

# **Evolving Psychological Contracts for Women Across Life Stages and Career Paths: The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework for Hybrid Work Environments**

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## **Abstract**

This viewpoint paper addresses a critical gap in psychological contract literature by proposing a comprehensive framework that recognizes how women's workplace expectations evolve across distinct life stages and career trajectories within contemporary hybrid work arrangements. The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework (DEF) emerges from synthesizing life-course perspectives with gendered workplace research and emerging work design principles. The framework operationalizes psychological contracts by integrating four life-stage dimensions with five equilibrium factors to create adaptive employment agreements. Traditional psychological contracts inadequately serve women's intersectional experiences across varied career stages. The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework reveals that women require contracts capable of continuously balancing five key considerations: autonomy-structure, growth-stability, individuality-collaboration, flexibility-accountability, and care-career progression throughout four distinct life phases. This research presents the first construction of a Dynamic Equilibrium Framework specifically addressing gendered psychological contracts, introducing the concept of "Equilibrium Contracting" as maintaining balance between competing demands across women's evolving life circumstances. While the framework requires empirical validation across multiple organizational contexts and industrial sectors, future research should pursue longitudinal applications and cross-cultural adaptations. Organizations can implement more effective retention and engagement strategies through equilibrium-based psychological contracts that adapt to women's changing life-stage needs while maintaining organizational objectives. By addressing the diverse experiences of women throughout their professional lifecycles, this framework contributes to advancing gender equity in workplace environments.

## **Keywords**

Psychological Contracts, Women's Career Development, Life-stage Transitions, Hybrid Work Arrangements, Equilibrium Contracting, Workplace Gender Equity

## **1. Introduction**

The contemporary workplace landscape has undergone profound transformation, marked particularly by the widespread adoption of hybrid work arrangements that fundamentally challenge traditional employment paradigms. This evolution has created unprecedented opportunities and complexities, especially for women who frequently navigate intricate intersections of professional aspirations, caregiving responsibilities, and personal development goals throughout their careers.

Since the field of psychological contract research—the implied, unwritten expectations, and obligations holding employment relationships together—has undergone much research, the existing literature has always conceived of women as a single homogeneous group. This has thereby failed to address the varied experiences of individuals arising out of competitive life demands situated variably at diverse career stages and personal circumstances. These extraordinary opportunities for work-life integration have been created by the post-pandemic remote and hybrid work arrangements [1]. Yet, organizations continue to presuppose old psychological contracts that fail to comprehend the complex trajectories of women's careers.

The fundamental premise of this viewpoint centers on recognizing that women's workplace expectations exist in constant tension between multiple competing demands, requiring sophisticated frameworks that move beyond static accommodation models toward dynamic equilibrium approaches. Traditional psychological contracts, designed primarily around male-centered career patterns, prove insufficient for addressing the nuanced needs of women who may simultaneously be early-career professionals seeking skill development, mid-career mothers balancing multiple responsibilities, or senior executives preparing for succession planning.

A deeper reimagining of psychological contracts for women is required in the new system of work. A pertinent argument is that hybrid work cultures have shown the possibilities for more workplace flexibility and yet existing structural inequities that continue to put barriers in front of women trying to move ahead in their careers [2]. If companies fail to accept and embrace the emerging expectations, they will definitely lose some of their best talent, while unwittingly furthering the cause of systemic inequities in the workplace.

This paper proposes a Dynamic Equilibrium Framework (DEF) as a transformative lens to understanding and managing psychological contracts for women throughout their professional lifecycle. Instead of regarding women's career needs additively or linearly, the framework respects that workplace expectations exist in dynamic tension, requiring constant recalibration through an ever more complex equilibrium mechanism that changes with shifting life circumstances.

### **The Imperative for Change**

Assistant: A traditional conception of psychological contracts arose during an era when careers were predictable and were predominantly modeled after male career paths characterized by linear progression and very little caregiving responsibilities. The latest research, on the other hand, indicates that women's career paths are inherently more complex, having many transitions, caregiving responsibilities, and varying life priorities that change across the life span [3].

