

Accountability, Compliance and Ethical Risk in the Contingent Workforce Economy: A Cross-Market Governance Framework for Staffing Intermediaries

Adedamola Sobowale^{1*}, Ogochukwu T. Izuchukwu², Rasheed Akhigbe³, Shalom Alugwe⁴

¹Sixt Rent a Car-Newark, NJ, USA, damolasobowale@gmail.com

²Independent Researcher, Ohio, USA, tessygoci@gmail.com

³Independent Researcher, Ontario, Canada, rasheedakhigbe@gmail.com

⁴Independent Researcher, USA, shalomalugwe@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: Adedamola Sobowale, damolasobowale@gmail.com

Abstract

Staffing intermediaries supply labour to organisations that direct the work but do not employ the worker, and they do so across markets whose labour regulation, enforcement capacity and levels of informality differ sharply. Scholarship on this arrangement is substantial but fragmented: one literature explains why firms externalise employment, a second examines whether compliance instruments work, a third explains individual conduct, and a fourth analyses algorithmic direction and worker data. None speaks to the others. This article reviews and integrates those four literatures around a single organising claim: that the recurrent failure in intermediated employment is not the absence of rules but the absence of an identifiable party answerable under them, a condition designated here as accountability diffusion. Eighty-nine sources are coded into four thematic clusters and synthesised into three products: a typology of four intermediary governance regimes defined by the interaction of answerability clarity with enforcement capacity; a mapping of nine ethical risk categories across four market types; and three reproducible failure pathways running from structural condition to realised harm. A four-stage maturity ladder converts the diagnosis into an assessable instrument. The review's central and falsifiable claim is that compliance investment reduces ethical risk only where conformance findings attach to a named answerable party, and that in the absence of such coupling additional compliance activity improves what is measured while leaving what is at stake unchanged.

Keywords: contingent workforce; staffing intermediaries; accountability; regulatory compliance; ethical risk; algorithmic management; comparative governance

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Introduction

There is a particular kind of organisational failure in which nothing goes wrong. Every party act within its remit, every contract is honoured, every audit is passed, and a worker is nonetheless harmed in a way that everyone involved can see and no one is obliged to fix. Intermediate employment produces this outcome with unusual regularity, and the reason is structural rather than moral. The organisation that decides how the work is done does not employ the person doing it. The organisation that employs that person has no authority over the site where the work happens. The worker, standing between them, answers both and is owed a full account by neither.

This arrangement is now ordinary. Temporary agency work, professional employer organisations, managed service providers, labour contractors, outsourced facilities management and platform-mediated task allocation together account for a large and rising share of employment in high-income economies, and a larger though less reliably measured share in low- and middle-income ones (International Labour Office, 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). The industry supplying these arrangements has itself internationalised, so that a single intermediary may operate simultaneously under labour regimes that differ not only in what they require but in whether requirements are enforced at all (Coe et al., 2007).

The scholarship is extensive and, in its separate parts, strong. Weil (2014) explained why lead firms shed direct employment while retaining the standard-setting and profit-capturing functions. Kalleberg (2000) established the analytical categories for non-standard work; Davis-Blake and Uzzi (1993) identified the determinants of externalisation; Cappelli and Keller (2013) demonstrated that legal and organisational classifications of work have diverged so far that a single task may sit in several categories at once. A regulatory literature has examined why firms comply and when they do not (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Parker & Nielsen, 2011), and a behavioural literature has established that ethical conduct is shaped more by situation than by disposition (Treviño et al., 2006). A newer body of work has documented direction

exercised through software by parties that disclaim employer status (Duggan et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019).

What is missing is the connection between them. The compliance literature asks whether rules are followed and does not ask who is answerable when they are not. The behavioural literature explains individual conduct and does not model the structure that shapes it. The externalisation literature describes the structure and stops before its ethical consequences. The algorithmic-management literature analyses a control technology without situating it in the accountability architecture it operates within. The consequence for practice is that intermediaries and their clients hold instruments that certify process and none that assess whether answerability has been allocated, which this review argues is the variable that determines whether the process instruments do anything at all.

This article reviews those four literatures and integrates them. It does not propose that a new construct be added to an already crowded field; it argues that a construct already implicit across all four — the identification of a party who must give an account — is the hinge on which the others turn, and that making it explicit reorganises what the field collectively knows. The review pursues one scoping question: under what conditions does governance activity by or upon a staffing intermediary reduce ethical risk to the parties in the intermediate relationship, and under what conditions does it not?

Three products follow. The first is a typology of four intermediary governance regimes generated by the interaction of answerability clarity with enforcement capacity, which identifies the single regime in which compliance investment is predicted to work and three in which it is not. The second is a mapping of nine ethical risk categories across four market types, which makes the cross-market claims of the review concrete enough to be disputed. The third is a set of three failure pathways, each traced from a structural condition through a governance mechanism to a realised harm, which converts a diffuse critique into specific and checkable causal chains. A four-stage maturity ladder then translates the diagnosis into something an intermediary or a client can actually assess.

Scope, Terminology and the Structural Problem

What Counts as a Staffing Intermediary

A staffing intermediary is defined here as any organisation that supplies labour to a client organisation under an arrangement in which the client directs the worker's daily activity while

the intermediary holds the formal engagement relationship. The definition is deliberately functional rather than legal, because the legal characterisation is precisely what varies across the markets this review spans. It admits temporary work agencies, labour contractors and subcontractors, professional employers and employer-of-record organisations, managed service providers who supply personnel alongside a service, and digital platforms that match workers to tasks while asserting that they merely facilitate. It excludes pure recruitment placement, where the intermediary's role ends at hire, and it excludes conventional outsourcing where the supplier both directs and employs on its own premises.

Bonet and colleagues (2013) treated labour market intermediaries as a distinct organisational form rather than as a variant of the employer, and that treatment is adopted here. The consequence is that the intermediary is not analysed as a weak or partial employer but as an organisation whose function is to hold a relationship that another organisation directs. Once stated that way, the governance problem is visible without further argument.

Why the Bilateral Model Does Not Fit

Employment law, employment scholarship and organisational practice were all built around a relationship with two parties, in which the entity that directs the work is the entity that owes duties to the worker. The intermediate relation breaks that identity, and Figure 1 shows how. Four relationships operate simultaneously where the bilateral model expects one: a commercial contract between client and intermediary that governs price, service levels and any supplier code; an engagement contract between intermediary and worker that governs pay, status and discipline; a direction relationship between client and worker that is typically undocumented and often formally denied; and statutory obligations that attach to each party independently of anything any of them agreed.

