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Competence Politics, Skill Visibility, and Status Reordering in Changing Work Systems

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Abstract

Technological change alters not only what employees do but also which forms of competence become visible, credible, and consequential inside organizations. Existing accounts often emphasize automation, augmentation, work design, or identity disruption separately, leaving underdeveloped the organizational process through which changing visibility of skill becomes translated into altered standing. This Original Conceptual Framework Article develops a proposed Competence-Politics Framework to explain that process. The framework distinguishes underlying competence from skill visibility, attributed competence, status, formal authority, and professional-identity appraisal. It proposes that work-system reconfiguration changes the observability and interpretability of competence-relevant cues; these cues may then influence competence attribution and authority allocation, which may contribute to status reordering and identity threat. These relationships are conditional on task demonstrability, evaluation architecture, occupational interdependence, prior status, implementation context, and access to learning opportunities. The article further argues that employee responses should not be reduced to resistance or acceptance because accommodation, identity work, status repair, learning, and redesign may emerge through different pathways. Testable propositions and explicit readiness boundaries are developed to support future longitudinal, multilevel, experimental, and qualitative evaluation. The contribution is conceptual rather than causal or prescriptive: it organizes compatible evidence streams into a falsifiable account of how competence becomes politically consequential during technological change while preserving rival explanations based on performance, restructuring, labor-market conditions, and broader work insecurity.

Keywords: Competence politics, Skill visibility, Theoretical foundations, Status reordering after technological change, Employee and organizational responses, Research priorities

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Introduction

Technological change increasingly reorganizes how work is allocated, evaluated, and interpreted. Learning algorithms can alter knowledge practices and relationships around expertise rather than simply automate a pre-existing task [1]. Algorithmic systems can also become mechanisms through which work is directed, evaluated, recorded, rewarded, or disciplined, making technological change inseparable from questions of organizational control [2]. Yet these developments do not imply that technology mechanically determines who is competent or who gains status. The relevant problem is how changing work systems alter the conditions under which competence claims are produced, recognized, and made consequential.

A second limitation of prevailing accounts is the tendency to frame automation and augmentation as opposite outcomes. Their organizational relationship is more complex because systems may simultaneously substitute for some activities while



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increasing the value of others, and managerial choices shape where this boundary is drawn [3]. Accordingly, competence politics should not be equated with a struggle between humans and machines. It concerns how changing task arrangements and evaluative systems alter the social and organizational conversion of capability into recognized expertise, legitimate contribution, and consequential influence.

Organizations also participate in defining expertise itself. Arrangements for generating, grading, and sometimes obscuring expertise affect which forms of knowledge become institutionally visible and valued [4]. This observation does not make competence merely subjective. Actual capability may differ across individuals, and some tasks permit more reliable performance assessment than others. The conceptual problem is instead that capability must often pass through organizational devices, evaluators, categories, and interactional processes before it becomes socially consequential. The article therefore treats competence as analytically distinct from the recognition of competence.

This distinction makes competence a potentially political organizational resource without assuming that every competence judgment is strategic manipulation. Politicality enters when recognition affects access to desirable tasks, learning opportunities, credibility, influence, or status and when actors differ in their capacity to shape the evaluative criteria through which competence is judged. The framework therefore focuses on conversion processes rather than on motives: even routine technologies and apparently neutral evaluation arrangements may redistribute visibility without deliberate political intent.

Work design provides the final entry point. Algorithmic management changes job resources and demands through the way tasks, monitoring, autonomy, feedback, and human influence are configured [5]. These design choices can alter whose judgment is requested, whose outputs are legible, and whose work remains difficult to evaluate. This article proposes the Competence-Politics Framework as an original non-empirical synthesis linking work-system reconfiguration, skill visibility, competence attribution, status reordering, professional-identity appraisal, and employee and organizational responses. The framework is intended as a testable conceptual architecture, not as a validated causal model or a universal prescription for technological implementation.

