Administrative Delegation, Work Stress and Job Performance in Public-Sector Organizations: An Integrative Literature Review with Implications for Diplomatic Institutions

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Abstract: *Public organizations operating in unstable environments face pressure to improve performance while their decision structures often remain highly centralized. Administrative delegation, the transfer of decision authority together with responsibility and accountability to lower levels, is widely proposed as a remedy, yet the mechanisms through which it affects performance remain under-specified. This integrative literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical research on three constructs: administrative delegation, work stress and job performance. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demand–Control Model, Self-Determination Theory, the challenge–hindrance stressor framework and Job Characteristics Theory, the review examines the evidence on four relationships: delegation and performance, delegation and stress, stress and performance, and the mediating role of stress. The synthesis shows broadly consistent evidence that delegation and related empowerment practices are positively associated with performance, and that work stress, especially hindrance stressors such as role ambiguity and role conflict, is negatively associated with performance. Evidence that stress mediates the delegation–performance relationship is thinner and mixed, and appears contingent on the quality of delegation, the type of stressor and the cultural context. No identified study has examined these relationships together in diplomatic institutions or in Libya. The review also identifies methodological weaknesses in the existing literature, including cross-sectional single-source designs, inconsistent construct definitions and limited attention to context, and sets out a research agenda for public-sector and diplomatic settings in fragile states.*

Keywords: administrative delegation; work stress; job performance; Job Demand-Control Model; public sector; diplomatic institutions.

1. Introduction

Job performance is the most direct link between what employees do and what organizations achieve. In public institutions, its effects extend beyond internal efficiency to the quality of services delivered to citizens and to public trust in the state. Governments in many developing and conflict-affected countries are therefore under sustained pressure to improve employee performance, frequently while operating with centralized structures, scarce resources and unstable political conditions. Administrative delegation has long been proposed as one way to address this problem. Classical

administrative theory treated delegation as a necessity: a manager cannot personally make every decision, so authority must be passed down while ultimate responsibility is retained (Fayol, 1949; Gulick & Urwick, 1937). Later work reframed delegation as a motivational and developmental practice that signals trust, enlarges autonomy and enhances employees' sense of competence (Leana, 1987; Schriesheim et al., 1998; Chen & Aryee, 2007). More recent research on structural and psychological empowerment and on empowering leadership has extended this logic, linking the distribution of authority to performance, creativity and well-being (Spreitzer, 1995; Seibert et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2018).

In parallel, a large literature documents the costs of work stress. Meta-analytic evidence shows that stressors such as role ambiguity, role conflict and situational constraints are reliably associated with lower performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000; Gilboa et al., 2008), while the challenge–hindrance framework shows that not all stressors are equally harmful (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine et al., 2005). The Job Demand–Control Model adds that strain is greatest where high demands coincide with low control over how work is done (Karasek, 1979). Because delegation directly changes employees' decision latitude, the two literatures intersect: delegation may influence performance not only directly but also by changing the stress employees experience. Despite this conceptual overlap, the three constructs have mostly been studied in pairs. Studies of delegation and performance rarely measure stress; studies of stress and performance rarely consider delegation as an antecedent; and the few studies that test stress as a mediator have done so with empowering leadership, the work environment or work–life balance rather than with delegation itself (Udin et al., 2025; Pane, 2025; Prakosa & Aini, 2024). The evidence also comes predominantly from healthcare, banking, manufacturing and education. Diplomatic institutions, which combine high-stakes demands, time pressure, geographically dispersed staff and frequently centralized authority, are almost absent from this literature.

This gap is particularly relevant for countries such as Libya, where public institutions have operated under political division and instability for more than a decade. Ministries of foreign affairs in such settings must deliver consular and diplomatic services under conditions that are likely to intensify both centralization and stress. Understanding whether, and how, delegation is associated with performance in such institutions is therefore of practical as well as theoretical value. This article addresses that gap through an integrative literature review. Its objectives are to: (1) clarify the conceptual boundaries of administrative delegation, work stress and job performance; (2) synthesize the theories that explain how the three constructs relate; (3) critically review the empirical evidence on each of the four relationships; and (4) identify contextual and methodological gaps and set out a research agenda, with particular reference to diplomatic institutions in fragile contexts. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 sets out the conceptual and theoretical background. Section 3 describes the review methodology. Section 4 presents the findings by relationship. Section 5 discusses the findings and their relevance to diplomatic institutions. Section 6 concludes with contributions, implications, limitations and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Background