Agency reasoning describes the resulting structure as a double-agency problem, in which the worker is agent to the intermediary, the intermediary is agent to the client, and the client's objectives reach the worker only through a party whose own objectives differ from both (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Transaction-cost reasoning explains why the structure is chosen: intermediation is selected where the client wishes to avoid the asset-specific and legally durable commitments that direct employment entails, and the growth of externalisation has been shown to track the expansion of employment liability rather than any change in the underlying work (Autor, 2003; Williamson, 1979).



Figure 1: The Triangular Employment Relation: Control and Liability Do Not Coincide

Note. The shaded region marks the zone in which obligations are recognised by all three parties and owned by none. The heavy line from client to worker is the direction relationship: it carries control but no employment duty, and it is generally the only one of the four relationships that is not reduced to writing.

Psychological contract theory identifies a further asymmetry that neither of those accounts captures. A worker forms expectations about the exchange with reference to the organisation whose work they perform, whose premises they occupy and whose supervisors they answer to daily, not with reference to the entity that issues the payslip (Rousseau, 1995). Breach is therefore experienced in relation to one party and remediable only by another. Barley and Kunda (2004) documented how contract professionals build occupational identity in the absence of organisational membership, and Spreitzer and colleagues (2017) distinguished the empowering and the precarious readings of alternative work arrangements that coexist within a single structural form. Ashford and colleagues (2007) had earlier mapped the research agenda for nonstandard work and observed that the field's assumptions were inherited from a relationship it no longer studied.

Accountability Diffusion

The condition this review places at the centre is accountability diffusion: the state in which a material obligation exists is recognised by every party to the relationship, and is unambiguously owned by none. It is worth separating from two conditions it resembles.

It is not the absence of an obligation. In diffusion the obligation is present and acknowledged; what is missing is the assignment. A worker injured on a client site in a jurisdiction with a

strong safety statute is not unprotected in law; the difficulty is that the party with site control has no employment duty and the party with the employment duty has no site control, so the obligation exists twice and is discharged by neither.

It is also not evasion. Diffusion requires no bad faith from any party and arises from the ordinary operation of a structure adopted for reasons that have nothing to do with escaping obligations. This distinction carries weight for policy, because instruments designed to deter deliberate avoidance have little purchase on a condition that no one chooses and everyone reproduces.

Accountability itself is used here in its governance sense: an identified actor's obligation to give an account of conduct to an identified forum that can evaluate it and impose consequence. Four elements follow, and each can fail independently. Answerability assignment establishes which party accounts for which obligation, including obligations arising from direction rather than employment. Forum adequacy establishes whether the party owed the account can assess it and act; a worker whose only route of complaint runs through the party whose conduct is at issue faces an inadequate forum whatever the complaint procedure says. Evidentiary sufficiency establishes whether the records needed to substantiate or rebut an account exist and are reachable by the party bearing the burden. Consequence credibility establishes whether the stated consequence would in fact be imposed. Compliance, by contrast, denotes conformance with a rule, and the two are routinely conflated. A system can exhibit high compliance and no accountability whenever conformance is certified without any actor being answerable for the outcome the rule was written to secure.

Review Approach

Design and Scoping Question

This is an integrative review with a synthesising rather than an aggregating purpose. The aim is to reconceptualise a fragmented topic by bringing disconnected literatures into contact, which is the condition under which an integrative rather than a systematic design is appropriate (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The synthesis is organised concept-centrally rather than source-by-source, following Webster and Watson (2002), and the integrative move follows the theory-synthesis approach set out by Jaakkola (2020). The intended contribution is delineation and integration in the sense of MacInnis (2011), consistent with the conventions for conceptual and review contributions described by Gilson and Goldberg (2015). No primary data were collected and no effect sizes are pooled.

The scoping question governing inclusion was stated above: under what conditions does governance activity by or upon a staffing intermediary reduce ethical risk to the parties in the intermediated relationship, and under what conditions does it not? A source was admitted only where it contributed a construct, a mechanism, or a boundary condition bearing on that question. Sources reporting an association without proposing a mechanism were excluded, because the review's product is a set of causal pathways and an association cannot populate one.

Corpus Construction

The corpus was assembled from two streams. The first is a designated corpus: the complete published output listed on seven author profiles supplied at the outset of this project, together with a set of separately supplied references. Every work in that stream was enumerated and assessed individually against the scoping question. The second stream is the wider domain literature, assembled purposively across the four thematic areas that the first stream's screening revealed, plus the methodological sources governing review design. Foundational theoretical works were retained irrespective of publication date, since their constructs remain the operative vocabulary of the field; empirical sources were weighted toward the most recent decade.

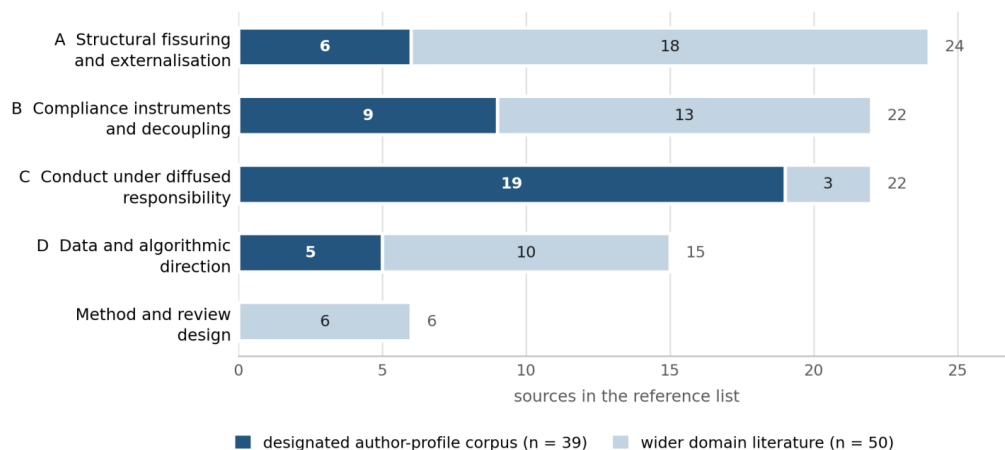


Figure 2: Composition of the Retained Corpus by Thematic Cluster and Source Stream

Note. Counts are actual assignments in this article's reference list; each source is assigned to one cluster. The designated corpus comprises works enumerated from seven author profiles and a separately supplied reference set. The imbalance in Cluster C is discussed in the Limitations section.

Figure 2 reports the composition of the retained corpus. The counts are actual assignments in

this article's reference list rather than estimates, and they expose an imbalance worth stating plainly at the outset rather than leaving for a reviewer to find. Cluster C, which supplies the review's behavioural mechanisms, draws nineteen of its twenty-two sources from the designated corpus and only three from the wider behavioural-ethics literature. That is the weakest evidentiary position in the review, and the discussion returns to it.