Theoretical foundations

A competence-politics account requires a precise distinction between status and power. Status concerns socially conferred esteem or prestige, whereas power concerns the capacity to control resources or outcomes; empirical measurement supports treating them as separable dimensions of hierarchy [6]. This distinction matters because technological change may alter perceived expertise or prestige without changing formal authority, or may reallocate decision rights without changing social standing. The framework therefore does not infer one form of hierarchy from another and treats authority allocation as analytically adjacent to, but not identical with, status.

Status positions can also be inconsistent. Evidence from organizational fields shows that actors may occupy different positions across overlapping status hierarchies, producing evaluative ambiguity and context-dependent consequences [7]. Related research indicates that positional inconsistency across hierarchies can generate behavior oriented toward improving a lagging status position, depending on the relative prestige of the hierarchy involved [8]. These findings caution against portraying technological change as a simple upward or downward status movement. Reordering may occur across multiple audiences and status systems, and a gain in one arena may coexist with a loss in another.

Expertise adds a further distinction. Expertise matters collectively only when others can identify, interpret, and use it. Research on demonstrability shows that expert contributions are more readily utilized when the correctness or diagnostic value of those contributions can be recognized by others [9]. Demonstrability therefore differs from competence itself. A highly capable employee may work on tasks whose quality is difficult to observe, while a less capable employee may operate in a setting where outputs are highly legible. This difference becomes especially important when digital systems selectively expose some activities and suppress contextual or tacit elements of others.

The proposed theoretical synthesis therefore separates four layers: underlying competence, visibility of competence-relevant cues, attributed competence, and hierarchical consequence. Existing evidence supports the distinctness of status, power, evaluative position, and demonstrability, but it does not establish a single causal chain connecting them. Competence politics is proposed as the organizational process through which these layers may become linked. Its explanatory value depends on demonstrating that visibility and attribution contribute something beyond objective performance, formal restructuring, prior status, and existing authority relations.

Skill visibility in changing work systems

Skill visibility refers here to the extent to which competence-relevant actions, outputs, judgments, or learning become observable and interpretable to evaluators whose judgments matter. Observation is not equivalent to valid knowledge about performance. Research on organizational transparency shows that observation can alter behavior and information conditions in ways that are contingent on how visibility is structured [10]. Consequently, a digitally traceable activity may be highly visible while remaining weak evidence of competence, whereas an important but tacit contribution may be difficult to capture even when it materially improves collective work.

Recognition introduces a relational layer. Employees' perceptions of their own expertise can diverge from coworkers' perceptions, and recognition depends partly on communication and relational conditions rather than expertise existing as a self-announcing property [11]. Likewise, research on status construction indicates that the evaluability of contributions changes how status is accumulated [12]. Together, these findings support a distinction between having competence and having competence that others can readily recognize, compare, and credit. They do not imply that recognition is necessarily inaccurate; instead, they show that recognition has organizational conditions.

Visibility can also become path dependent. When evaluators gain access to prior professional evaluations, later judgments may converge or diverge partly as a function of that information environment rather than being formed independently [13]. In changing work systems, comparable dynamics may arise when dashboards, rankings, scores, algorithmic recommendations, or digital traces become salient cues about employee capability. Whether these cues improve evaluation depends on their diagnostic validity, the expertise of evaluators, task specialization, and the possibility that earlier judgments already embed error or bias.

The proposed concept of a skill-visibility regime captures these conditions: who or what becomes observable, which cues are treated as diagnostic, who interprets them, and which judgments affect work allocation or standing. It is an original synthesis rather than an established construct. It must therefore remain separate from surveillance, performance measurement, self-promotion, or credentialing. The core claim is limited: changing work systems may alter the distribution and interpretation of competence-relevant visibility, and this creates a plausible route through which competence becomes politically consequential.

Table 1 differentiates the core analytical layers through which competence becomes observable, interpreted, and organizationally consequential in changing work systems.