2.1 Job performance

Contemporary performance research treats job performance as behaviour that contributes to organizational goals rather than as outcomes alone (Campbell, 1990). A widely accepted distinction separates task performance, the proficiency with which employees carry out the core duties of their role, from contextual performance, the discretionary behaviours that support the social and psychological environment in which tasks are performed (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Motowidlo

& Van Scotter, 1994). In public-sector research, and particularly in Arab public administration studies, the term "job performance effectiveness" is often used to combine two ideas: efficiency, which concerns how work is carried out (speed, accuracy and resource use), and effectiveness, which concerns whether intended results are achieved (Ajlouni, 2025; Naji et al., 2025). This review adopts that two-dimensional view, distinguishing task efficiency (speed, accuracy and procedural compliance) from goal effectiveness (achievement of intended outcomes and beneficiary satisfaction). The distinction matters for delegation because delegated authority may primarily accelerate processes, whereas delegated responsibility and accountability may primarily direct effort toward priority goals.

The conceptualization of performance has evolved considerably. Scientific management treated performance largely as output per unit of input, measured against standardized work methods. The human relations tradition broadened this view by showing that social and psychological conditions shape output, while expectancy and goal-setting theories linked performance to employees' beliefs about effort, outcomes and goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goal-setting research is particularly relevant to delegation: specific and challenging goals, combined with feedback and commitment, are consistently associated with higher performance, and delegation typically involves agreeing on such goals with the delegate. The move toward multidimensional models in the 1990s, distinguishing task from contextual performance, made it possible to ask whether managerial practices influence what employees accomplish, how they accomplish it, or both (Campbell, 1990; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). Measurement remains a persistent challenge, especially in the public sector. Many public organizations lack objective output indicators, and appraisal systems often rely on seniority or supervisors' general impressions. As a result, most empirical studies in the reviewed literature use employee self-ratings of performance, which are vulnerable to leniency and common-method bias. Where available, objective indicators such as processing times, error rates and service-quality ratings provide a stronger basis for assessing how delegation and stress relate to performance. In diplomatic and consular work, both dimensions are visible. Efficiency is reflected in the processing time and accuracy of consular transactions and correspondence; effectiveness is reflected in the protection of nationals abroad, the quality of political reporting and the handling of crises.

2.2 Administrative delegation

Administrative delegation is the assignment of decision authority and responsibility for specified tasks from a superior to a subordinate, with the superior retaining ultimate accountability (Leana, 1987; Yukl & Fu, 1999). Delegation differs from participation: in participative decision-making the manager shares a decision with subordinates, whereas in delegation the subordinate makes the decision (Leana, 1987). It also differs from empowerment. Structural empowerment refers to organizational access to power, information, resources and support (Kanter, 1977), while psychological empowerment refers to employees' felt sense of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995). Delegation is best understood as a concrete managerial practice that forms one component of structural empowerment and one antecedent of psychological empowerment (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Drawing on classical and contemporary sources, administrative delegation can be described along four dimensions: Delegation of decision-making authority: the extent to which employees can make operational decisions without referral to superiors. Delegation of responsibility: the transfer of the obligation to accomplish defined tasks, with clear success criteria and resources. Delegation of accountability: the extent to which delegates are answerable for the use of delegated authority and its results. Communication and feedback: the clarity of the boundaries of delegated authority and the timeliness of guidance and feedback. The principle that authority and responsibility must be balanced is one of the oldest in management thought (Fayol, 1949). The literature consistently warns that delegating responsibility

without corresponding authority creates frustration and role strain (Ajlouni, 2025), a point that becomes central when delegation is linked to stress.

Research has also examined why managers delegate. Yukl and Fu (1999) found that managers delegate more to subordinates whom they perceive as competent and who share their task objectives, and that delegation is closely tied to the quality of the leader–member relationship. Schriesheim et al. (1998) similarly showed that delegation is strongly associated with leader–member exchange quality. These findings imply that delegation is not randomly distributed within organizations: it tends to be extended to trusted subordinates, which complicates causal interpretation of its effects on performance. They also explain why delegation is often restricted in environments of low trust, high accountability risk or political uncertainty, conditions common in public administration in fragile states. A further distinction concerns the depth of delegation. Delegation may range from authority to investigate and recommend, through authority to act and report afterwards, to full authority to decide without reporting. Classical administrative writing captured part of this idea in the exception principle, under which routine decisions are delegated and only exceptional cases are referred upward. In practice, delegation in centralized bureaucracies is often formal rather than substantive: authority is assigned on paper, but approval is still sought informally from superiors. Measures that capture only the formal existence of delegation may therefore overstate the decision latitude employees actually experience.