Coding and Synthesis

Retained sources were coded into four clusters by the kind of contribution they make rather than by discipline: Cluster A explains why the structure exists, Cluster B explains what happens when it is regulated, Cluster C explains how people behave inside it, and Cluster D explains how it is now operated technically. The three synthesis products were then constructed in sequence. The typology was generated by crossing the two dimensions that recurred across clusters as conditions rather than as outcomes. The risk mapping was built by cross-classifying the party bearing potential harm against the governance failure producing it, then consolidating categories that shared a mechanism, and finally reasoning each category against each market type. The failure pathways were derived by tracing, for the risk categories with the strongest mechanism support, the chain from structural condition through governance response to realised harm.

What This Review Is Not

Three disclaimers are necessary. This is not a systematic review: there was no protocol registration, no independent double screening, and no formal risk-of-bias assessment, and no PRISMA or equivalent reporting guideline is claimed or applies. It is not a meta-analysis and pools no effects. And the severity gradings presented in Figure 4 and Table 2 are analytical expectations derived by argument from the reviewed literature; they are not measurements, no dataset underlies them, and they are stated in ordinal words rather than numbers precisely so that they cannot be mistaken for one.

Ethical Considerations

No human participants, animal subjects or personally identifying data were involved. Institutional ethical approval was accordingly not required.

Cluster A: Structural Fissuring and the Externalisation Decision

The first cluster explains why intermediated employment exists and what its structure entails. Its central contribution is Weil's (2014) account of the fissured workplace, in which lead firms concentrate on the activities that generate returns and shed direct employment to a tier of contracting organisations operating on thin margins under standards the lead firm sets but does not administer. The important feature of the account for present purposes is that fissuring is not a failure of the lead firm's management but its success: the arrangement performs exactly as designed, and the harms it produces are by-products of a structure chosen for unrelated reasons. Kalleberg's (2000) categorisation of non-standard employment relations supplied the vocabulary the field still uses, and Davis-Blake and Uzzi (1993) established empirically that externalisation decisions respond to identifiable organisational and legal conditions rather than to the nature of the work. Autor (2003) sharpened this by showing that growth in outsourced employment tracked the expansion of employment liability, which is to say that firms externalise in proportion to what they would otherwise owe. Cappelli and Keller (2013) then demonstrated that classification itself has become unstable, with legal, organisational and functional definitions of the same work diverging; this matters here because an obligation cannot be assigned to a party whose relationship to the work is contested.

A second line within the cluster examines the experience of the arrangement. Rousseau's (1995) psychological contract framework explains why obligations are perceived toward the directing party rather than the employing one. Barley and Kunda (2004) traced how itinerant contract professionals construct careers and identity outside organisational membership, and Spreitzer and colleagues (2017) showed that the same structural form supports both an autonomy narrative and a precarity narrative depending on which population is examined. Ashford and colleagues (2007) had already warned that research on the arrangement was importing assumptions from the bilateral model.

A third line is institutional and comparative. Vosko (2010) analysed how precarious employment is produced and sustained by the regulatory architecture that ostensibly constrains it, and Rubery and colleagues (2018) examined the contradictions in the normalising of precarious work across European labour markets. Coe and colleagues (2007) mapped the globalisation of the temporary staffing industry itself, establishing that the intermediary is now typically a multinational operating across regimes rather than a local firm operating under one. The International Labour Office (2016) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) supply the comparative scale of the phenomenon and, importantly,

document how much of it is not measured at all in economies with large informal sectors.

The emerging-market extension of this cluster is thinner than the rest and is drawn largely from the designated corpus. Analyses of monetary policy conduct in middle-income emerging economies document the difficulty of maintaining the nominal stability that employment planning presupposes (Agwuna, 2022a), and work on entrepreneurship finance in African markets identifies financial fragility as a structural rather than episodic feature of the small-enterprise base from which many intermediaries and their client firms are drawn (Agwuna, 2022b). Systemic shocks propagate through such systems quickly, as the employment consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa illustrated (Ikwegbue et al., 2021). At the individual level, evidence on economic pressure and household provider roles in Nigerian urban settings describes the conditions under which precarious placement is accepted rather than chosen (Ezeani & Sabboh, 2021), and research on entry pathways and career decision-making indicates how workers arrive at intermediated positions in the first place (Ezeani, Ogu, & Sabboh, 2023). Where self-employment is the principal alternative to placement, the institutional conditioning of entrepreneurial intention becomes part of the same variable (Iwu et al., 2024).

Taken together, the cluster establishes the structural premise on which everything following depends: the separation of direction from employment is deliberate, durable, economically rational for the parties who choose it, and produces an unassigned remainder of obligation that no party to it has an incentive to claim.

Cluster B: Compliance Instruments and the Decoupling Problem

The second cluster asks what happens when the structure described above is subjected to rules. Its finding, stated across four decades and several disciplines, is consistent and uncomfortable: conformance and conduct come apart, and they come apart most reliably where conformance is most thoroughly documented.

The theoretical basis is the decoupling argument. Meyer and Rowan (1977) established that organisations adopt formal structures because those structures confer legitimacy, and that such structures are routinely decoupled from operational activity in order to preserve both. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explained why organisations in a field converge on the same structures irrespective of their technical merit, and Suchman (1995) treated legitimacy itself as the resource being managed. Applied to staffing, these arguments predict that intermediaries will

adopt the compliance architecture that clients and regulators recognise, and that adoption will be substantially independent of whether the architecture changes anything.

Power (1997) named the resulting condition the audit society, in which auditability progressively displaces the substantive quality auditing was introduced to verify. Locke (2013) supplied the strongest empirical demonstration in a labour context, showing across global supply chains that private compliance programmes improve measurable indicators considerably more reliably than they improve the conditions those indicators are meant to proxy. The finding is not that audit fails; it is that audit succeeds at what it measures, which is why the choice of what to measure carries the whole weight.