Table 1. Analytical Layers of Competence Visibility and Organizational Recognition

Analytical layer	Core question	What becomes visible	What may remain hidden	Organizational consequence	Boundary
Underlying competence	What can the employee actually do?	Demonstrated task capability, judgment, expertise	Tacit knowledge and latent capability	Substantive basis for competence claims	Capability is not recognition
Competence signal	What evidence becomes available?	Outputs, behaviors, credentials, task completion	Coordination, prevention, contextual work	Supplies cues to evaluators	Signal is not competence
Skill visibility	Who can observe competence-relevant cues?	Traceable actions, outputs, and contributions	Work outside formal evaluation systems	Determines what enters organizational attention	Visibility is not performance
Evaluative interpretation	How are signals understood?	Cues considered credible or relevant	Context and alternative meanings	Produces judgments of capability	Observation is not neutral interpretation
Attributed competence	Who is regarded as competent?	Recognized expertise and credibility	Unrecognized capability	Shapes task access and influence	Perception is not objective capability
Organizational consequentiality	When does recognition materially matter?	Influence, opportunity, task access, decision weight	Informal exclusion or dependency	Converts recognition into differentiated standing	Recognition is not formal authority
Competence politics — proposed	Who benefits when particular competence signals become consequential?	Patterns of credit, recognition, and authority	Unequal access to visibility or evaluation	May contribute to status redistribution	Proposed construct requiring validation

Table note. The table separates competence, visibility, interpretation, recognition, and consequence to prevent conceptual substitution. Competence politics denotes an original proposed process rather than an established causal mechanism.

Status reordering after technological change

Technological change can modify status conditions by changing what counts as legitimate knowledge. Longitudinal qualitative evidence shows that algorithm adoption may reshape a workplace regime of knowing, including the symbolic and practical standing of established knowledge practices [14]. This kind of change is more consequential than simple tool use because it can redefine which forms of judgment are considered credible. Even so, altered knowledge legitimacy does not by itself prove status reordering. Direct evidence of changes in esteem, influence, authority, or jurisdiction remains necessary. Analytical technologies can also change expertise through organizational practices that make their operation more or less interpretable. Research on knowledge work shows that black boxing is partly enacted through the ways workers validate, use, and defer to analytical systems, rather than being only an intrinsic technical property [15]. Related evidence from AI

development warns that expert “ground truth” can capture know-what while omitting situated know-how [16]. These findings suggest that technological systems may privilege some representations of expertise over others, but they do not establish that codified knowledge is necessarily inferior or that tacit expertise should always retain authority.

A further pathway concerns skill formation. In robotic surgery, altered participation structures constrained established routes through which novices acquired practical competence, prompting some trainees to develop unofficial forms of “shadow learning” [17]. The broader implication is not that automation universally deskills work. Rather, changes in participation can affect who receives opportunities to practice, observe, exercise judgment, and later demonstrate valued capability. Over time, unequal learning access could plausibly feed back into competence visibility and status, but that cross-domain relationship remains proposed and requires longitudinal testing.

Status reordering should therefore be defined narrowly as change in relative esteem, legitimacy, or recognized expertise, not as any change in task assignment. The Competence-Politics Framework proposes that reordering becomes more likely when technological change alters knowledge legitimacy, evaluative visibility, learning access, or jurisdiction in ways that change whose competence is credited. Alternative explanations remain substantial: actual performance differences, formal restructuring, labor-market scarcity, selection into new roles, changes in compensation, or managerial turnover may account for observed status shifts. Evidence of technological adoption alone is insufficient to distinguish among these mechanisms.

Professional identity threat

Technological change becomes identity-relevant when employees interpret altered tasks, knowledge claims, or standing as threatening valued professional self-definitions. Research on workplace artificial intelligence shows that AI-related change may be experienced as identity threat, including concerns about occupational value and status [18]. The framework therefore treats identity threat as an appraisal rather than a direct technological effect. Exposure to the same system may be interpreted as augmentation, displacement, professional challenge, or routine redesign depending on employees’ existing roles and expectations.