Such inadequacies of existing approaches are especially glaring in the resolution of retention and engagement issues confronting organizations. Women still face barriers to career advancement, with many leaving organizations not due to lack of capability or ambition, but because their evolving needs and expectations remain unrecognized and unaddressed by inflexible organizational structures.

Considering recent research into hybrid work efficiency, women are shown to be experiencing distinct advantages and pressures within flexible work schemes [4]. While working hybrids may in some cases yield a higher capability for juggling competing demands, hybrid arrangements demand more sophisticated approaches to the management of contracts at a psychological level than currently available traditional frameworks can offer organizations that fail to adapt their psychological contract approaches risk perpetuating inequities even within seemingly progressive work arrangements.

The emergence of inclusive talent development approaches [5] demonstrates organizational recognition of the need for more sophisticated frameworks addressing diverse employee needs. However, these approaches often lack the theoretical foundation necessary for systematic implementation across different organizational contexts and career stages.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations**

### **2.1 Psychological Contract Evolution**

Psychological contracts represent the implicit beliefs and expectations that individuals hold regarding their employment relationships, encompassing both transactional elements focused on specific exchanges and relational elements emphasizing long-term commitment and mutual obligation. Traditional psychological contract theory, however, has largely overlooked how gender influences contract formation, interpretation, and fulfillment processes.

The evolution of psychological contract theory must acknowledge that women's workplace expectations are shaped by complex interactions between professional aspirations, caregiving responsibilities, and societal expectations that vary significantly across life stages. Research demonstrates that career development patterns differ substantially between men and women, with women more likely to experience non-linear career progressions characterized by transitions in and out of intensive work periods [6].

Contemporary psychological contract research increasingly recognizes the importance of addressing diverse employee populations and organizational contexts. However, most studies continue to treat gender as a simple demographic variable rather than recognizing the complex ways in which gendered experiences shape workplace expectations and contract interpretation.

### **2.2 Life-Course Perspectives**

Life-course theory provides essential insights into how women's workplace expectations evolve across different life stages and career transitions. This perspective recognizes that career development occurs within broader life contexts that include family formation, caregiving responsibilities, and personal development goals that shift over time [3]. The integration of life-course perspectives with psychological contract theory offers powerful insights into how women's workplace expectations evolve and how organizations can better address these changing needs.

The concept of life-stage transitions becomes particularly relevant when examining women's career patterns. Whereas traditional career models are linear in nature, women's careers often involve several transitions that require different types of organizational support and accommodation at various periods in their lives. Keeping these career patterns in mind gives organizations the ability to construct more responsive and effective approaches toward the psychological contract.

### **2.3 Work-Life Integration Paradigms**

The shift from work-life balance toward work-life integration represents a fundamental change in how individuals are viewed as managing competing life demands. Work-life integration recognizes that the personal and professional vary not in a container in which one needs to keep the other in balance but are interrelated because they form life that must be integrated harmoniously [7].

This paradigm shift is especially important for women, who are often burdened with greater caregiving responsibilities and subjected to social expectations that create tension between professional work and personal life. An effective work-life integration must be one based on organizational discourses and arrangements in recognition of and in support to such complex dynamics, instead of viewing them as issues women must independently wrestle with.