Regulatory scholarship supplies the corrective and the diagnosis of why compliance instruments sometimes do work. Responsive regulation holds that enforcement must escalate through a pyramid of interventions matched to the regulated party's disposition, and that regimes relying exclusively on either persuasion or deterrence fail in predictable and opposite ways (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Braithwaite, 2002). Empirical work on compliance motivation establishes that firms comply for reasons including but not limited to deterrence, and that the balance between normative and instrumental motivation varies systematically with organisational and field characteristics (Parker & Nielsen, 2011). The implication for intermediaries is that the same instrument produces different behaviour in different enforcement environments, which is the observation the typology in the next section formalises. A comparative-institutional line explains cross-national variation. Matten and Moon (2008) distinguished implicit responsibility, embedded in national institutions, from explicit responsibility, articulated in corporate policy, and showed that firms substitute the latter for the former where institutions are weak. Brammer and colleagues (2012) extended the institutional account of corporate social responsibility to explain cross-national divergence in practice, and Scherer and Palazzo (2011) analysed the contested legitimacy of firms assuming quasi-political functions where governance gaps exceed state capacity. Gereffi and colleagues (2005) supplied the structural vocabulary for the coordination forms that result, and stakeholder theory the normative basis for obligations extending beyond contractual counterparties (Freeman, 1984). The applied governance literature in the designated corpus converges on the same point from the operational side. Models for improving transparency, accountability and strategic execution in complex enterprises work by making specified actors answerable for specified outcomes rather than by increasing measurement volume (Akhigbe, Falemi, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2025).

Governance models addressing compliance and operational quality across distributed retail networks confront the structurally identical problem of securing conformance from entities the lead firm does not own (Akin-Oluyomi & Akhigbe, 2022). Multi-site efficiency frameworks show that data-driven indicators generate improvement only where an actor is identified who must respond to them (Akin-Oluyomi & Akhigbe, 2023a), and leadership models aligning distributed operating decisions with enterprise strategy provide the translation layer through which such assignment is sustained (Akin-Oluyomi & Akhigbe, 2023b). Reliability engineering contributes a discipline that compliance practice largely lacks, in that failure analysis proceeds by identifying the failure mode and its propagation path rather than by raising inspection frequency (Gideon, Adaramola, & Fadero, 2019), and risk-mitigation evaluation in extended component supply chains demonstrates the same logic commercially (Gideon, 2025).

Finally, evidence on regional economic integration establishes that implementation quality, and specifically the ethical conduct of those charged with implementation, conditions whether structural reform yields inclusive outcomes (Enaifoghe et al., 2020), and more recent work extends the argument to digital systems by holding that economic participation is governed rather than automatic (Agwuna, 2026a, 2026b). The cluster's conclusion is that compliance instruments are not inert but conditional, and that the condition is whether a finding attaches to someone.

Cluster C: Conduct Under Diffused Responsibility

The third cluster explains what people do inside the structure. Its central finding, established well beyond the employment context, is that ethical conduct is determined substantially by situational and organisational features rather than by stable differences between individuals (Treviño et al., 2006). This is the finding that makes the structural argument of Cluster A ethically consequential rather than merely descriptive.

Moral disengagement is the most developed account of the mechanism. Bandura (1999) identified the cognitive operations by which people suspend self-sanction for conduct that violates standards they genuinely hold: displacement of responsibility onto an authority, diffusion of responsibility across a group, dehumanising language applied to those affected, and advantageous comparison against a worse alternative. Moore and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that propensity to disengage predicts unethical organisational behaviour across settings and outcomes.

The intermediated relation contains an unusual concentration of the conditions each mechanism requires, and this is the cluster's principal analytical claim. Displacement of responsibility is structurally available to every party: the client directs but does not employ, the intermediary employs but does not direct, and the worker follows instruction from a party that is not their employer. Diffusion of responsibility follows from the multi-entity structure by construction. Dehumanising language is embedded in the industry's own operating vocabulary, in which people are headcount, resource, supply and fill rate. Advantageous comparison is available wherever the realistic alternative to a poor placement is no placement. None of this requires anyone to behave badly by disposition; the structure supplies the cognitive conditions, and ordinary people do the rest.

Empirical work in the designated corpus examines antecedents of these constructs, and its evidentiary position must be stated carefully. Psychosocial antecedents of moral disengagement have been examined directly in Nigerian in-school adolescent populations (Sabboh, 2021a). Locus of control and socio-economic status have been identified as predictors of self-handicapping conduct among undergraduates (Sabboh& Yemi, 2023), climate and peer-influence effects on behaviour have been documented in secondary-school populations (Alausa &Sabboh, 2021), and related work examines disengagement-adjacent constructs in undergraduate samples (Sabboh& Damola, 2021; Yusuf &Sabboh, 2023). These are educational rather than workforce populations. Their transfer to intermediary and client personnel is an assumption of this review, not a finding of it, and measurement invariance across the two populations has not been tested. The direction of the resulting bias is toward overstating the generality of the behavioural mechanism.

A distinct and better-matched line concerns professional norms as a partial substitute for structural protection. Work examining professional ethics, moral standards and the workplace experiences of women in administrative roles in higher education documents both how occupational norms operate and the conditions under which they fail to protect (Onche& Ogbonna, 2021). Related evidence links the personal and professional attributes of administrative personnel to organisational outcomes (Onche, Adenekan, &Sabboh, 2021) and situates these dynamics in the wider organisation of contemporary administrative work (Onche, 2021). The inference this review draws are uncomfortable but follows directly: where occupational norms operate as a substitute for structural protection, workers in occupations without such norms carry the residual risk, and those are disproportionately the occupations

that intermediaries supply.

The cluster's final line treats assurance as a workforce capability rather than a systems property, which is how it is usually treated. Talent-development models for distributed operations establish that capability must be built where the operation is rather than assumed to travel from the centre (Falemi, Akhigbe, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2020). Retention frameworks establish that personnel stability is an operational variable with direct productivity consequences (Falemi, Akhigbe, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2023a), and workforce-optimisation research on staffing volatility during rapid expansion documents that control weakens precisely when placement volume rises (Falemi, Akhigbe, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2023b). Enterprise risk models integrating human-capital strategy with operational analytics show that workforce instability transmits directly into risk exposure (Falemi, Akhigbe, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2024), and growth frameworks linking leadership effectiveness to measurable outcomes indicate that the translation runs through leadership rather than structure alone (Falemi, Akhigbe, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2025). Adoption frameworks centred on employee readiness rather than technical specification report materially different implementation trajectories from those that are not (Akhigbe, Falemi, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2024). Evidence on the role of technical professionals in workforce development indicates that assurance competence is built deliberately rather than acquired alongside the system that requires it (Sunday et al., 2025), and workforce-centric line balancing across multi-shift operations demonstrates that the scheduling of labour determines throughput and therefore the conditions under which assurance can be exercised at all (Akanbi, Ganiu, & Sunday, 2022). The measurement problem the cluster leaves behind is addressed in the research agenda. Item response theory offers the appropriate methodology for constructing and validating the scales the review's constructs will require (Sabboh, 2025), prior scale-development work in Nigerian populations offers a procedural template (Sabboh, 2021b), and the interpretation of any resulting scores should be governed by the validity frameworks associated with Messick and Kane (Sabboh & Janet, 2026).