2.3 Work stress

Following the transactional view, work stress arises when individuals appraise job demands as exceeding their resources for coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress is therefore relational: the same demand may be experienced as manageable or overwhelming depending on available resources, including control over one's work. Two classifications are relevant. The first distinguishes sources of stress. Role theory identifies role ambiguity (uncertainty about expectations and authority) and role conflict (incompatible expectations) as central stressors in bureaucratic organizations (Rizzo et al., 1970). Workload and environmental pressures, such as political instability and economic strain, are additional sources frequently reported in public-sector and unstable settings (Alayoubi et al., 2022; Siswadi et al., 2024).

The second classification distinguishes challenge stressors, such as workload and responsibility, which may be appraised as opportunities for growth, from hindrance stressors, such as role ambiguity, red tape and organizational politics, which are appraised as obstacles (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that hindrance stressors are negatively related to performance, whereas challenge stressors show weaker or positive relationships once strain is accounted for (LePine et al., 2005). This distinction is essential for understanding delegation, which may simultaneously add challenge demands and remove hindrance demands. Subsequent meta-analytic work has refined this distinction. Podsakoff et al. (2007) showed that both challenge and hindrance stressors are positively related to psychological strain, but that challenge stressors are positively, and hindrance stressors negatively, related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Crawford et al. (2010) found a comparable pattern for engagement: challenge demands were positively related to engagement, whereas hindrance demands were negatively related to it. These findings imply that the overall effect of a managerial practice on employee outcomes depends on the balance of challenge and hindrance demands it creates, not simply on whether it raises or lowers total stress.

Stress in public organizations has distinctive features. Public employees often work within rigid rules, multiple and sometimes conflicting lines of accountability, and limited control over resources. Diplomatic personnel face additional pressures, including responsibility for nationals in crisis,

representation of the state in sensitive settings, frequent relocation and separation from family. In politically unstable states, these pressures may be compounded by uncertainty about institutional authority and by delays in salaries or budgets. Effort–Reward Imbalance theory adds that stress also arises when high effort is not matched by adequate rewards, recognition or job security (Siegrist, 1996), a condition plausibly widespread in under-resourced public services.

2.4 Theoretical lenses

Table 1 summarizes the five theoretical perspectives most frequently used to explain the relationships among the three constructs.

Table 1. Theoretical lenses linking delegation, work stress and performance

Theory	Core proposition	Relevance to the reviewed relationships
Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)	Favourable treatment creates obligations that employees reciprocate	Delegation signals trust; employees reciprocate with effort and performance
Job Demand–Control Model (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990)	Strain is highest when high demands meet low decision latitude	Delegation raises control, buffering demands and lowering strain
Challenge–hindrance stressor framework (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine et al., 2005)	Hindrance stressors harm performance; challenge stressors are less harmful or beneficial	Explains why evidence on delegation, stress and performance is mixed
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Satisfying autonomy and competence needs enhances motivation and well-being	Explains motivational and stress-reducing effects of delegation
Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976)	Autonomy produces experienced responsibility, leading to better outcomes	Links delegated authority to responsibility and performance

Source: Compiled by the authors. Social Exchange Theory provides the main explanation for a direct effect: when managers delegate, they communicate confidence in subordinates, which employees reciprocate through higher effort and commitment (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The Job Demand–Control Model explains an indirect effect: delegation is a primary organizational source of decision latitude, and greater latitude reduces the strain that high demands would otherwise produce (Karasek, 1979). Empirical tests of the model's buffering hypothesis have produced mixed results, with stronger support for the additive effect of control than for the interaction (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Häusser et al., 2010). This suggests that control may reduce stress directly, regardless of demand level. The Job Demands–Resources model generalizes this logic by treating control and autonomy as job resources that reduce strain and support performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Self-Determination Theory and Job Characteristics Theory provide complementary motivational explanations. Self-Determination Theory holds that autonomy, competence and relatedness are basic psychological needs whose satisfaction fosters autonomous motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Delegation directly supports autonomy and, when accompanied by adequate support, competence. Job Characteristics Theory identifies autonomy as the job characteristic that produces a sense of experienced responsibility for outcomes, which in turn is associated with higher performance and satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Both theories predict a direct positive relationship between delegation and performance, and both imply that delegation may reduce distress by satisfying needs that, when frustrated, generate strain. The theories differ, however, in the mechanisms they