Identity work provides a vocabulary for these responses because workers may maintain, repair, revise, or reconstruct work-related identities when established meanings become unstable [19]. Yet technology is only one possible source of instability. Research on independent work shows that precarious arrangements can also make professional identity difficult to sustain [20]. This rival explanation matters because insecurity attributed to competence politics may instead reflect employment uncertainty, weakened communities, or broader organizational change.

Professional identity can also become relational when technologies redistribute responsibilities between occupational groups. Enterprise-system implementation has been shown to stimulate identity work where interdependent professional groups renegotiate role boundaries [21]. The proposed framework therefore links status reordering to identity threat only conditionally: altered standing must first become meaningful to a valued identity. Responses may then differ according to occupational interdependence, prior status, perceived replaceability, and available routes for reaffirming expertise.

This distinction also limits levels-of-analysis inference. An employee may experience threat even when an occupation retains high collective standing, while occupational jurisdiction may shift without every member reporting threat. Formal role change similarly does not demonstrate perceived status loss. Empirical tests should therefore distinguish individual appraisal, interpersonal recognition, occupational status, and organizational authority rather than aggregating one into another.

Table 2 outlines alternative competence-politics pathways through which technological change may affect professional standing and identity without assuming a single linear or deterministic sequence.

Table 2. Competence-Politics Pathways Under Technological Change

Pathway	Initial change	Proposed competence-politics mechanism	Possible consequence	Rival explanation	Validation question
Visibility amplification	Previously hidden work becomes observable	Newly visible cues receive greater evaluative weight	Increased recognition or standing	Actual performance improved	Does recognition change after controlling for performance?
Visibility compression	Complex work is reduced to standardized indicators	Narrow signals dominate judgment	Some expertise becomes undervalued	Task redesign explains the change	Which valuable contributions disappear from evaluation?
Knowledge recoding	Expertise is translated into data or formal rules	Codified knowledge becomes easier to credit	Authority may move toward controllers of codification	Coordination simply improves	Does jurisdiction change independently of quality?
Jurisdictional redistribution	Technology changes who performs or authorizes work	Recognition and decision rights shift across roles	Relative professional standing may change	Formal restructuring is primary	Does standing change beyond changes in rank?

Learning displacement	Access to high-value tasks declines	Reduced participation limits future demonstrability	Unequal development of recognized expertise	Prior skill explains allocation	Does task access predict later recognition?
Evaluative inheritance	Earlier ratings remain visible	Prior judgments influence later interpretation	Status differences may persist	Persistent quality differences	Are later judgments dependent on earlier evaluations?
Counter-signaling response	Recognition is perceived to decline	Workers seek alternative demonstrations of value	Status repair, reskilling, resistance, accommodation	General insecurity	Are responses linked specifically to competence-based standing?
Recursive redesign — proposed	Responses alter the work system	New visibility and authority arrangements emerge	Status ordering may change again	Broader organizational change	Do responses reshape subsequent attribution?

Table note. These pathways may coexist and operate in different directions. They constitute an original conceptual architecture for investigation rather than a validated sequence of organizational effects.

Proposed competence-politics framework

The Competence-Politics Framework integrates these streams through a proposed conversion mechanism rather than a technological-determinist sequence. Organizational identity-threat theory indicates that employees facing the same threat need not respond uniformly [22]. Longitudinal evidence likewise shows that identity-related responses can diverge across members and change over time [23]. These findings motivate a framework in which work-system reconfiguration changes the conditions of visibility, but subsequent attribution, status, identity appraisal, and response remain contingent.

The central proposed mechanism is competence attribution and authority allocation. A visibility regime makes some competence-relevant cues easier to observe than others. Evaluators then interpret those cues, and organizations may translate those interpretations into credibility, task access, influence, or decision rights. Status systems can themselves be shaped by evaluative infrastructures; evidence on third-party rankings demonstrates that ranking arrangements can participate in status dynamics [24]. The framework extends this insight cautiously to changing work systems: evaluative architecture may help reorder standing even when underlying competence changes less than visibility does.