Cluster D: Data, Algorithmic Direction and Worker Information

The fourth cluster addresses how the intermediated relation is now operated. Two developments matter, and they pull in opposite directions: direction has become technically mediated, which makes it more precise and more deniable at the same time; and the information held about workers has expanded far beyond what the engagement contract contemplates.

Algorithmic management allocates work, evaluates performance and administers discipline through software interfaces. Duggan and colleagues (2020) set out the implications for employment relations and human resource management specifically, Wood and colleagues (2019) documented the coexistence of autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy, and Kellogg and colleagues (2020) analysed algorithms as a contested terrain of control with its own repertoire of employer and worker moves. The governance significance for this review is narrow and sharp: software permits a party to exercise the substance of direction while disclaiming the status from which employment duties follow. Direction and status, which the bilateral model assumed were the same thing, can now be held by different parties by design.

The determinations such systems produce raise their own requirements. Mittelstadt and colleagues (2016) mapped the normative concerns that algorithmic systems raise — transparency, fairness, traceability — and established that technical performance metrics do not address them. Jobin and colleagues (2019) documented the international proliferation of AI ethics guidance and the persistent gap between principled convergence and implementation divergence. Janssen and colleagues (2020) connected these requirements to data governance directly, arguing that trustworthiness in automated decision-making depends on provenance, model accountability and auditability rather than on model quality alone. Applied to a worker whose next placement or continued engagement turns on an automated determination, the operative question is not whether the model is accurate but whether the determination can be explained and contested by the person it affects.

The second development concerns the data itself. Intermediaries hold identity documents, banking details, performance records, biometric access data, right-to-work documentation and frequently health-screening results, across multiple jurisdictions with divergent protection regimes and for populations that turn over rapidly. Nissenbaum's (2010) contextual integrity supplies the normative criterion: a flow of information is appropriate or not relative to the norms of the context in which it was collected, which means that a transfer perfectly lawful under a privacy statute can still be a governance failure. Data governance scholarship supplies the structural vocabulary of decision rights, quality management and control, together with the finding that no single configuration suits all conditions (Abraham et al., 2019; Khatri & Brown, 2010; Weber et al., 2009).

The behavioural stratum of data governance is where the designated corpus contributes most

directly, and its findings transfer to staffing with less adjustment than any other evidence in this review. Information-security awareness has been shown to determine records confidentiality in practice rather than in policy (Onche et al., 2020). Password and authentication behaviour predicts realised data-protection compliance among administrative professionals (Onche& Ogbonna, 2022). Bring-your-own-device adoption introduces measurable information-security risk into administrative operations (Onche et al., 2023), and the effectiveness of cybersecurity awareness training on insider-threat behaviour is contingent on design features that many programmes omit (Onche et al., 2024). Staffing operations concentrate every one of these exposures at once: high personnel turnover, distributed and lightly supervised work locations, heavy reliance on personal devices for candidate and placement management, and commission structures that reward throughput. Models linking workforce behaviour to real-time operational data indicate that behavioural signals can support assurance where transactional records alone cannot (Akhigbe, Falemi, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2023).

The cluster's conclusion is that data governance in staffing is not an information-technology function adjacent to the employment relationship. It is now part of the employment relationship, because it determines who can substantiate a claim, who can contest a determination, and who bears the cost of an error.

Synthesis I: A Typology of Intermediary Governance Regimes

Two variables recur across all four clusters as conditions rather than as outcomes. The first is answerability clarity: the extent to which each material obligation carries a named accountable party and an adequate forum. The second is enforcement capacity: the resources, reach and independence of the labour inspectorate, the data-protection authority and the courts in the jurisdiction of operation. Crossing them yields four regimes, shown in Figure 3 and specified in Table 1.

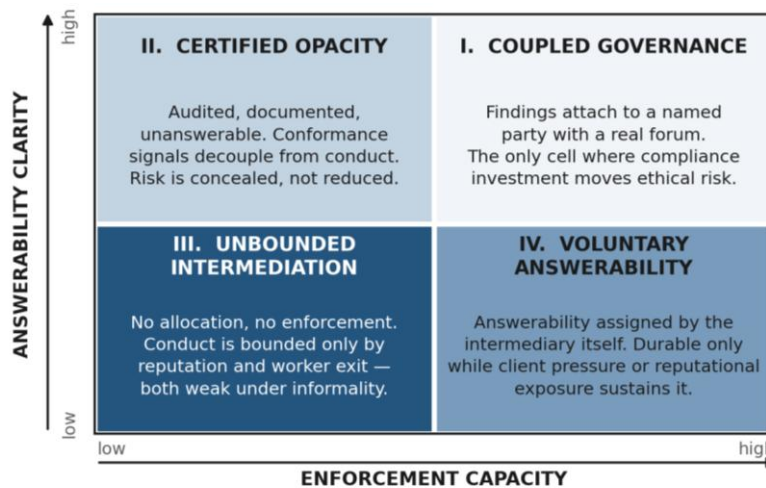


Figure 3: Four Regimes of Intermediary Governance

Note. Regimes are defined by the interaction of two conditions rather than by intermediary size, sector or ownership. Quadrant boundaries are analytical rather than empirical; the dimensions are continuous and most operations sit between cells and move across them as they enter new markets.

Regime I, coupled governance, is the configuration in which compliance instruments do what they are designed to do. Findings attach to a named party, that party answers to a forum with the capacity to impose consequence, and enforcement makes the consequence credible. This review's claim is that it is the only regime in which additional compliance investment reliably reduces ethical risk, which is a narrower claim than the compliance literature usually makes.

Regime II, certified opacity, is the most consequential cell for practice and the least discussed. Enforcement capacity is high, so the intermediary invests heavily in demonstrable conformance, but answerability remains unallocated. The result is an operation that is thoroughly audited, extensively documented and structurally unanswerable. Risk is not reduced; it is concealed beneath a conformance record, and concealed most effectively from the parties relying on that record. This is Power's (1997) audit society and Locke's (2013) private-compliance finding located in a specific structural position rather than described as a general tendency.

Regime III, unbounded intermediation, combines low clarity with low enforcement. Conduct is bounded only by reputation and by the worker's ability to exit, and both bounds weaken as labour market informality rises, since informality removes the alternative that makes exit credible. This is the regime in which the highest severities in the next section concentrate.

Regime IV, voluntary answerability, is the cell most often mistaken for Regime I.

Answerability has been assigned, but by the intermediary itself rather than by an enforcing authority, and it therefore persists only while client pressure or reputational exposure sustains it. It is genuine while it lasts and structurally fragile, and it reverts to Regime III under margin compression rather than through any decision to abandon it. Matten and Moon's (2008) explicit-for-implicit substitution describes exactly this cell.