emphasize. Social exchange perspectives focus on the relational meaning of delegation as a signal of trust; motivational perspectives focus on the intrinsic value of autonomy; and stress perspectives focus on the reduction of strain through greater control. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, but few studies measure more than one of them, which makes it difficult to determine their relative importance. This limitation recurs throughout the empirical evidence reviewed in Section 4.

3. Review Methodology

3.1 Review design

This study adopts an integrative review design, which is suited to topics where theoretical and empirical literatures are fragmented and where the aim is to synthesize and critically assess evidence rather than to estimate a pooled effect size. The review combines (a) foundational theoretical works and meta-analyses that define the constructs and their relationships, and (b) recent empirical studies that examine the bivariate and mediated relationships among delegation (or closely related empowerment constructs), work stress and job performance.

3.2 Search strategy

Relevant literature was identified through searches of major academic databases and platforms, including Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed Central, Emerald Insight, Wiley Online Library and SSRN. The search for recent empirical studies focused on the period 2022–2025, while foundational theoretical works and meta-analyses were included regardless of publication date. Database searches were supplemented by backward citation searching of key articles. Search strings combined three blocks of terms: Delegation: “delegation” OR “delegation of authority” OR “administrative delegation” OR “empowering leadership” OR “structural empowerment” Stress: “work stress” OR “job stress” OR “occupational stress” OR “role ambiguity” OR “role conflict” OR “hindrance stress” Performance: “job performance” OR “employee performance” OR “task performance” OR “performance efficiency”

3.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they (1) were empirical and quantitative, or were theoretical or meta-analytic works defining the core constructs; (2) examined at least one of the four relationships under review; (3) were published in English or Arabic in peer-reviewed journals or refereed proceedings; and (4) reported their sample, method and key findings. Studies were excluded if they addressed delegation only in non-organizational senses (for example, clinical task delegation between professions), measured stress solely as a physiological outcome without reference to work, or lacked sufficient methodological detail.

3.4 Selection and analysis

Retrieved records were screened by title and abstract, and potentially relevant studies were then assessed in full against the inclusion criteria. Consistent with the integrative design, the aim of screening was to identify studies that address the relationships under review in a substantive and methodologically transparent way, rather than to produce an exhaustive count of all publications. This process resulted in a core set of fifteen recent empirical studies (2022–2025), summarized in Table 2, which were analysed alongside foundational theoretical works and meta-analyses. Each study was coded for country, sector, sample size, analytic method, constructs and principal findings. Findings were then synthesized thematically according to the four relationships, and patterns of agreement, inconsistency and omission were identified.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview of the empirical evidence

Table 2 summarizes the core empirical studies. The evidence base is geographically diverse, spanning the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Europe, but sectorally concentrated in healthcare, manufacturing, banking, education and corporate services.

Table 2. Summary of core empirical studies (2022–2025)