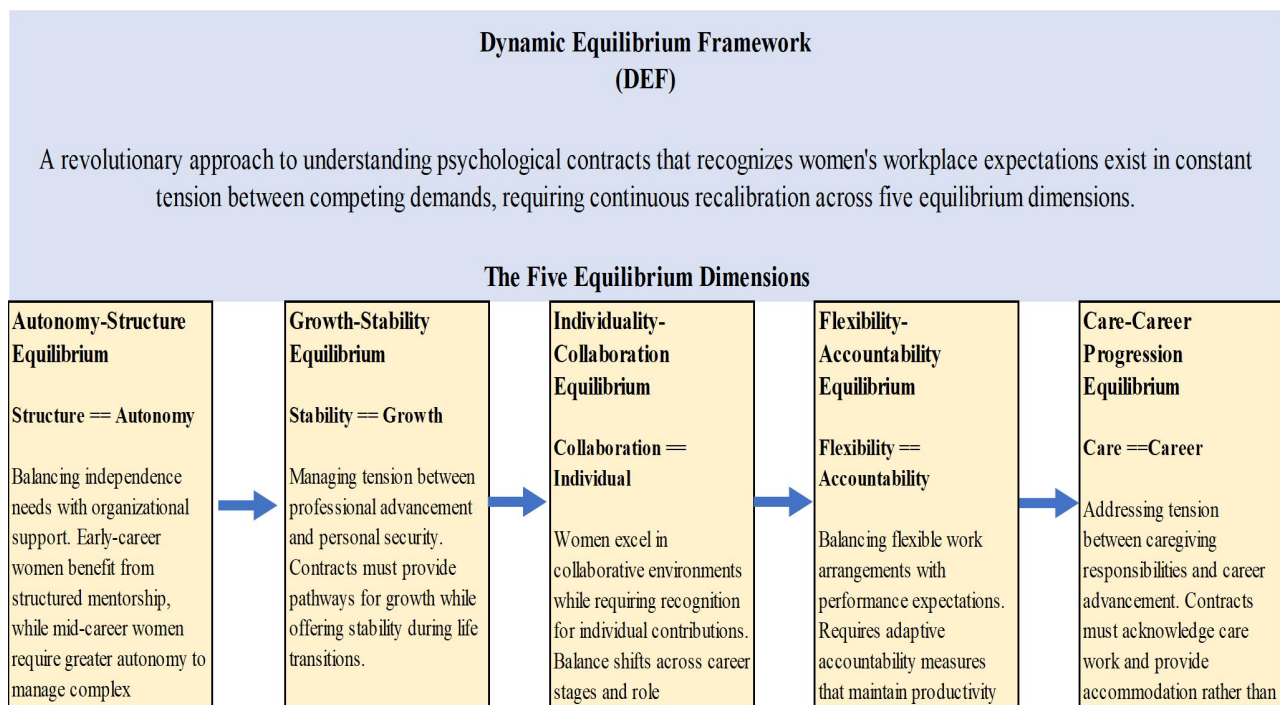
In this way, hybrid work arrangements seem to be a boon for things to be well integrated into life, but they pose a challenge in those more sophisticated organizational approaches to psychological- contract management will be demanded. Organizations must create frameworks that view from a diversity lens the is truly happening in terms of work-life integration for women at various stages in their careers and life circumstances.

### 3. The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework

#### 3.1 Framework Foundation

The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework (DEF) is a shift in perspective that changes from the static psychological contracts to adaptive contracts of equilibriums between competing demands throughout the professional lives of women. It operates on the assumption that there exist continuous tensions in the expectations women form about their workplaces; hence, any accommodation measure needs to be constantly recalibrated rather than fixed in place.

The framework argues that women's professional needs are not additive but sit in dynamic tension requiring very complex balancing mechanisms that evolve with changing circumstances in life. Instead of viewing workplace accommodation as a series of discrete adjustments, this framework implies a psychological contract theory as a dynamic system that requires ongoing maintenance of equilibrium across several dimensions simultaneously.



**Figure 1.** Dynamic Equilibrium Framework (DEF)

Figure 1 illustrate DEF is an abbreviation of the Dynamic Equilibrium Framework. It depicts five dimensions of equilibrium and their interconnections during the four life stages.