Table 1:

Regime	Diagnostic signature	Dominant failure mode	Lever that actually moves risk
I Coupled governance	Obligation register names a role, a forum and a consequence for each duty; findings are tracked to closure	Residual: gaps at the boundary of newly entered markets or engagement models	Extending existing coupling to new obligations as they arise
II Certified opacity	Extensive certification; no worker-accessible forum; audit conducted by or reporting to the audited function	Decoupling: conformance signal detaches from conduct and conceals rather than reveals	Verification independence and a forum outside the line of the conduct at issue
III Unbounded intermediation	Neither allocation nor enforcement; disputes resolved relationally or not at all	Unbounded exposure: harm is neither detected nor remediable	Mandatory disclosure of accountability allocation, which creates a forum where enforcement cannot
IV Voluntary answerability	Allocation present and self-imposed; sustained by client or reputational pressure	Reversion: allocation lapses under margin compression without any decision to abandon it	Client contractual requirements that survive price renegotiation

Note. Diagnostic signatures are observable at the level of an individual intermediary operation in a single market. An organisation operating in several markets will typically occupy different regimes simultaneously, which is why the unit of diagnosis is the operation rather than the firm.

Synthesis II: Ethical Risk Across Market Types

Ethical risk is used here to mean the likelihood that conduct within the intermediated relationship imposes unjustified harm on a party to it, whether or not that conduct is unlawful where it occurs. The distinction from compliance risk is deliberate and load-bearing: much of what troubles observers of contingent work is entirely lawful in the jurisdiction concerned, and a framework that indexes harm to legality cannot travel across the markets this review addresses.

Nine categories emerge from cross-classifying the party bearing potential harm against the governance failure producing it. Four are worker-facing: misclassification and consequent entitlement erosion (R1); wage and deduction irregularity (R2); safety-obligation gaps arising

where the directing party bears no safety duty (R3); and coercive dependency, where debt, document retention or immigration sponsorship constrains exit (R4). Two are client-facing: capability misrepresentation (R5) and vicarious exposure to intermediary conduct the client cannot see (R6). Three are system-facing: algorithmic determination without contestability (R7); worker-data exposure across jurisdictions with unmatched controls (R8); and displacement of ethical judgement into procurement processes that select on price alone (R9). Categories are distinguished by harm mechanism rather than by legal characterisation, since the same conduct attracts different legal treatment across the markets in scope.

	Specific statutory regulation	General employment law	Minimal regulation	High-informality market
R1 Misclassification	Low	Moderate	High	Severe
R2 Wage irregularity	Low	Moderate	High	Severe
R3 Safety-duty gap	Moderate	High	High	Severe
R4 Coercive dependency	Moderate	High	Severe	Severe
R5 Capability misrepresentation	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
R6 Vicarious client exposure	Moderate	High	High	High
R7 Algorithmic determination	High	High	High	Moderate
R8 Worker-data exposure	Moderate	High	High	High
R9 Judgement displacement	High	High	High	Severe

Figure 4: Expected Ethical Risk Exposure by Category and Market Type

Note. Gradings are analytical expectations derived by argument from the reviewed literature, not measurements. No dataset underlies them and no empirical validation has been attempted. They are stated ordinally to prevent their being read as scores. Table 2 gives the reasoning for the cells where the pattern departs from a simple gradient.

Figure 4 maps expected exposure for each category across four market types. The gradings are analytical expectations derived from the reviewed literature and are stated in ordinal words rather than numbers because no dataset underlies them. They are offered as claims to be disputed and tested, and the pattern rather than any individual cell is what the review asks the reader to assess.

Two features of the pattern carry the argument. The first is that most categories worsen monotonically as regulation and enforcement thin, which is unsurprising and is not the review's contribution. The second is that two categories do not, and those are the informative ones.

Algorithmic determination without contestability (R7) is expected to be highest in the most heavily regulated markets, because that is where platform-mediated and software-directed work is most developed, and lowest where informality dominates, because direction there remains largely personal. Judgement displacement into price-only procurement (R9) is expected to be high across every market type, because procurement practice is set by client organisations that are frequently headquartered elsewhere and apply the same selection logic irrespective of the labour regime in which the placement occurs. Table 2 gives the reasoning for the departures.

Table 2: Reasoning for Risk Categories Whose Pattern Departs From a Simple Regulatory Gradient

Category	Departure from the gradient	Reasoning
R4 Coercive dependency	Reaches severe at minimal regulation rather than only at high informality	Debt-financed placement and document retention require an administrative apparatus that informal arrangements often lack; the mechanism needs enough formality to operate
R5 Capability misrepresentation	Flat across the two weakest regimes rather than rising	Credential verification is performed by the party benefiting from placement in all four types; regulation rarely addresses it, so there is little for weakening enforcement to remove
R7 Algorithmic determination	Highest in the most regulated markets; falls to moderate under high informality	Platform and software-mediated direction is concentrated where digital infrastructure and formal payment systems are established; direction under informality remains predominantly personal and is contested through relationships rather than through appeal
R9 Judgement displacement	High to severe across all four types	Procurement logic is set by client organisations frequently headquartered outside the market of placement and applied uniformly; the host regime has little purchase on it

Synthesis III: Three Failure Pathways

The typology says where risk concentrates and the mapping says what form it takes. Neither says how it comes about. Figure 5 traces the three pathways for which the reviewed literature supplies the strongest mechanism support, each running from a structural condition through the governance response it provokes to a realised harm.

The first pathway, decoupling, begins with where a client selects on price and attaches a supplier code without verifying it. The intermediary responds rationally by maximising coverage completeness, the property the client can observe, while leaving answerability coupling at zero because no one is looking at it. The conformance signal detaches from conduct, audit certifies process, and the realised harm is that measured compliance rises while the

underlying risks — misclassification, wage irregularity and judgement displacement — are unchanged. This is Regime II reached by an ordinary commercial route, and no party needs have intended it.

