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“While many areas of contemporary life have changed significantly in the 21st century, management has remained largely unchanged and rooted in 19th century theories and paradigms”.

DBA Level 7

Vision for the Future

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1. Introduction

1.1 The assertion and why it remains plausible

It is easy to make the case that management has not changed since the nineteenth century. Walk into almost any organisation and there is a hierarchy, a set of targets, and a gap between those who decide and those who execute. Medicine, communication, finance and manufacturing have been transformed; the organisation chart has not. The assertion under examination generalises from that observation.

The observation deserves better than dismissal, and this report treats it as a serious empirical claim. Where it goes wrong is in a conflation: it treats management *theory* and management *practice* as one object, when the evidence indicates they have moved at different speeds and, in some settings, in opposite directions. Practice has changed unevenly, and in platform work, logistics and warehousing the classical logic of measurement and control has intensified rather than receded ([Miszczyski and Zanoni, 2025](#); [Kadolkar et al., 2025](#)). These are two claims with two different answers, and distinguishing them is the analytical move on which this report rests.

1.2 Purpose, scope and critical approach

The report has three purposes: to trace the development of management theory in terms of what changed and what drove the change; to evaluate the contribution of contemporary theorists, distinguishing conceptual advance from relabelling; and to reach a defensible judgement on the assertion, tested against the strongest available counter-evidence.

The method is a critical synthesis of peer-reviewed literature. Section 6.1 addresses what this method can and cannot establish.

Three commitments govern the argument and can be held against it. Judgement precedes conclusion, so each substantive section closes with a weighed judgement rather than a summary. Competing explanations are evaluated rather than the preferred one defended, most directly in Section 4.10. And assumptions are questioned, including this report's own.

Three such assumptions warrant statement, because the evidence reviewed qualified each of them. The first, that theoretical evolution implies practical evolution, is not supported by Spicer and Alvesson (2025) or Miszczyski and Zanoni (2025), and the claim defended here is narrowed accordingly. The second, that newer theory is better theory, is a chronological bias which Grant's (2008) critique of Hamel and Ingaggiati et al.'s (2025) finding of stable

bureaucratic–post-bureaucratic coexistence both undermine. Third, successful reorganisations are published and abandoned ones frequently are not, producing survivorship bias, while vivid cases are disproportionately cited — an availability effect of the kind Kahneman (2011) describes. This report mitigates rather than escapes these biases, by preferring systematic reviews and treating single cases as illustrative.

2. Background and Context

2.1 Defining the terms of the debate

Three concepts recur throughout this report and are used in specific senses that require statement, since much of the disagreement in this literature is definitional rather than empirical.

Management theory means the body of systematic propositions about how organised work should be coordinated, controlled and directed, and is distinguished throughout from *management practice*, the observable arrangements by which organisations actually coordinate work. The assertion treats these as one object; this report treats them as two, and the distinction carries much of the argument.

Paradigm is used in the sense of a governing set of assumptions about what management is and what makes a managerial claim valid. A paradigm can be abandoned while individual techniques derived from it remain in use, and this report argues that precisely this has occurred. *Universalism* names the specific commitment at the heart of the classical paradigm: that a single rational best method can be discovered and applied irrespective of context, sector or culture.

One qualification is required at the outset. Taylor, Fayol and Weber are treated here as a shared inheritance rather than as identical positions, and the differences matter. Taylor's "one best way" is universalist in the strongest sense: a prescriptive method claimed to hold wherever work is measurable. Fayol's principles are universal in scope but were offered as flexible guides to administrative judgement rather than as fixed rules. Weber's bureaucracy differs in kind again — an ideal type constructed for sociological analysis, describing a tendency in modern organisation rather than prescribing a managerial technique, and one about whose consequences Weber was notably pessimistic. What follows concerns the universalist assumption as it was absorbed into twentieth century management practice, not a claim that these three theorists held the same position.

2.2 Why the question matters now

The debate is not merely historiographical. Generative artificial intelligence has begun performing evaluative work previously considered irreducibly managerial, unsettling the basis on which managerial authority has been justified since Fayol. Distributed working has removed the physical co-presence classical control silently assumed. And algorithmic management has made nineteenth century measurement logic feasible at a granularity Taylor could not have

implemented. Whether management has evolved is therefore a question about which frameworks organisations should reach for now, not about the history of ideas.

2.3 Five drivers of transformation

A history of management theory that lists schools in sequence explains nothing. The analytically useful question is what forces made each successive framework inadequate. Five drivers recur across the literature and are used throughout this report as the connecting thread.