#### 3.2 The Five Equilibrium Dimensions

**Autonomy-Structure Equilibrium:** As women go through various phases of life, they require amounts of independence and organizational support. Throughout the first stages of career development, early-career women are better served by structured mentoring systems, followed by clear-cut career-development pathways, while mid-career women must have greater autonomy in carrying out their responsibilities. An overarching framework posits that in a successful psychological contract, the Autonomy-Structure balance must be explicitly recognized and offered mechanisms for adjustment as the needs of women change. The autonomy-structure equilibrium represents that women's needs for independence and support are not static but ever-changing along axes of professional development, life circumstances, and organizational context. Solutions must develop with the organization that provides just the right level of structure and autonomy depending on the needs and circumstances of the individual rather than a one-fits-all approach.

**Growth-Stability Equilibrium:** Professional advancement versus personal security is a matter tensely suited across the life stages and circumstances of women. A psychological contract must take account of this equilibrium, providing

some pathways to grow while supporting the need to remain stable through a life transition. The equilibrium recognizes growth needs are not common to all, for which suitable consideration needs to be based on individual life circumstances and career goals. The changes in life circumstances, such as family formation, undertaking care-giving responsibilities, or personal development goals, often bring changes to women's needs for growth and stability. Psychological contracts should stand as a container for continuous change in response to development needs while at the same time ensuring an environment for further development and upgrades.

**Individuality-Collaboration Equilibrium:** Women, for the most part, perform better if they work together, as they require validation for individual contributions. This balance changes across career stages as early-stage women may require more collaborative learning opportunities, while senior women may need a stronger platform for showcasing individual professional expertise and thought leadership.

The individuality-collaboration equilibrium perceives that women's preferences for collaborative vs. individual work may change based on their stage in career, specific needs of the role, and their working styles. Organizations must devise strategies that can foster place for a spectrum of individual preferences, yet do a good jobbery of recognizing both collaborative work and individual accomplishments.

**Flexibility-Accountability Equilibrium:** Organization-wise, the foremost need of flexible work arrangement shall remain balanced with performance expectations and goals. This view recognizes that demands for flexibility differ alongside life stages and individual circumstances; thus, accountability measures accordingly should maintain productivity while allowing some individual accommodations.

In other words, modern studies on hybrid working suggest that flexibility can help, rather than hurt, performance if it is managed appropriately [4]; yet this demands performance management systems that would probably not count directed presence or such as availability as status measures.

**Care-Career Progression Equilibrium:** Arguably the most important dimension in this framework, it seeks to address the ongoing tension between caregiving responsibilities and career advancement. The framework proposes that psychological contracts must acknowledge care work and establish alternatives for career progression that accommodate rather than penalize these life-essential responsibilities. The term equilibrium recognizes that caregiving responsibilities are not temporary interruptions to career progression but rather ongoing responsibilities in many women's lives that require systematic organizational accommodation. Effective approaches must go beyond the characterization of caregiving as an individual problem and instead recognize it as an organizational opportunity to work on more inclusive and enabling work arrangements us on outcomes rather than traditional measures of workplace presence or availability.

#### 4. Four Life-Stage Configurations

**Foundation Stage (Ages 22-32):** Characterized by career establishment, skill acquisition, and relationship nurturing. Women in this stage view learning opportunities, access to mentors, and foundational experiences as priorities. Their needs balance growth versus stability and individualism versus collaboration, with psychological contracts centered on guarantees for skill development and collaborative environments for learning.

Within the foundation stage, women require structured developmental opportunities that provide clear paths of advancement but at the same time test options to pursue various career directions. Organizations must find themselves balancing enough structures for supporting learning with sufficient flexibility that accommodates their interests and circumstance changes.

**Integration Stage (Ages 33-44):** This is when the high career advancement winds are working through other things like family responsibilities and personal development. Women need psychological contracts that recognize these dual identities and allow sufficient flexibility for caregiver responsibilities while maintaining upward movement along professional trajectories. Hence, there is a shift from flexibility-accountability to care-career progression balance through inclusive talent development approaches [5]. Integration frequently represents the most intricate period in women's careers requiring higher complexities from organizational approaches to manage the overwhelming demands and yet preserve opportunities for advancement. Hence, new ways must be forged to manage performance and develop careers, taking into consideration the challenges arising out of, and opportunities associated with, this life stage.

