answers for harmful interactions among targets. This is a governance principle, not evidence that one audit method will produce superior outcomes.

Second, technology adoption should not be allowed to settle authority questions implicitly. The automation–augmentation paradox treats these arrangements as interdependent organizational choices rather than predetermined properties of artificial intelligence [26]. A tool may provide recommendations or allocate tasks while managers retain legitimate responsibility for priorities and consequences. Conversely, nominal human oversight is weak when employees cannot understand, contest, or override consequential outputs. The design principle is authority traceability: each material decision should have an identifiable human or collective forum able to explain the rule, consider contextual evidence, and assume responsibility for exceptions. Its feasibility will differ across regulated, professional, platform, and routine work.

Third, empowerment initiatives should be evaluated as work redesign rather than communication programs. Digital systems alter task boundaries, knowledge requirements, social relationships, feedback, and control, with enabling or constraining consequences depending on implementation [27]. Prospective assessment should therefore include coordination time, interruption, learning demands, workload recovery, escalation delays, and the distribution of invisible repair work. Evaluation should compare formal policy with enacted practice and should not infer organizational performance from employee visibility or isolated attitude measures. Employee-level improvements may coexist with team integration costs, while local efficiency can transfer burdens to clients, contractors, or other units. Multilevel evidence is needed before claiming organizational benefit.

Fourth, learning algorithms can participate in organizing by reshaping expertise, opacity, and accountability rather than merely processing information [28]. Organizations consequently need recurring governance review, not a one-time declaration that a system is empowering. Review should examine whether workers can challenge classifications, whether managers remain answerable when systems fail, and whether accumulated coordination work is being converted into staffing, workflow, or rule changes. Research should test the proposed framework through validated measures of hidden coordination and accountability transfer, longitudinal policy studies, quasi-experiments, within-person recovery data, and comparative occupational and institutional designs. Results should be capable of refining or rejecting the framework, not only confirming it.

Fifth, evaluation should be designed to disconfirm as well as support the proposed framework. Longitudinal demand-resource evidence shows why temporal ordering and reciprocal processes must be examined rather than assumed [19]. The heterogeneity of work-intensification measures requires separate assessment of pace, simultaneous demands, cognitive extension, availability, and learning or decision load [20]. Voice studies also require observation of managerial response and influence, not merely employee willingness to speak [23]. Organizations testing new arrangements should specify plausible alternative explanations, compare affected groups, and record whether coordination costs are eliminated, recognized, or merely transferred. Such evaluation can inform revision, but it cannot convert a locally favorable result into a universal prescription.

Conclusion

This Critical Viewpoint Article has argued that empowerment is best understood as a conditional organizational configuration rather than a uniformly beneficial transfer of discretion. The proposed contribution links hidden coordination work, accountability transfer, and work intensification without direct supervision. These mechanisms explain how employees may gain local choice while also becoming responsible for integration, visibility, availability, and outcomes that exceed their authority. The argument does not deny established benefits of autonomy or empowering leadership. It identifies a narrower problem: formal empowerment can coexist with responsibilization when organizational functions are redistributed without adequate support or retained managerial answerability.

The proposed Genuine Empowerment Conditions framework organizes five requirements: congruent decision rights, coordination infrastructure, sufficient resources and recovery, consequential voice with appeal and reversibility, and accountable governance with symmetric transparency. These conditions do not form a validated causal model, implementation standard, or universal prescription. Their relevance and configuration may differ across occupations, teams, employment relationships, technologies, national institutions, and worker preferences. Individual perceptions cannot establish team coordination or organizational performance, and observed associations may reflect selection, leadership quality, staffing, restructuring, or other contextual causes. Likewise, formal permission cannot establish substantive power, descriptive

visibility cannot establish contribution, and technological functionality cannot establish legitimate authority. These distinctions are central decision boundaries rather than semantic qualifications.

The practical boundary is therefore one of organizational responsibility. Discretion should not be labeled empowerment when employees must privately compensate for missing integration, cannot alter the demands for which they are accountable, or remain visible to systems whose rules and owners are obscure. Conversely, demanding self-management may still be genuinely empowering when authority, resources, recourse, and recoverability are credible. Future research should validate the proposed constructs, test temporal and multilevel relationships, and examine whether the framework survives comparison across settings. Until then, it should be used as a critical diagnostic vocabulary and research agenda, not as proof of organizational effects or implementation readiness.

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