Technology changes what can be measured, coordinated and automated, and therefore what management is required to do directly. **Society** changes what employees will accept, expect and reciprocate, altering the terms on which authority is exercised. **Knowledge** changes where productive capability resides: when it resides with the worker rather than the process, the classical separation of planning from execution becomes counterproductive. **Globalisation** changes the assumption of a culturally homogeneous workforce on which universal principles depended. **Complexity** changes what is knowable in advance, undermining the premise that the correct procedure can be specified before the work begins.

These drivers are not independent, and treating them as separate variables would misrepresent the system. Technology enables globalisation, which increases complexity, which raises the value of distributed knowledge, which alters social expectations of autonomy, which shapes what technology is acceptable. The relationships are reciprocal: management theory does not merely respond to the drivers but participates in producing them, since designs adopted at scale become part of the environment later organisations adapt to. An account attributing change to a single driver will misattribute causation.

2.4 The evaluative template

Each body of theory examined in Sections 3 to 5 is assessed against a consistent template: the **problem** it was formulated to solve; the **theory** it produced; its **application** in organisational practice; its **limitations**; the **contemporary challenge** it now confronts; and its **future application**.

3. Literature Review: The Development of Management Theory

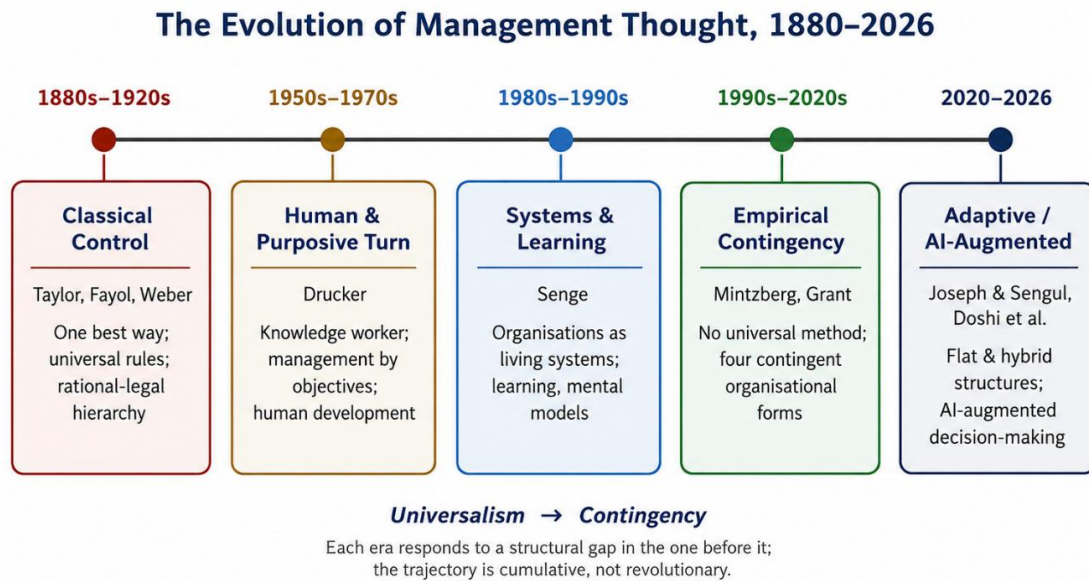


Figure 1: The evolution of management thought, five periods from classical control to adaptive practice, 1880 to 2026

Figure 1: The development of management theory, showing the driver that most challenged each preceding framework. Period boundaries are indicative rather than exact, and the schools overlap substantially in practice

3.1 Classical foundations: the problem of the industrial firm

Problem. The late nineteenth century firm was a novel organisational object: large, capital-intensive, employing workers with no craft tradition governing the work, managed by owners with no transferable body of knowledge. Output varied unpredictably, authority was exercised arbitrarily by foremen, and there was no vocabulary for administration.

Theory. Three responses emerged. Taylor's (1911) scientific management held that the productivity of manual labour was not fixed by workers' willingness but was a variable improvable through observation, measurement and standardisation ([Witzel and Warner, 2015](#)). Fayol's (1949) five functions and fourteen principles gave managerial work its first formal vocabulary. Weber's (1978) rational-legal authority — grounded in formal rules and defined roles rather than personal or traditional claims — supplied the sociological account of why bureaucratic organisation was displacing its alternatives.