Study	Context	n	Method	Key findings
Ajlouni (2025)	Government departments, Palestine	211	Descriptive-analytical; regression	Effective delegation positively related to administrative innovation and performance efficiency; accountability among the strongest dimensions
Naji et al. (2025)	Public joint-stock companies, Yemen	433	SEM	Administrative empowerment strongly predicted job performance and mediated the effect of ethical leadership on performance
Engström et al. (2025)	Telephone nurses, Sweden	409	Cross-sectional; mediation	Structural empowerment related to performance and fewer stress symptoms via thriving at work
Udin et al. (2025)	Food industry, Indonesia	100	PLS-SEM	Empowering leadership had no significant direct effect on performance or stress; work environment reduced stress; stress reduced performance and partially mediated the environment–performance link
Li et al. (2025)	Employees, China	449	Two-wave survey; moderated mediation	Empowering leadership increased challenge stress and reduced hindrance stress, with a net positive effect on innovative performance
Nyakeko (2024)	Secondary school teachers, Tanzania	n.a.	Mixed methods	Delegation of authority identified as a strategy for alleviating occupational stress and improving performance
Arı (2025)	Healthcare workers, Türkiye	n.a.	Cross-sectional	Work stress negatively related to job performance
Lasisi & Annor (2024)	Bank employees, Nigeria	120	Correlational	Significant negative relationship between stress and performance
Alramali & Ayaz (2025)	Working students, Türkiye	80	Regression; ANOVA	Workload, job security and shift-work stress explained about 14% of performance variance
Zurnizam et al. (2024)	Manufacturing, Malaysia	116	PLS-SEM	Role ambiguity and role conflict negatively affected performance
Ibrahim et al. (2024)	University administrative staff, Indonesia	275	PLS-SEM	Social support moderated the stress–performance relationship; work–life conflict did not
Alayoubi et al. (2022)	Nurses, Gaza	60	Descriptive-analytical	Dimensions of work stress significantly related to job performance
Alrifae & Wahab (2023)	Public hospitals, Jordan	n.a.	SEM	Job stress mediated the relationship between high-performance work systems and performance
Pane (2025)	Electricity company, Indonesia	135	SEM	Work–life balance reduced stress; stress negatively related to performance and acted as a mediator
Prakosa & Aini (2024)	Agro-industry employees, Indonesia	138	Census survey; SEM	Work–life balance reduced job stress; job stress mediated the link between work–life balance and job satisfaction, which in turn related to performance

Source: Compiled by the authors from the studies cited. Note: n = sample size; n.a. = not available in the abstract or record consulted.

4.2 Delegation and job performance

The direct relationship between delegation and performance is the best supported of the four. Early field studies found that delegation was associated with higher subordinate performance and that its effects were partly explained by the quality of the leader–member relationship (Schriesheim et al., 1998). In a non-Western context, Chen and Aryee (2007) showed that delegation in Chinese organizations was positively related to task performance, organizational commitment and innovative behaviour, with effects transmitted through perceived insider status and organization-based self-esteem. This finding is significant because it shows that delegation can be effective even in high power-distance cultures, although its mechanisms may differ. Broader empowerment research reinforces this pattern. Meta-analytic evidence shows that psychological empowerment is positively related to task performance, contextual performance and job satisfaction (Seibert et al., 2011), and that empowering leadership, of which delegation is a core component, is positively related to task, citizenship and creative performance (Lee et al., 2018).

Recent studies in Arab public and quasi-public settings point the same way. Ajlouni (2025) found that effective delegation was significantly related to both administrative innovation and job performance efficiency in Palestinian government departments, with the accountability dimension among the strongest predictors. Naji et al. (2025) found that administrative empowerment strongly predicted job performance among 433 employees of Yemeni public joint-stock companies, and that it mediated the effect of ethical leadership on performance, a finding notable given the instability of the Yemeni environment. The evidence is not uniform, however. Udin et al. (2025) found no significant direct effect of empowering leadership on job performance among Indonesian food industry employees, which the authors attributed to the weakness of empowering practices in the sample, its small size and possible omitted mediators. Lee et al. (2018) similarly showed that the incremental contribution of empowering leadership over transformational leadership is modest for some outcomes. Taken together, the evidence indicates that delegation is generally associated with higher performance, but that its effect depends on how it is implemented and on supporting conditions such as trust, competence and clear boundaries.

The evidence also indicates that different dimensions of delegation may matter for different aspects of performance. Ajlouni (2025) found that accountability was among the dimensions most strongly related to performance efficiency, suggesting that delegation improves performance not only by granting freedom of action but also by making employees answerable for results. This finding is consistent with goal-setting research showing that goals improve performance when they are accompanied by feedback and commitment (Locke & Latham, 2002). It also implies that delegation which transfers authority without clear accountability may yield faster decisions without corresponding gains in quality or goal achievement. Few studies, however, have measured the dimensions of delegation separately, so the relative contribution of authority, responsibility, accountability and communication remains largely untested.