Status loss can also invite legitimacy scrutiny and behavioral repair [25]. This supports the possibility of feedback rather than a one-way sequence. Employees may seek more visible assignments, protect jurisdiction, develop new capabilities, challenge evaluative criteria, or accommodate changed expectations. Organizations may respond by redesigning work, revising evaluative rules, or reallocating authority. These feedback pathways are proposed and require testing because none of the selected evidence validates the complete architecture.

The framework therefore contains three explicit decision boundaries. First, descriptive visibility must not be treated as demonstrated performance. Second, social status must not be treated as formal authority. Third, technological capability must not be treated as legitimate organizational jurisdiction. The framework predicts political significance only when organizational actors or systems convert competence-related signals into consequential recognition, access, or authority. Where technology changes efficiency without changing those conversion processes, competence politics may be weak or absent.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for competence-politics framework, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

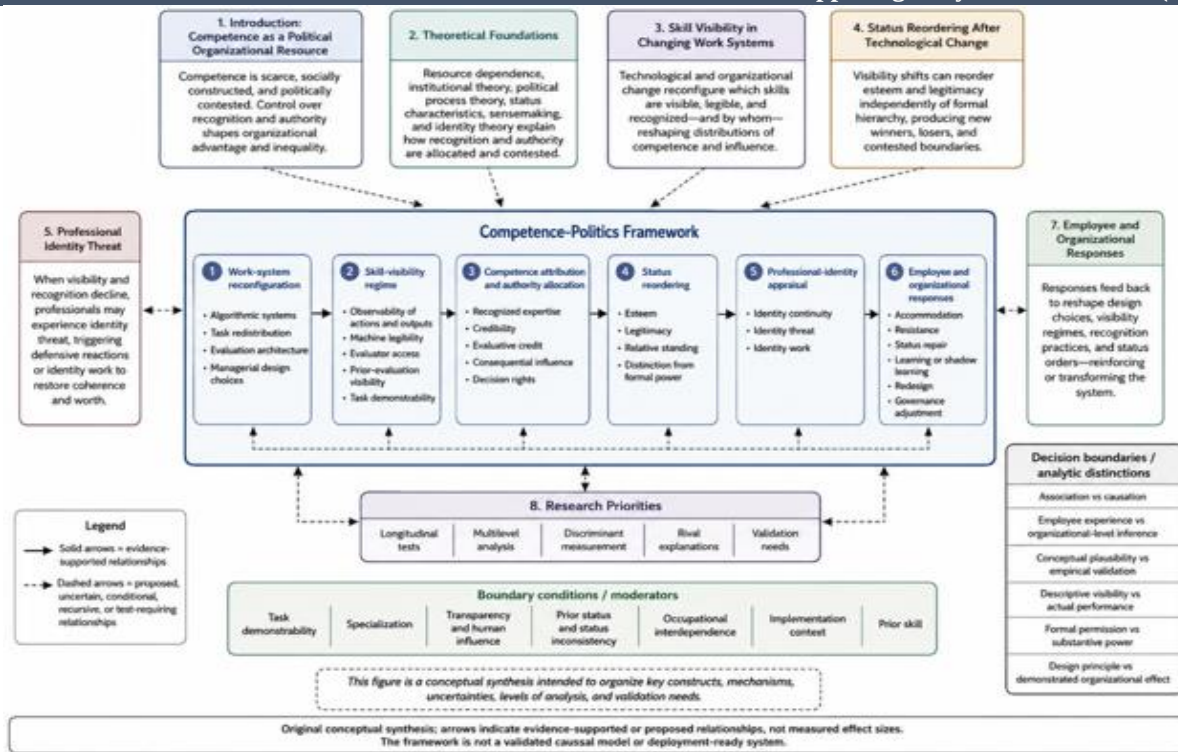


Figure 1. Competence-Politics Framework

Employee and organizational responses

Employee responses should not be reduced to acceptance versus resistance. Algorithmic management can reorganize allocation, evaluation, monitoring, and control within employment relations [26], while digital work-design research indicates that consequences depend on how autonomy, skill use, feedback, relational demands, and control are configured [27]. Thus, similar technologies may create different competence-political conditions because organizational implementation determines which judgments remain human, which activities become measurable, and how workers can contest or contextualize evaluations.