Application. The combination proved extraordinarily effective against the problem it was formulated to solve, and mass production, the corporate hierarchy, cost accounting and the professionalisation of management all descend from it. The classical framework is not criticised here for having been wrong, but for having been generalised beyond the conditions

that made it right — specifiable output, stable environment, low-discretion labour, cultural homogeneity — conditions never stated as boundaries because they were not visible as conditions at all.

Limitations. Three structural absences define the limits of the inheritance as a *general* theory: no account of human psychology, treating workers as mechanical rather than social actors; no account of uncertainty or knowledge, assuming correct procedures were discoverable in advance; and the assumption that principles applied irrespective of sector, culture or type of work. Revisionist scholarship complicates the caricature. [Witzel and Warner \(2015\)](#) show Taylor believed his system would replace arbitrary foreman authority with agreed standards, and [Hatchuel and Segrestin \(2019\)](#), working from an untranslated manuscript, show Fayol was substantially more concerned with innovation than the textbook version suggests. That second finding is uncomfortable for this report's position and is retained for that reason: if the seeds of later thinking were already present, what followed is elaboration rather than rupture.

3.2 The behavioural turn: society enters the model

Problem. The classical model could not explain why identical procedures produced different output with different groups.

Theory and application. The Hawthorne research (Mayo, 1933) established that social and psychological factors materially affected productivity. McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y made the underlying issue explicit: classical management had not discovered that workers require coercion — it had *assumed* it, and the practices following from that assumption produced the behaviour appearing to confirm it.

Limitations and contemporary challenge. The behavioural school identified the deficiency without supplying a structural alternative; it humanised the classical model rather than replacing it. Its contemporary descendant — the analysis of the psychological contract discussed in Section 4.4 — is considerably more rigorous.

3.3 Systems and contingency: complexity enters the model

Problem. Neither classical nor behavioural theory could explain why the same structure succeeded in one environment and failed in another.

Theory. Burns and Stalker's (1961) distinction between mechanistic and organic forms, and Lawrence and Lorsch's (1967) demonstration that effective structure varied with environmental

uncertainty, together fundamentally challenged the universalist assumption. The claim was no longer that a best structure existed but that *fit* between structure and environment determined performance.

Limitations. Contingency theory specified *that* fit mattered far better than *which* variables constitute fit, leaving a framework analytically correct but operationally underdetermined — a gap the requisite variety argument in Section 4.3 partially closes.

Assessment. This is arguably one the most consequential development in the field's history, and it is what the assertion under examination overlooks. After contingency theory the governing question changed from *what is the right way to manage* to *under what conditions does a given approach work*. The assertion cannot be evaluated without acknowledging this: a discipline that has replaced its central question has not remained rooted in the paradigm that posed the original one.

3.4 Drucker: knowledge enters the model

Problem. By the 1950s an increasing proportion of organisational value derived from work whose method could not be specified in advance by anyone other than the person performing it.

Theory. Drucker reframed the field's central question from how to maximise the efficiency of labour to what management is *for*. His answer, grounded in ideas of virtue and human flourishing ([Turriago-Hoyos et al., 2016](#)), was that management exists to make people productive in ways serving organisational goals and individual development together. Central to it is the knowledge worker, whose principal instrument of production is information and judgement rather than physical effort — the point at which the *knowledge* driver becomes explicit.

Application and limitations. [Turriago-Hoyos et al. \(2016\)](#) separate Drucker's position from both classical management and managerialism: the manager is a developer of human potential rather than an efficiency engineer. Management by Objectives, frequently conflated with contemporary OKR frameworks, was a device for aligning individual purpose with organisational direction rather than a surveillance mechanism. Its limitation is that the distinction proved fragile: the same instrument reverts to surveillance whenever it is tightly coupled to evaluation, a failure mode examined in Section 4.7.

3.5 Senge and Nonaka: learning and knowledge creation

Problem. If knowledge is the productive resource, how is it created, retained and transferred rather than merely deployed?

Theory and application. Senge (1990) reframed what an organisation *is*: not a machine to be optimised but a living system, adaptive and shaped by the largely unexamined mental models of those within it ([Hansen et al., 2020](#)). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) supplied the mechanism, distinguishing tacit from explicit knowledge and describing the conversion processes by which organisational knowledge is generated.

Limitations and contemporary challenge. [Hansen et al. \(2020\)](#) find the framework durable but note that Senge never specified when learning becomes *responsible* practice rather than adaptation. The sharper challenge is that tacit knowledge transfer assumed physical co-presence, which hybrid work has removed (Section 4.5).

3.6 Mintzberg: empirical challenge to managerial universalism

Problem. Management theory described what managers should do; nobody had rigorously observed what they actually did.