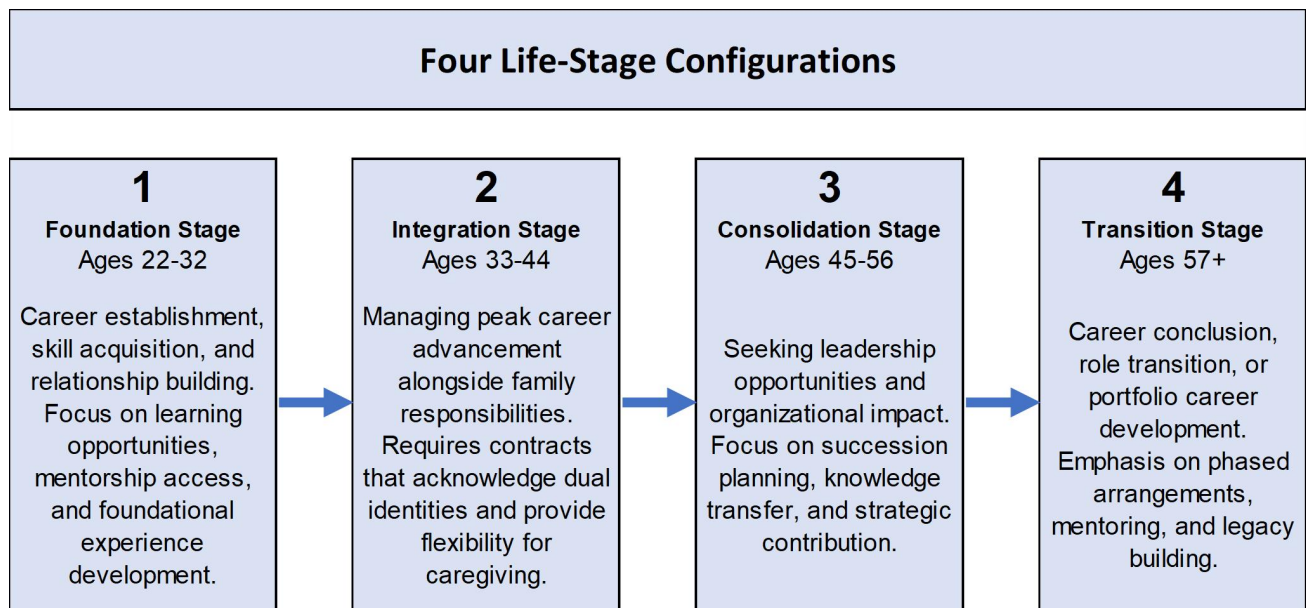
**Consolidation Stage (Ages 45-56):** Women in this stage seek leadership opportunities and organizational impact while potentially managing complex family dynamics including aging parents. Their psychological contracts must address succession planning, knowledge transfer responsibilities, and continued professional development. The focus moves toward autonomy-structure and growth-stability equilibrium, emphasizing strategic contribution and organizational influence.

During the consolidation stage, women often possess significant expertise and experience that can benefit organizations through leadership roles and knowledge transfer activities. Psychological contracts must provide for such contributions while considering the prevailing life complexities that, by this stage, are present for the individuals themselves.

**Transition Stage (Ages 57+):** Preparation for winding down of the career, role transition, or portfolio career options should enter the psychological contract with its phased working arrangement, mentoring role, or legacy-building

opportunity. Balancing autonomy-versus-structure and self-versus collaborative needs with knowledge transfer-organization contribution is critical.

The transition nature gives type of the unique opportunities to benefit from women's accumulated expertise while making flexible arrangements that accommodate shifting priorities and interests in life. From a practical point of view, it needs to make a stepped move beyond old-fashioned retirement arrangements into a more raggedly difficult segment with variable offerings.