4.3 Delegation and work stress

Theory predicts a negative relationship between delegation and stress. Under the Job Demand–Control Model, delegation increases decision latitude and should therefore reduce strain (Karasek, 1979). Under role theory, clearly defined delegated authority should reduce role ambiguity and role conflict (Rizzo et al., 1970). Under Self-Determination Theory, the autonomy afforded by delegation should satisfy basic psychological needs, which are associated with lower distress (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Empirical evidence is supportive but more limited. Engström et al. (2025) found that structural empowerment among Swedish nurses was associated with fewer stress symptoms, with thriving at

work acting as a mediator. Nyakeko (2024) identified delegation of authority among the managerial strategies that alleviated occupational stress among Tanzanian teachers. Ajlouni (2025) argued that clarity of delegated authority and responsibility reduces the uncertainty that drives stress in government departments.

At the same time, the literature warns that delegation can increase stress under certain conditions. When responsibility is delegated without corresponding authority, without training, or as a way of off-loading work, delegation may intensify workload and ambiguity rather than relieve them. The most nuanced evidence comes from Li et al. (2025), who found that empowering leadership simultaneously increased challenge stress and reduced hindrance stress. Udin et al. (2025) found no significant relationship between empowering leadership and stress, which again suggests that any stress-reducing effect is contingent on implementation quality. The evidence therefore supports a qualified conclusion: well-designed delegation, meaning delegation that balances authority with responsibility and accountability and is accompanied by clear communication, is likely to reduce hindrance stress, while it may modestly increase challenge stress.

4.4 Work stress and job performance

The negative relationship between work stress and job performance is the most extensively documented in the literature. Although the inverted-U hypothesis proposed that moderate stress improves performance, field evidence has generally found a negative linear relationship. In a meta-analysis, Gilboa et al. (2008) found that most stressors were negatively related to performance, with role ambiguity and situational constraints showing the strongest associations. Tubre and Collins (2000) similarly found that role ambiguity was more strongly and negatively related to performance than role conflict. Recent studies across sectors and countries confirm this pattern. Negative stress–performance relationships have been reported among healthcare workers in Türkiye (Arı, 2025) and Gaza (Alayoubi et al., 2022), bank employees in Nigeria (Lasisi & Annor, 2024), manufacturing employees in Malaysia (Zurnizam et al., 2024) and employees in Indonesia (Pane, 2025; Saputra & Putra, 2025). Alramali and Ayaz (2025) found that workload, job security and shift-work stressors together explained around 14% of the variance in performance, indicating a meaningful but not dominant effect.

Two qualifications emerge. First, the effect of stress depends on its type: the challenge–hindrance framework shows that hindrance stressors are consistently harmful, whereas challenge stressors may have neutral or positive direct effects on performance (LePine et al., 2005). Second, the effect is moderated by resources. Ibrahim et al. (2024) found that social support buffered the negative effect of stress on performance, and Oose et al. (2024) found that innovative work behaviour partly offset it. These moderators suggest that organizational practices which build resources, including delegation, may weaken the stress–performance link as well as reduce stress itself.

4.5 Work stress as a mediator

The proposition that stress mediates the relationship between organizational practices and performance has gained empirical support in recent years. Alrifae and Wahab (2023) found that job stress mediated the relationship between high-performance work systems and performance in Jordanian public hospitals. Pane (2025) found that stress mediated the relationship between work–life balance and performance, while Prakosa and Aini (2024) found that job stress mediated the relationship between work–life balance and job satisfaction, which was in turn related to performance. Siswadi et al. (2024) found a serial pathway in which stress affected performance through job satisfaction. Udin et al. (2025) found that stress partially mediated the relationship between the work environment and performance.

Direct evidence for stress as a mediator between delegation specifically and performance is, however, scarce. The closest test, by Udin et al. (2025), did not find mediation for empowering leadership. Li et al. (2025) found mediation, but through two opposing stress pathways (challenge and hindrance) and with innovative performance rather than task performance as the outcome. Engström et al. (2025) found that thriving, rather than stress, mediated the effect of structural empowerment. The mediating role of stress is therefore theoretically well grounded but empirically under-tested. Existing evidence suggests that (a) mediation is more likely when stress is measured as hindrance stress or role stress rather than as a global construct, (b) mediation is likely to be partial rather than full, because delegation also affects performance through motivational routes, and (c) mediation depends on the quality of delegation.