Theory and application. Mintzberg's observational research found managerial work to be fragmented, reactive, relational and context-dependent — a picture no classical framework accommodates comfortably. [Mintzberg \(2024\)](#) identifies four organisational forms — personal, bureaucratic, professional and collaborative — and argues most real organisations combine them according to purpose and scale.

Judgement. The distance between Taylor's one best way and Mintzberg's four contingent forms is a difference of conceptual orientation, not vocabulary. Each transition was driven by an explanatory failure caused by an identifiable driver rather than by changing taste, and each retained what remained defensible. On the intellectual history alone the assertion cannot be sustained; whether it holds for practice is addressed from Section 4 onwards.

3.7 Morgan's metaphors and the coexistence of paradigms

One question must be settled before the historical account begins. If contingency theory substantially challenged universalism in the 1960s, why does the assertion remain plausible in 2026? Morgan's (2006) metaphorical analysis supplies the answer: all organisational theories rest on metaphors, each illuminating some features while obscuring others, and none is

complete. The classical school is the machine metaphor made explicit; human relations and systems thinking correspond to the organism; Senge's learning organisation to the brain; Schein's work to culture; and the critical tradition, of which [Spicer and Alvesson \(2025\)](#) are contemporary exponents, to domination.

Two consequences follow. Paradigm coexistence appears to be normal rather than transitional. [Ingaggiati et al. \(2025\)](#), in a PRISMA systematic review of public administration, find bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features coexisting and generating paradoxical tensions rather than one replacing the other. Their setting is the public sector, so the wider generalisation here extends their finding rather than restating it. And the machine metaphor persists because it is embedded in administrative infrastructure — job descriptions, reporting lines, budget cycles, legal accountability — long after intellectual abandonment.

[Örtenblad et al. \(2016\)](#) enter a caution applying to this report as much as to Morgan: the scheme is often used as classificatory convenience rather than critical instrument, and proliferating metaphors obscure rather than illuminate when they substitute vocabulary for analysis. **Assessment.** Morgan's framework is adopted here to explain paradigm coexistence, not to claim that all paradigms are equally warranted. The shift from universalism towards contingency is supported by contemporary reviews of organisational structure and new organisational forms. Bremer (2026), reviewing 180 articles, identifies recurring features of decentralised and self-organising forms, while Luciano et al. (2026) provide an integrative review of how and why organisational structures change.

3.8 Agreements, disagreements and unresolved questions

Read together, this literature agrees on more than its disputes suggest: that universalism has been substantially displaced, that context determines appropriate structure, and that knowledge-intensive work resists the classical separation of planning from execution. The disagreements concern consequence rather than fact. [Grant \(2008\)](#) reads the trajectory as evolutionary extension of existing frameworks where Hamel reads it as revolutionary replacement; [Spicer and Alvesson \(2025\)](#) read structural reform as the reproduction of managerial power where [Bremer \(2026\)](#) reads it as measurable structural change; [Ingaggiati et al. \(2025\)](#) read bureaucratic persistence as paradox where the critical tradition reads it as continuity.

Three unresolved questions follow from the literature reviewed here, and Sections 4 and 5 are organised around them. Because this is a critical synthesis rather than a systematic review, these are presented as limitations of the work examined rather than as established absences across the field. First, the studies reviewed document *that* practice diverges from theory without isolating the variable governing the divergence, and they generally take industry as the unit of analysis where contingency logic implies it should not be. Second, much of the contemporary literature is descriptive of change already occurring rather than predictive. Third, none of the frameworks reviewed here specifies how accountability should be distributed when a decision is jointly produced by a manager and a system whose reasoning is not fully inspectable — an open problem [Joseph and Sengul \(2025\)](#) also identify.

4. Critical Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The persistence of classical theory

Scientific management as bounded technique

Scientific management has not been superseded; in specific domains, elements of its approach remain useful. Process standardisation, work measurement and task decomposition remain the foundation of operations management, lean production and Six Sigma. Where work is repetitive and safety depends on procedural consistency — surgical checklists, aviation, pharmaceutical manufacture — Taylor's proposition that method can be studied and improved therefore remains useful in these contexts rather than being merely a historical residue.