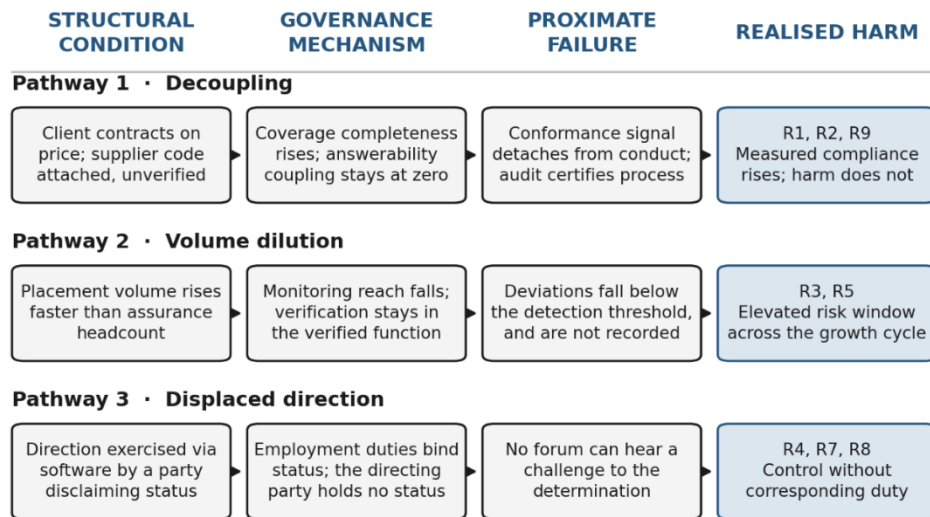


Figure 5: Three Failure Pathways From Structural Condition to Realised Harm

Note. Pathways are reconstructed from mechanisms reported in the reviewed literature. Risk category codes correspond to Figure 4. Each pathway is stated so that it can be checked against an actual operation: the mechanism column is where an intervention has to act, and interventions placed at the harm column arrive too late to prevent the harm they address.

The second pathway, volume dilution, begins when placement volume grows faster than assurance headcount, which is the normal condition of a growing staffing business (Falemi, Akhigbe, & Akin-Oluyomi, 2023b). Monitoring reach falls as a proportion of placements, and verification typically remains inside the function being verified because separating it costs headcount the growth is already consuming. Deviations then occur below the detection threshold and are not recorded, which means the incident data show improvement precisely when exposure is rising. The harm is an elevated risk window running the length of the growth cycle, concentrated in safety-duty gaps and capability misrepresentation.

The third pathway, displaced direction, begins where direction is exercised through software by a party disclaiming employer status. Employment duties bind status, the directing party holds no status, and no forum exists that can hear a challenge to a determination made this way. The harm is control without corresponding duty, expressed as coercive dependency, uncontestable algorithmic determination and worker-data exposure. Unlike the first two, this

pathway is not a degradation of an intended design but a direct product of it, which is why instruments aimed at improving intermediary conduct have so little effect on it.

The practical value of stating pathways rather than propositions is that each identifies where an intervention must act. In every case that point is the governance mechanism column, not the realised harm column. Interventions placed at the harm — incident reporting, remediation funds, post-hoc audit — address the pathway after the point at which it became inevitable.

From Diagnosis to Practice: A Governance Maturity Ladder

A diagnosis that cannot be applied to an actual organisation is of limited use to the people who would apply it. Figure 6 presents a four-stage ladder ordered by logical dependency rather than by observed prevalence: each stage presupposes the structural elements of the one before it, so an organisation cannot reach Stage 3 by adding a worker forum to a Stage 1 documentary regime.

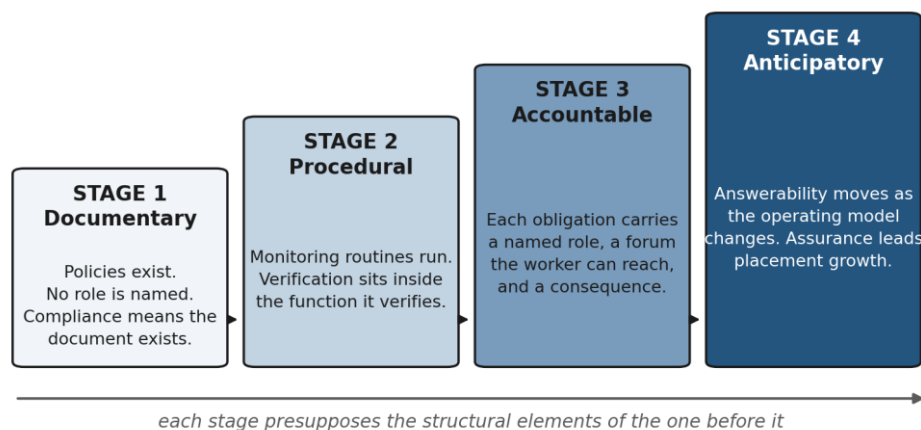


Figure 6: Governance Maturity Ladder for Staffing Intermediaries

Note. Stages are ordered by logical dependency. The transition that matters is from Stage 2 to Stage 3, because it is the only one that changes who answers rather than how much is measured. The ladder is a heuristic diagnostic derived from the reviewed literature; it has not been validated as an instrument.

The step from Stage 2 to Stage 3 is the one that matters, and it is qualitatively different from the steps either side of it. Moving from Stage 1 to Stage 2 increases how much is measured. Moving from Stage 3 to Stage 4 increases how early it is measured. Moving from Stage 2 to Stage 3 changes who answers, and on this review's argument that is the only change that acts on the mechanism generating the risk. An intermediary can invest indefinitely in Stage 2 and remain in Regime II.

Table 3 sets out what an assessor should look for at each stage. The instrument implied is an obligation register: every material obligation listed against a named accountable role, a named forum and the evidence that would substantiate an account. Obligations for which any of the three is absent constitute the organisation's diffusion inventory, and its size is the diagnosis.

Table 3: Assessment Criteria by Maturity Stage

Stage	Accountability allocation	Compliance architecture	Assurance capability
1 Documentary	Policies exist; no role is named against any obligation	Coverage evidenced by the existence of a document	Periodic self-certification; no independent verification
2 Procedural	Roles named; forums unspecified, or internal to the function	Coverage mapped to obligations; findings not coupled to a party	Monitoring routines operate; verification sits inside the function it verifies
3 Accountable	Each material obligation carries a named role, an adequate forum and a defined consequence	Findings coupled to answerable parties; remediation tracked to closure	Independent verification; a worker-accessible forum; evidentiary infrastructure retained
4 Anticipatory	Answerability reallocated as the operating configuration changes	Obligations reassessed on entry to each new market or engagement model	Leading-indicator detection; assurance scaled ahead of placement growth

Note. The unit of assessment is an operation in a single market, not the firm. A multinational intermediary will commonly assess at different stages in different markets, and the variance across its operations is itself diagnostic.

Discussion

What the Review Changes

Three claims follow from the synthesis, and each cuts against a position currently held in the field.

The first is that ethical risk in intermediate employment is generated by accountability diffusion rather than by regulatory absence. The prevailing account attributes precarity to gaps in coverage and prescribes extending coverage. If this review is right, extending coverage without allocating answerability raises measured compliance and leaves risk where it was, because the mechanism producing the risk is structural rather than normative. Regime II exists precisely because coverage and answerability are independent properties that the field has treated as one. A substantial share of current regulatory and voluntary-standard activity is, on this reading, directed at the wrong variable.