4.6 Boundary conditions

Across the four relationships, the literature points to several conditions under which delegation is more or less likely to be associated with lower stress and higher performance. The first is employee competence and readiness. Naji et al. (2025) reported that the effect of empowerment on performance was stronger among more competent employees, and Yukl and Fu (1999) showed that managers themselves delegate more to subordinates they regard as capable. Delegation to employees who lack the necessary skills or information is likely to be experienced as overload rather than opportunity. The second condition is the quality of the supervisory relationship and of communication. Delegation embedded in a high-quality leader–member relationship is associated with stronger performance effects (Schriesheim et al., 1998), and the reviewed studies repeatedly identify unclear boundaries and absent feedback as reasons why delegation fails. Communication thus appears to determine whether delegated authority reduces or increases role ambiguity.

The third condition is organizational and cultural context. Studies of empowerment in teams and organizations have shown that the effects of empowerment depend on supportive structures, including access to information and resources (Kanter, 1977; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). In cultures characterized by high power distance, employees may expect decisions to be made by superiors, and delegation may initially create discomfort; nonetheless, Chen and Aryee (2007) found positive effects of delegation in China, suggesting that cultural values shape the mechanisms of delegation more than its overall direction. The fourth condition is environmental stability. Where political instability raises the perceived risk of decisions, managers may restrict delegation and employees may avoid using delegated authority, weakening its potential benefits. These boundary conditions help reconcile the null findings reported by Udin et al. (2025) with the positive findings reported elsewhere. They also suggest that future studies should measure the conditions under which delegation occurs rather than treating delegation as uniform across contexts.

4.7 Contextual gaps

Three contextual gaps stand out. First, no identified study examines delegation, stress and performance in diplomatic institutions, despite their distinctive combination of high-stakes demands, geographic dispersion, time pressure and centralized authority. Second, evidence from Arab public administrations is limited and largely descriptive, and no identified study addresses Libya. Third, few studies consider how political instability shapes delegation. Instability may push leaders toward centralization as a defensive response, while at the same time increasing the environmental stress that delegation might help employees manage. Cultural context also matters: in high power-distance cultures (Hofstede, 2001), employees may experience delegation as an unfamiliar or even risky responsibility, which may alter both its motivational and its stress-related effects (Chen & Aryee, 2007).

4.8 Methodological patterns

Most reviewed studies are cross-sectional, rely on self-reported data from a single source and use small or convenience samples (often between 60 and 150 respondents). These features raise concerns about common-method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and limit causal inference, which is particularly problematic for mediation claims. Several studies use the Baron and Kenny (1986) causal-steps approach, whereas contemporary guidance recommends bootstrapped tests of indirect effects (Zhao et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2022). Construct definitions also vary: delegation is often measured through broader empowerment or leadership scales, and stress is sometimes measured as a global construct and sometimes by dimension, which hinders comparison across studies.

5. Discussion

5.1 Synthesis

The review supports three broad conclusions. First, delegation and related empowerment practices are generally associated with higher job performance, consistent with Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory. Second, work stress, particularly hindrance stress arising from role ambiguity and role conflict, is consistently associated with lower performance. Third, the claim that delegation improves performance partly by reducing stress is theoretically coherent but supported mainly by indirect evidence from related constructs. The mixed findings are best explained by attending to the quality of delegation and the type of stressor. Delegation that transfers authority, responsibility and accountability in balance, with clear communication of boundaries, is likely to reduce hindrance stressors by clarifying roles and removing the need for repeated referral up the hierarchy. The same delegation may increase challenge stressors by adding responsibility. Where delegation is partial, for example responsibility without authority, it may increase hindrance stress and weaken performance. This contingency helps explain why some studies report strong effects and others report none.

A further point concerns the direction of the relationships. Most of the reviewed studies assume that delegation influences stress and performance, but the reverse is also plausible: managers may delegate more to employees who already perform well and appear resilient under pressure (Yukl & Fu, 1999). In cross-sectional data, these explanations cannot be separated. Similarly, the observed negative association between stress and performance may partly reflect the effect of poor performance on stress, for example through negative feedback or job insecurity. The current evidence is therefore best interpreted as showing consistent associations rather than established causal effects. The review also shows a gap between the level at which delegation is theorized and the level at which it is measured. Delegation is a relational practice between a specific manager and a specific subordinate, yet most studies measure it through employees' general perceptions of their organization or leadership. Studies that link delegation reported by managers to stress and performance reported by subordinates, or that analyse delegation at the work-unit level, would provide a more accurate picture of how delegation operates.