The serious version of the argument concerns *extension* rather than survival, and it is driven by technology. [Kadolkar et al. \(2025\)](#), reviewing algorithmic management in the gig economy, find the dominant effect to be tighter control and the replacement of human judgement with automated decisions workers cannot readily contest. [Miszczynski and Zanoni \(2025\)](#) examine how workers experience such regimes. Analysing the narratives of Polish Amazon workers through Marx's theory of alienation, they show how alienating work produces a contradictory consenting subject: workers are estranged from the labour process while simultaneously reconstituted as wage-earners, consumers and holders of legal rights, and it is this reconstitution that elicits consent to the very conditions producing it. The characterisation of these warehouses as sites of techno-economic despotism is drawn from an established literature rather than established independently. Their contribution matters here because intensified measurement is shown to operate through consent as well as surveillance — a mechanism classical scientific management never theorised. This provides particularly strong evidence for the assertion, and Section 4.9 addresses it directly.

Bureaucracy as structural necessity

Weber's model persists for defensible rather than merely historical reasons. Formal rules, documented procedure, defined authority and merit-based advancement are the mechanisms through which organisations achieve accountability, regulatory compliance, procedural fairness and resistance to arbitrary personal power; in financial services, healthcare, aviation and public administration these are conditions of licence to operate rather than overheads. The point is lost in critiques that evaluate bureaucracy against efficiency criteria it was never designed to satisfy: the model optimises for predictability and contestability, trading speed to

obtain them, and judged against a different problem it appears merely obstructive. [Ingaggiati et al. \(2025\)](#) find the debate misframed as a succession question when the evidence describes a paradox: the features generating rigidity also generate reliability, and organisations dismantling bureaucratic control in pursuit of agility frequently rediscover the need for it under another name. The systemic point is that removing formal hierarchy does not remove the coordination problem hierarchy was solving — it displaces it into informal networks where influence is less visible and therefore less accountable. [Lee and Edmondson \(2017\)](#) identify exactly this risk in the literature they review: eliminating formal authority can produce informal status hierarchies that are harder to challenge precisely because they are unofficial.

Administrative management as rewritten vocabulary

Fayol's functions have proved the most durable inheritance and the most transformed. Planning, organising, coordinating and controlling remain recognisable descriptions of managerial activity; commanding is the exception, and its displacement is instructive. [Lydiana et al. \(2025\)](#), in a qualitative study of ten senior executives across eight Indonesian banks, document a shift from positional authority towards leadership judged by its effect on employee experience rather than by its capacity to enforce compliance.

Judgement. Classical theory persists, but the *mode* differs by framework and the distinction is decisive. Scientific management persists as a technique bounded to standardisable work and, in algorithmic form, illegitimately extended beyond it; bureaucracy as a structural necessity under accountability and regulation; administrative management as a vocabulary whose content has been rewritten. Each is a component retained on grounds subsequent theory supplied. The assertion mistakes the presence of the parts for the persistence of the whole.

Three Structural Forces Challenging Classical Management Assumptions

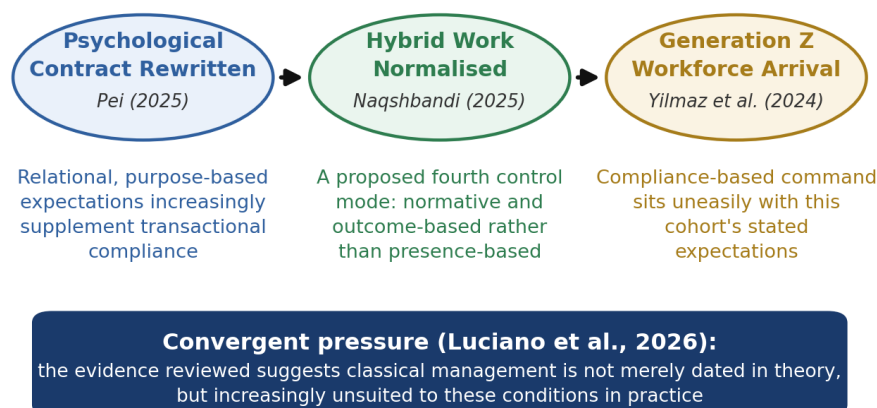


Figure 2: Three structural forces challenging classical management assumptions

4.2 Technology and AI: from decision-maker to decision-architect

Problem. Generative artificial intelligence performs evaluative work previously considered irreducibly judgemental, unsettling the assumption — common to Fayol and every subsequent framework — that managerial authority rests on superior access to judgement.