The second is that governance instruments are not portable across enforcement environments in the way that transfer of best practice assumes. Compliance investment and accountability

allocation are substitutes where enforcement capacity is high, because compliance alone avoids sanction, and complements where it is low, because compliance alone produces no consequence and therefore no behavioural change. The uncomfortable implication is that approaches developed and validated in high-enforcement jurisdictions will underperform when transferred to low-enforcement ones — not because they are implemented poorly, which is the usual explanation offered, but because a mechanism they silently depend upon is absent. This is consistent with the institutional account of explicit substituting for implicit responsibility where institutions are weak (Brammer et al., 2012; Matten & Moon, 2008) and with evidence that implementation quality conditions whether structural reform produces inclusive outcomes (Enaifoghe et al., 2020).

The third is that behavioural and informational strata belong inside governance analysis rather than beside it. The behavioural-ethics evidence indicates that structural conditions supply the cognitive permissions for harmful conduct, so a governance intervention that alters structure without altering those permissions will underperform its design specification. The behavioural information-security evidence indicates the same for data: policy existence predicts realised protection far less well than the conduct of the people handling the data does (Onche et al., 2020, 2024; Onche & Ogbonna, 2022). Both imply that assurance is a workforce capability before it is a systems property, which is not how it is budgeted.

Where the Evidence Is Weakest

An honest review names the joints at which it would break. Three are worth stating explicitly. The weakest is the behavioural mechanism in Cluster C. Figure 2 makes the position visible: nineteen of twenty-two sources in that cluster come from the designated corpus, and several of the antecedent studies use Nigerian secondary-school and undergraduate samples rather than workforce populations. The moral-disengagement account itself rests on well-established work (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012; Treviño et al., 2006), but the claim that the structural conditions of intermediated employment activate those mechanisms in intermediary and client personnel is an inference by analogy. It is the claim a determined reviewer should press hardest, and it should be tested in workforce samples before it is relied upon.

The second is the independence of the typology's two dimensions. Answerability clarity and enforcement capacity are treated as orthogonal, and they are almost certainly correlated in practice: jurisdictions with strong inspectorates also tend to have clearer statutory allocation of

duties. If the correlation is high enough, Regimes II and IV may be transitional states rather than stable configurations, and the typology would collapse toward a single dimension. Distinguishing these possibilities requires cross-market data the review does not have.

Third is the risk mapping in Figure 4. Every cell is an argued expectation, and the arguments vary in strength. The departures from the gradient set out in Table 2 are the review's most substantive and most exposed claims, particularly the prediction that R7 is highest in the most regulated markets, which runs against the intuition that regulated markets are safer and depends on an empirical premise about where platform-mediated work concentrates.

Limitations of the Review

Beyond the three above, four limitations bound the contribution. The corpus was assembled purposively rather than through a registered protocol with independent double screening, which introduces selection bias of unquantified direction; a systematic review would likely surface evidence inconsistent with the accountability-diffusion account that purposive selection has not sampled, and the review should be read as a hypothesis about the field rather than a summary of it. A number of sources in the designated corpus carry no journal, volume or digital object identifier in the indexed record, and constructs drawn from them are provisional pending replication in indexed outlets. Every construct in the review is specified from the organisational side, and the risk taxonomy in particular requires validation against worker report, since organisational records are least reliable exactly where risk is highest. Finally, the four market types are analytical simplifications of a continuous and multidimensional space, and treating regulatory regime type, enforcement capacity and informality as separable almost certainly understates how tightly they covary.

Research Agenda

The review generates a programme rather than a set of loose suggestions, because the synthesis products specify what would have to be observed to overturn them. Table 4 sets out the six studies that would most efficiently test the central claims, ordered by what each would settle rather than by ease of execution.

Table 4: Priority Studies, What Each Would Settle, and Principal Feasibility Constraint

Study	Design	What it would settle	Principal constraint
S1	Cross-sectional survey of intermediary operations measuring answerability coupling and coverage completeness separately, against independently observed risk incidence	Whether coverage without coupling is inert, which is the review's central claim	Requires an outcome measure not derived from the organisation's own records
S2	Matched comparison of the same multinational intermediary's operations across jurisdictions differing in enforcement capacity	Whether compliance and accountability are substitutes at high enforcement and complements at low	Access; the comparison is only interpretable within a single firm
S3	Scale development and psychometric evaluation of accountability diffusion, answerability coupling and assurance maturity using item response theory	Whether the constructs are measurable and separable at all	Prior step for S1, S2 and S6; no validated instrument currently exists
S4	Worker-report validation of the nine-category risk taxonomy, sampled independently of employer records	Whether the taxonomy captures the harms workers actually experience, and what it omits	Reaching workers outside employer-mediated sampling frames
S5	Vignette or discrete-choice experiment on contestability of algorithmic determinations, with agency and platform samples	Whether contestability, separately from accuracy, drives acceptance of determinations	External validity of stated-preference methods for livelihood decisions
S6	Longitudinal panel across expansion cycles tracking placement volume, assurance capability and incident detection	Whether the volume-dilution pathway operates as specified, and whether detection falls as exposure rises	Requires three or more waves and cooperation through a growth cycle

Note. S3 is a prerequisite for S1, S2 and S6 and should be executed first despite being the least interesting of the six. S4 is the study most likely to falsify the taxonomy, which is the reason to run it.

Conclusion

The contingent workforce economy is governed by instruments built for a relationship it does not contain. The result is not lawlessness. It is a specific, reproducible failure mode in which obligations that every party recognises are owned by none, and in which the ordinary remedies — more rules, more audit, more documentation — improve the record without touching the condition. This review has named that failure mode accountability diffusion, distinguished it from regulatory absence and from evasion, located it within four governance regimes and nine categories of ethical risk, and traced three pathways by which it produces harm. Its central claim is testable and, on the evidence assembled here, unproven: that compliance investment reduces ethical risk only where conformance findings attach to an identified answerable party, and that

in the absence of such coupling additional compliance activity improves what is measured while leaving what is at stake exactly where it was. The studies that would settle the matter are specified. None of them has been done.

Declarations

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Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval. Not applicable. No human participants, animal subjects or personally identifying data were involved in this review.

Consent. Not applicable.

Data availability. No datasets were generated or analysed. All sources synthesised are cited in the reference list. Figures 1, 3, 5 and 6 are analytical diagrams; Figure 2 reports reference-list composition for this article; Figure 4 presents argued expectations rather than measurements.

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