Resistance itself may carry costs and should not automatically be treated as evidence of irrational opposition. Research in algorithmically managed work shows that resistance can be context-dependent and associated with worker consequences that vary with the surrounding configuration [28]. More broadly, systematic integration of algorithmic-management research shows substantial heterogeneity across mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes [29]. The framework therefore predicts no single response category. Accommodation, identity work, status repair, learning, withdrawal, contestation, and work redesign remain possible but conditional.

At the organizational level, evaluator calibration, access to learning, mechanisms for contextualizing machine-generated signals, and explicit allocation of decision rights are proposed responsibilities for investigation. They are not validated interventions. Their value would depend on whether they improve correspondence between competence and consequential recognition without merely creating additional monitoring or administrative burden.

Organizational responses should also preserve contestability without assuming that every disagreement indicates evaluation failure. Employees may possess contextual knowledge unavailable to a metric, but managers may also have legitimate reasons to standardize evaluation or constrain discretion. A competence-politics approach therefore asks whether consequential judgments can be explained, challenged with relevant evidence, and revised when warranted. It does not imply that human review is inherently superior, that worker preferences should determine authority, or that formal permission to speak guarantees consequential influence.

Table 3 translates the Competence-Politics Framework into a research-oriented diagnostic structure that specifies what organizations and researchers would need to observe before drawing consequential conclusions.

Table 3. Diagnostic Questions, Research Tests, and Decision Boundaries for the Competence-Politics Framework

Diagnostic domain	Question to examine	Observable indicator	Rival explanation	Organizational responsibility	Prohibited inference	Readiness boundary
Competence measurement	Is capability independently observable?	Valid task performance or expert assessment	Visibility is mistaken for competence	Improve measurement quality	High visibility means high competence	Independent competence measurement required

Visibility distribution	Are some contributions easier to observe?	Unequal traceability or evaluator access	Legitimate task differences	Audit what becomes visible and invisible	Invisible work is low-value work	Visibility patterns must be understood
Attribution process	How do signals become competence judgments?	Evaluator reasoning and task referrals	Performance differences	Make evaluative criteria explicit	Recognition perfectly represents capability	Attribution must be distinct from performance
Status movement	Has professional standing actually changed?	Prestige, influence, opportunity access	Restructuring or compensation change	Measure status independently	Task change equals status loss	Direct status evidence required
Authority allocation	Have decision rights moved?	Approval rights, discretion, task ownership	Administrative redesign	Clarify decision jurisdiction	Prestige equals formal power	Authority change must be documented
Identity appraisal	Is change experienced as identity threat?	Repeated identity or role-meaning measures	General insecurity or change fatigue	Examine role meaning and learning needs	Technology exposure equals threat	Identity effects require direct measurement
Learning opportunity	Who accesses skill-building work?	Practice and developmental assignments	Prior skill differences	Preserve meaningful learning routes	Reduced exposure proves deskilling	Longitudinal development evidence required
Contestability	Can consequential judgments be questioned?	Review and correction mechanisms	Disagreement reflects competing interests	Maintain review for consequential decisions	Every challenge demonstrates error	Correction mechanisms must be assessable
Framework validation	Does the proposed pathway outperform rivals?	Longitudinal, multilevel, comparative evidence	Performance, selection, labor markets, insecurity	Treat framework as research lens	Plausibility demonstrates causation	Replicated discriminant and predictive evidence
Decision readiness	Is evidence sufficient for consequential use?	Validated constructs and known boundaries	Context transfer fails	Restrict use until adequately validated	Framework determines promotion or replacement	Context-specific validation must precede deployment

Table note. The table is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. Organizational responsibilities identify domains requiring examination and governance attention; they do not represent validated interventions or guaranteed organizational effects.