Theory and application. [Doshi et al. \(2025\)](#), comparing large language model and human expert rankings of sixty business models across two studies, find that generative AI often produces evaluations that are individually inconsistent and biased, but that aggregated AI rankings come to resemble those of human experts. Taken together with the wider evidence, these findings suggest a possible shift in the senior role from decision-maker to what this report terms the manager as *decision-architect*: designing the conditions and aggregation procedures under which reliable judgements emerge, rather than making each judgement personally. The term is this report's synthesis rather than a claim advanced by the cited authors. On that reading, AI raises rather than lowers the premium on judgement and oversight. [Joseph and Sengul \(2025\)](#), reviewing organisation design research published between 2000 and 2023, identify AI and organisational decision-making, flat organisations and multiple goals as the field's emerging problems, while [Luciano et al. \(2026\)](#) show the study of structural change shifting from top-down alignment toward adaptation, and from change events toward the micro-processes, including bottom-up employee behaviour, through which structures actually change.

Limitations. The evidence is recent and the literature descriptive rather than predictive, and no framework specifies how accountability should be distributed when a decision is jointly produced by a manager and a system whose reasoning is not fully inspectable. This is the

clearest question the classical writers could not have posed, and, on the evidence available, the development most capable of reversing this report's conclusion.

4.3 Complexity: the limits of specifiability

Problem. Classical management assumed the correct procedure could be determined in advance and imposed. That fails wherever interacting variables, environmental change or interdependence between decisions exceed what a central planner can hold. This is the driver the assertion most consistently ignores, because complexity is invisible in an organisation chart.

Theory. Ashby's (1956) law of requisite variety states the constraint formally: a control system must possess at least as much variety as the system it regulates. Applied to organisations it yields a conclusion classical theory accommodates poorly: as environmental variety rises, a centralised controller becomes progressively less capable of regulating the organisation, and the variety must be absorbed somewhere. It does not follow that authority must decentralise. Organisations can also absorb or reduce variety through standardisation, buffering, modularisation, or information systems that compress what the centre must process, and decentralising decision rights is one option among these rather than a deduction from the law. What requisite variety does establish is that the classical assumption of a fully specifying centre becomes untenable beyond some threshold of environmental variety. Contingency theory reached a compatible conclusion empirically.

Application. [Mintzberg's \(2024\)](#) four forms are four answers to how much variety a structure must absorb. [Bremer \(2026\)](#), reviewing 180 articles, identifies five features most characteristic of new organisational forms — community-based organising, decentralised decision-making authority, self-organising teams, networking and flexible work — of which at least the first three are consistent with what a requisite variety argument would anticipate.

Limitations. Complexity arguments license almost any decentralisation and are therefore invoked to justify structural change not shown to be necessary. [Lee and Edmondson \(2017\)](#) provide the corrective, cautioning that the conditions under which radical decentralisation succeeds remain poorly established.

4.4 Globalisation and the limits of a universal model

Problem. Classical theory assumed a culturally homogeneous workforce, an assumption that never held and is now untenable.

Theory and application. Hofstede's (1980) demonstration that work-related values vary systematically across national cultures provided independent evidence that substantially challenges universalism, a direction contingency theory had not anticipated. [Vo et al. \(2024\)](#), analysing an eleven-year panel of 118 Vietnamese firms, report that structural reorganisation combined with digital transformation is associated with better performance than either alone, suggesting that structural adaptation under digital pressure may also occur in an emerging-market context..

Limitations. Hofstede's approach has been criticised for treating national culture as static and for inferring individual behaviour from country-level averages. The defensible conclusion is narrower than the framework claims: contextual variation is real and systematic, whether or not these are the right dimensions.

4.5 Society: the rewritten employment relationship

Problem. Classical management assumed not only a method but a setting — workers and supervisors sharing physical space, direct observation as the basis of authority — and a transactional bargain exchanging compliance for pay and security. Both have substantially disrupted.

Theory and application. Edwards' (1979) typology distinguishes simple, technical and bureaucratic control, all of which presuppose co-presence or rule-following. Applied to the hybrid reconfiguration of work [Naqshbandi \(2025\)](#) describes, it suggests a fourth mode the original does not contain: *normative, outcome-based control*, managing through shared values and negotiated outcomes rather than observation. This fourth category is this report's extension of Edwards rather than a claim in the source. [Pei \(2025\)](#), surveying 456 employees across 127 organisations using co-working arrangements, finds the reconstruction of the psychological contract mediating between the characteristics of such environments and organisational commitment, most strongly for affective commitment.

Contemporary challenge. A workforce operating under a relational contract and distributed across locations appears increasingly unsuited to Taylorist methods, which risk producing the disengagement classical management was designed to prevent.

4.6 Emotional intelligence: a contested contribution

Emotional intelligence is included because it is the *weakest* of the contemporary contributions examined here, and a report considering only its strongest examples would not be doing critical work.