**Figure 2.** Four Life-Stage Configurations

Figure 2 illustrates four distinct career life-stage configurations, detailing the evolving focus areas from early career development to retirement, with an emphasis on role transitions, skill development, and leadership opportunities.

## 5. Contemporary Work Trends and Framework Application

### 5.1 Human-Centric Work Design Integration

The move toward human-centric work design fundamentally undermines traditional psychological contracts by placing employees' well-being and individual needs paramount. The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework falls in line with this movement, considering that women's needs are set against each other in a continual tension and therefore must be balanced through refined means rather than by mere accommodation.

Human-centric work design principles stress designing work on features of human design or capabilities. This approach is helpful to women as it accepts the complexity associated with juggling many life roles and responsibilities.

### 5.2 Skills-Based Economy Implications

The transformation into a skills-first economy requires psychological contracts providing for continuous learning opportunities while recognizing that women's learning needs differ greatly according to life stages and balancing requirements. The framework outlines differentiated learning paths considering varying capacity for skill acquisition in different life phases.

This is construed to mean that women's learning and development needs may diverge from commonplace models because of career interruptions, caregiving responsibilities, and life priorities. Thus, organizations must design learning methods flexible enough to accommodate these distinctions while ensuring options for continued professional development and advancement.

### 5.3 AI Performance Management Considerations

The integration of artificial intelligence into performance management works both for and against women's career development opportunities. The framework thus argues that psychological contracts include provisions that clearly speak to fairness with respect to collaboration styles and relationship-building contributions potentially underappreciated by algorithmic assessment systems.

Increasing recourse to AI in performance appraisal requires that evermore focused attention be paid to product-inherent biases that might discriminate against women or that might fail to appreciate the different ways in which women contribute to organizational success. Organizations must ascertain that AI systems are designed and implemented in accordance with, rather than contrary to, gender equity objectives.

## 5.4 Work Identity Fragmentation

This change in work arrangement during the pandemic added room for multiple work-life identities [2], especially pertinent for women who may possess different professional identities across different contexts. The framework acknowledges that this fluidity exists through the dimension of individuality-collaboration equilibrium to bolster multiple professional roles and identities.

Women typically possess complex professional identities, some of which may encompass formal employment; caregiving duties; community-oriented activities; and other outlets for personal growth and development. An effective psychological contract should allow for this complexity and recognize and support it rather than require focus on the advancement of a conventional career.

## 5.5 Work-Life Fusion Evolution

The availability standards and boundary management should be redefined for the transformation and transition from work-life balance to work-life integration. The framework addresses this through its flexibility-accountability equilibrium dimension, recognizing that fusion requirements vary across life stages and personal circumstances [8].