Research priorities

The most important empirical priority is to distinguish heterogeneous skill effects from visibility effects. Evidence on AI augmentation shows that outcomes can differ by existing employee skill rather than being uniformly beneficial [30]. Future studies should therefore measure underlying competence independently and ask whether changing visibility still predicts attributed competence, task allocation, or status after objective or externally validated performance indicators are considered. A second priority is to separate capability from perceptions of capability. Research shows that algorithmic-management conditions can influence perceptions of workers' creative capacities [31]. Such findings make perceptual outcomes theoretically important but also warn against treating them as direct evidence of competence change. Multilevel research is equally necessary because AI management unfolds through interactions among individuals, technologies, teams, organizational structures, and broader contexts [32]. Tests should therefore avoid inferring organizational reordering solely from individual attitudes.

Third, longitudinal process research should examine whether knowledge jurisdiction changes before, during, and after implementation. Multi-year evidence from professional work demonstrates how situated and algorithmic modes of knowing can become interlaced and reorganize workplace jurisdiction rather than simply replacing expertise [33]. Comparative designs could assess whether these dynamics differ across professions with high versus low demonstrability, stronger versus weaker occupational closure, or centralized versus distributed authority.

Measurement development is equally important. Status and formal power should remain discriminant constructs [6], while expertise demonstrability should not be used as a proxy for competence [9]. Researchers should validate measures of skill visibility and attributed competence against independent task-quality indicators and collect repeated measures before and after changes in work systems. Network data on advice seeking, influence, and task referral could reveal whether altered recognition precedes formal authority change or merely follows it.

A further priority concerns boundary conditions across occupations and institutional settings. The framework may operate differently where competence is readily verifiable than where performance depends on tacit judgment, long time horizons, or collective production. Researchers should compare settings with strong professional closure against settings in which authority is managerially assigned, and distinguish technologies that merely inform decisions from those that allocate tasks or constrain

discretion. Such comparisons would clarify whether competence politics is primarily an evaluation phenomenon, a jurisdictional phenomenon, or a broader consequence of organizational redesign.

The framework is strongest if researchers attempt to reject it. Useful designs include visibility manipulations, phased implementations, difference-in-differences comparisons, repeated status-network measures, validated skill assessments, digital-trace analysis, and qualitative process tracing. Evidence that status follows performance alone, that visibility adds no explanatory value, or that identity threat reflects general insecurity rather than competence-related standing would require revision of the framework.

Conclusion

Competence in changing work systems is not only a stock of employee capability. It is also something that must become visible, interpreted, credited, and translated into organizational consequence. This article proposes competence politics as a framework for analyzing that conversion without assuming that recognition is inherently distorted or that technological change necessarily displaces established expertise.

The framework separates underlying competence from skill visibility, attributed competence, status, formal authority, and professional identity. It proposes that work-system reconfiguration can alter visibility regimes and that these changes may contribute to status reordering when organizations translate particular competence cues into credibility, jurisdiction, or decision rights. Identity threat and employee response remain contingent appraisals rather than automatic effects.

These claims are conceptual and require direct empirical testing. Performance change, restructuring, labor-market scarcity, employment insecurity, and other explanations may account for apparent status shifts. The framework therefore offers a falsifiable research architecture rather than a validated model or managerial prescription. It should be rejected or revised where visibility does not affect attribution, where status change is fully explained by performance, or where identity responses arise independently of competence-related standing.

Its central contribution is to make visible a neglected organizational question: not simply who possesses competence after technological change, but how organizations decide which competence counts, whose competence becomes consequential, and with what implications for status and identity. That question places evaluation, learning opportunity, and jurisdiction alongside technological capability as central elements of changing work systems.

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