Problem and theory. Classical theory had no vocabulary for the interpersonal dimension of management, and relational, outcome-based management requires capabilities it never specified. Goleman's (1998) argument that leadership effectiveness depends on self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill addressed that absence, and the construct is now extensively embedded in leadership development, recruitment and appraisal.

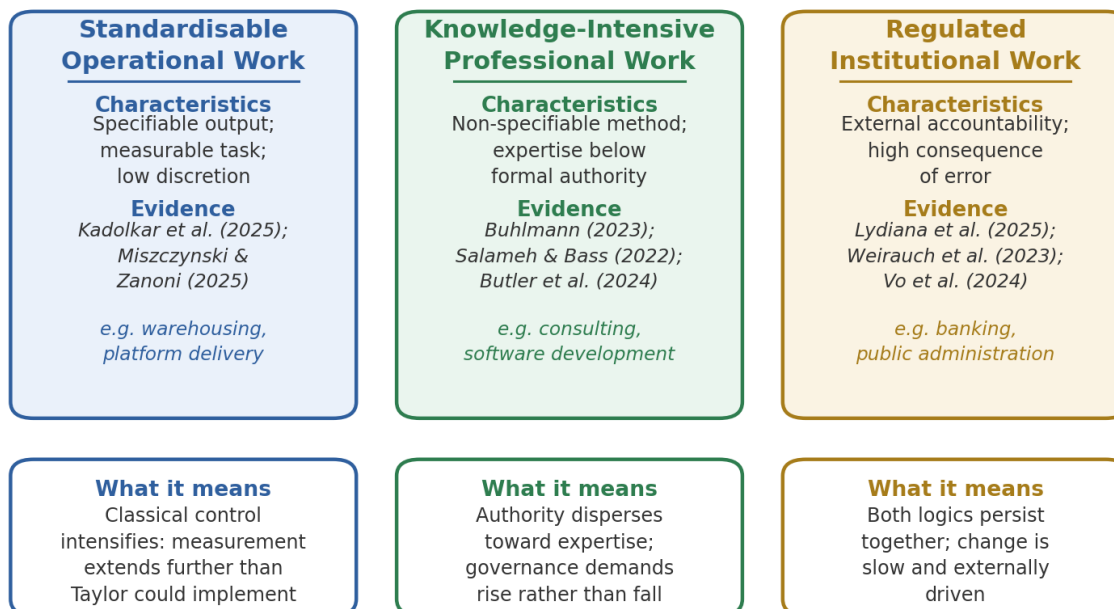
Limitations. The empirical position is weaker than that adoption implies. Ability-based and mixed models measure different constructs, and much practitioner literature relies on the latter while citing evidence generated by the former (Mayer, Roberts and Barsade, 2008). Meta-analytic work indicates that much of the variance emotional intelligence explains is shared with cognitive ability and established personality dimensions, leaving a real but modest incremental contribution (Joseph and Newman, 2010). Antonakis, Ashkanasy and Dasborough (2009) argue the measurement is inadequate to support the causal primacy claimed for it.

Unintended consequence. Where emotional intelligence enters appraisal it converts emotional expression into a performance criterion, with documented consequences for emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). A construct introduced to humanise management thereby extends managerial reach into a domain previously outside it — exactly the mechanism [Spicer and Alvesson \(2025\)](#) identify.

Interim judgement. The contemporary body of work constitutes genuine theoretical advance, though a narrower one than its proponents claim, and much of it describes change already occurring rather than predicting it. Emotional intelligence should be retained at reduced weight and with its limits stated.

4.7 Application across three contexts of work

Management Logics Across Three Contexts of Work



The unit of analysis is the nature of the work, not the industry:

one organisation may contain all three, and the evidence reviewed suggests each is associated with a different direction of managerial change.

Figure 3: Management logics across three contexts of work, with sector examples shown beneath each work type

Algorithmically managed operational work

Characteristics. Standardisable tasks, measurable output, low margins, high scale, weak labour market power.

Finding. This is where classical control has intensified. The evidence in Section 4.1 describes not a departure from Taylorism but its technological amplification, affecting very large numbers of workers.

Limitations of the evidence. Both examine a specific segment, and the Amazon case is the most-cited example in this literature, raising the availability concern noted in Section 1.2. Classical Taylorism was a *general* theory applied indiscriminately; algorithmic control is deployed selectively, by firms that manage their engineering staff quite differently. Selective application is the signature of contingency thinking, not universalism, even when the technique is classical.