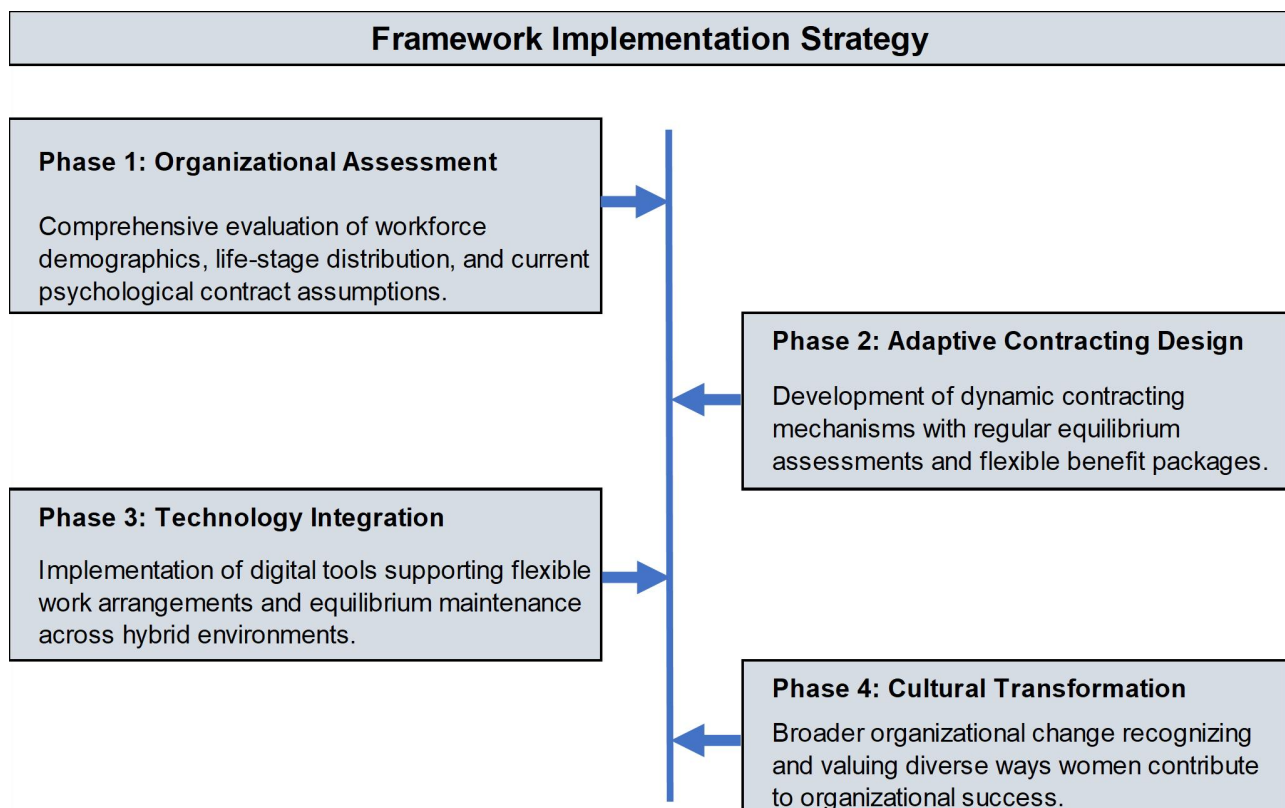
Work-life fusion acknowledges that personal and professional responsibilities are often integrated rather than balanced, requiring organizational approaches that support this integration while maintaining performance standards. Women may particularly benefit from fusion approaches that recognize the interconnected nature of work and life responsibilities.

## 6. Framework Implementation Strategy

### 6.1 Organizational Assessment Protocol

Organizations implementing the Dynamic Equilibrium Framework should begin with comprehensive assessment of their workforce demographics, life-stage distribution, and current psychological contract assumptions. This assessment should identify existing equilibrium imbalances and opportunities for adaptive contracting approaches.

The assessment process should involve systematic evaluation of current policies, practices, and outcomes across different demographic groups and career stages. Organizations must develop baseline understanding of how current approaches serve different populations before implementing framework-based improvements.



**Figure 3.** Framework Implementation Strategy

Figure 3 outlines a four-phase strategy for implementing a framework, including organizational assessment, adaptive contracting, technology integration, and cultural transformation to support workforce flexibility and gender diversity.



## 6.2 Adaptive Contracting Mechanisms

The framework requires implementation of dynamic contracting mechanisms that can adjust to changing life circumstances. This includes regular equilibrium assessments, flexible benefit packages, customized career pathways, and adaptive performance metrics that account for varying contribution styles across life stages.

Adaptive contracting is considered a revolutionary approach to traditional employment. This requires companies to develop new sets of capabilities concerning personalized career planning, flexible performance management, and individual support services.

Implementation must be systematic and supported by appropriate technological and administrative infrastructure.

## 6.3 Technology Integration

Remote work centers have been playing an increasingly important role in the hybrid working culture [9], thus requiring technological solutions to help maintain equilibrium. Organizations must invest in digital tools that facilitate flexible work arrangements while maintaining connection and collaboration opportunities.