5.2 Relevance to diplomatic institutions in fragile contexts

Diplomatic institutions offer a demanding setting in which to examine these relationships. Consular staff often face urgent cases involving nationals abroad that cannot wait for approval from headquarters, while political officers must respond quickly to changing events. Where authority remains concentrated at headquarters, employees bear responsibility for outcomes without the authority to act, which is precisely the configuration that the Job Demand–Control Model associates

with high strain. The Libyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs illustrates these conditions. Since 2011, and particularly during periods of rival governments, Libyan public institutions have operated amid contested authority and unstable budgets. Under such conditions, centralization may be reinforced by fear of accountability, while employees face environmental stressors that management cannot remove. The literature reviewed here suggests that delegation cannot eliminate environmental stress but may provide employees with the control and role clarity that help them manage it. Diplomatic missions also differ from many domestic agencies in that they are physically distant from headquarters and operate across time zones. This distance makes centralized approval slower and more costly, which increases the potential value of delegation, but it also makes supervision and feedback more difficult, which increases the risk that poorly designed delegation will generate ambiguity. The balance between these two effects is an open empirical question. Examining this possibility in the Libyan context would also contribute to the broader question of whether theories developed in stable Western organizations hold in fragile states.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Contributions

This review makes three contributions. First, it brings together two literatures, delegation and empowerment on the one hand and occupational stress on the other, that have largely developed separately, showing how the Job Demand–Control Model and the challenge–hindrance framework explain the stress pathway through which delegation may influence performance. Second, it explains inconsistent prior findings by identifying the quality of delegation and the type of stressor as key contingencies. Third, it highlights diplomatic institutions in fragile contexts as a setting absent from the existing literature.

6.2 Practical implications

For public managers, and for ministries of foreign affairs in particular, the literature suggests several practical steps. Delegation should be designed as a package, with authority, responsibility and accountability transferred together. Delegation boundaries should be documented, for example through written schedules specifying which consular decisions missions may make without referral. Delegation should be introduced gradually and accompanied by training, so that added responsibility is experienced as challenge rather than overload. Finally, communication channels between headquarters and missions should provide timely guidance, since unclear or delayed feedback can turn delegation into a new source of ambiguity. For human resource and training units, the review suggests that delegation and stress management should be addressed together rather than separately. Training in delegation for managers can focus on setting clear goals and boundaries, matching delegated tasks to subordinates' competence and providing regular feedback. Training for employees can focus on decision-making within delegated limits and on recognizing and managing hindrance stressors. Performance appraisal systems can support these efforts by recognizing the effective use of delegated authority rather than penalizing reasonable errors, which would otherwise encourage employees to refer even routine decisions upward.

For policymakers concerned with public-sector reform in fragile states, the review indicates that delegation is unlikely to succeed as an isolated administrative measure. It requires supporting conditions, including reliable communication systems, clear legal and regulatory bases for delegated decisions, and mechanisms that protect officials who act in good faith within their delegated authority. Without these conditions, formal delegation may coexist with informal centralization, and its potential benefits for performance and well-being are likely to remain unrealized.

6.3 Limitations

As an integrative review, this study does not estimate pooled effect sizes, and its conclusions depend on the quality of the primary studies, most of which are cross-sectional. The review was limited to studies published in English and Arabic, and some relevant regional literature may not be indexed in international databases. Because direct studies of delegation, stress and performance together are scarce, several conclusions rely on evidence from related constructs, such as empowering leadership and structural empowerment, rather than delegation itself.

6.4 Directions for future research

Future research should: (1) examine delegation, work stress and performance together in public and diplomatic institutions, using bootstrapped indirect-effect tests and PLS-SEM or covariance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2022); (2) measure delegation with dimension-specific scales rather than proxy empowerment measures; (3) distinguish challenge and hindrance stressors to capture opposing pathways; (4) reduce common-method bias by using supervisor-rated or archival performance indicators, such as consular processing times; (5) adopt longitudinal or multi-wave designs to strengthen causal inference; (6) examine moderators such as power distance, political instability, trust in the supervisor and employee competence; and (7) use qualitative or mixed methods to explore how diplomats experience delegation and stress under contested political authority.

6.5 Declarations

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