Technology implementation must consider the diverse ways in which women may use and benefit from digital tools across different life stages and circumstances. Solutions must be accessible, user-friendly, and supportive of the complex work arrangements that characterize women's careers.

## 6.4 Performance Management Evolution

Traditional performance management approaches often inadequately capture the diverse ways in which women contribute to organizational success. The framework requires development of more sophisticated performance evaluation approaches that recognize collaborative contributions, relationship building, and knowledge transfer activities alongside traditional productivity measures.

Organizations must move beyond simple metrics toward more comprehensive approaches that capture the full range of valuable contributions while maintaining clear standards and expectations. This evolution requires significant investment in manager training and system development.

## 6.5 Cultural Transformation

Implementing the Dynamic Equilibrium Framework requires broader organizational cultural transformation that recognizes and values the diverse ways in which women contribute to organizational success. This includes leadership development, policy revision, and systematic attention to equity and inclusion outcomes [10].

Cultural transformation represents the most challenging aspect of framework implementation, requiring sustained commitment from organizational leadership and systematic attention to changing deeply embedded assumptions about work, careers, and success.

## 6.6 Vocational Development Integration

The framework integrates life stage, lifespan, and life course perspectives on vocational behavior and development [3] by recognizing that women's career paths are not linear and that their psychological contract needs evolve with changing life circumstances. This integration provides a foundation for understanding how equilibrium requirements shift throughout women's professional lives.

Vocational development theory offers important insights into how career patterns and needs evolve over time, providing theoretical foundation for the framework's emphasis on adaptive and responsive approaches. Organizations must develop capability to support diverse career patterns rather than assuming universal progression models.

The integration of vocational development perspectives enables organizations to better anticipate and respond to changing employee needs while providing more effective career development support across different life stages and circumstances.

## 7. Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on empirical validation of the framework across diverse organizational contexts, industries, and cultural settings. Longitudinal studies examining how psychological contracts evolve over time would provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of these relationships and the effectiveness of equilibrium-based approaches.

Comparative research across different cultural contexts can help identify universal versus culture-specific factors in women's psychological contract experiences. Such research would enable more effective global implementation of framework principles while respecting cultural differences and local contexts.

Methodological considerations for future research include developing culturally-appropriate measurement instruments, ensuring representative samples across different demographic groups and organizational contexts, and employing mixed-methods approaches that capture both quantitative relationships and qualitative experiences.

## 8. Practical Implications

The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework provides several practical implications for organizational practice, including human resource policy development, leadership development, organizational assessment, and global strategy development. Organizations can use the framework to develop more effective recruitment, retention, and development strategies that recognize and respond to women's evolving needs across different life stages.

Leadership development programs must prepare managers to understand and support the complex dynamics that characterize women's careers while developing capability to implement equilibrium-based approaches to psychological contract management. This requires significant investment in training and development alongside system and policy changes.

## 9. Conclusion

The Dynamic Equilibrium Framework represents a fundamental shift in understanding psychological contracts for women across their professional lifecycles. By recognizing that women's workplace expectations exist in perpetual tension between competing demands, this framework provides a foundation for creating more inclusive and effective employment relationships that adapt to changing life circumstances.

The framework's emphasis on equilibrium maintenance rather than static accommodation acknowledges the complexity of women's professional journeys and provides practical guidance for improving retention, engagement, and equity outcomes. Through its integration of life-stage configurations with equilibrium dimensions, the framework offers a comprehensive approach to addressing the diverse needs of women throughout their careers.

Future research should focus on empirical validation of the framework across diverse organizational contexts, industries, and cultural settings, while practitioners should begin experimenting with equilibrium-based contracting approaches that recognize the rich diversity of women's career experiences and the dynamic nature of their professional needs.

The significance of this framework lies in its potential to transform organizational approaches to supporting women's careers from reactive accommodation toward proactive, systemic approaches that recognize and leverage the diverse ways in which women contribute to organizational success throughout their professional lives.

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