Knowledge-intensive professional work

Characteristics. Non-specifiable method, interdependent output, high mobility, expertise distributed below the level of formal authority.

Finding. This is where evolution is clearest. [Bühlmann \(2023\)](#), analysing global professional service firms, finds internal management organised around expertise-driven networks rather than positional hierarchy, while bureaucratic features such as formal career structures and credentialing persist for defensible reasons. [Salameh and Bass \(2022\)](#), studying the Spotify squad model at a multinational FinTech firm, find genuine structural innovation alongside scaling problems in architectural consistency and cross-squad knowledge management. Their central finding matters most: the model requires *more* sophisticated governance than classical hierarchy, not less — precisely Drucker's point that knowledge workers require a different kind of management rather than its absence.

Unintended consequence. [Butler et al. \(2024\)](#), in a mixed-methods study at a large multinational software company combining 47 interviews with a survey returning 512 responses, find that setting and tracking goals remains difficult regardless of tooling, that middle management is the critical layer translating high-level goals into actionable work, and that engineers' attitudes and beliefs are decisive for whether any goal-setting framework succeeds. The framework itself is therefore not the operative variable: the same instrument can express either a classical or a contemporary logic depending on how authority and belief around it are configured — which is why observers examining instruments rather than authority relations conclude that nothing has changed.

Regulated institutional work

Characteristics. Externally imposed accountability, documented process as a legal requirement, high consequence of error, long institutional memory.

Finding. Change here is slow, externally driven and genuine. [Lydiana et al. \(2025\)](#), interviewing ten senior executives across eight Indonesian banks operating under OJK regulatory oversight, document a move from positional to experience-centred leadership driven by digital transformation and workforce readiness rather than by managerial conviction, and [Kusmaryanto and Santoso \(2025\)](#), reviewing 33 articles on middle managers in digital transformation, find them neither redundant nor reproduced in their former role but navigating

demands no classical framework anticipated. [Weirauch et al. \(2023\)](#) confirm post-bureaucratic governance improves person–organisation fit under appropriate conditions.

What the three contexts jointly show

Synthesising across them produces a proposition none states individually. Variation is systematically explained by work characteristics rather than by industry, national setting or managerial enlightenment: where output is specifiable, control intensifies; where method is not specifiable, authority disperses; where accountability is externally imposed, both persist together. Internal heterogeneity of management approach is therefore the *predicted* result of contingency theory rather than evidence of its failure. The persistence of classical elements inside otherwise contemporary organisations is what the theory says should happen.

4.8 A hypothesis arising from the comparison

The comparison supports a hypothesis none of the studies advances individually, stated here in testable form because a critical synthesis should generate claims as well as evaluate them. It is offered as a hypothesis generated by the synthesis rather than as an established relationship, since the literature reviewed has not compared the relevant variables directly.

Hypothesis: the specifiability of a unit's output may explain variation in managerial form more effectively than industry classification alone. Where output is specifiable ex ante, technology is deployed to intensify measurement and management converges on algorithmic Taylorism. Where it is not, measurement cannot substitute for judgement, authority disperses towards expertise, and management converges on the normative, outcome-based mode set out in Section 4.5.

The hypothesis is falsifiable, and that is its main virtue: Section 4.10 concedes that the broader account defended here is difficult to disconfirm, and this supplies it with a mechanism that is not. It would be disconfirmed by algorithmic control extending stably into genuinely non-specifiable work, or by authority dispersing in work whose output is fully specifiable. It could be tested through a multi-industry panel design coding work units on output specifiability and tracking decision rights over time while holding sector constant.

Judgement. The applied evidence supports evolution as a differentiated rather than a general phenomenon.

4.9 Critical rebuttal: three objections to this argument

An argument avoiding its strongest counter-evidence is not an argument. This subsection states the case against the position defended here at full strength before explaining why that position is nonetheless preferred.

Three Critical Tensions in the Management Evolution Debate

	Evidence against evolution	Evidence for evolution	Resolution
Tension 1 Old wine, new bottles?	Spicer & Alvesson (2025): managerialism reproduces itself through progressive language	Bremer (2026); Jimenez et al. (2023): decentralised authority & outcome- orientation are structurally real	Distinguish label from structure
Tension 2 Algorithmic Taylorism	Miszczyski & Zanoni (2025); Kadolkar et al. (2025): gig/logistics control intensifies, not evolves	Naqshbandi (2025): knowledge-work contexts build outcome-based, normative control instead	Uneven, context- determined evolution
Tension 3 Does flat scale?	Lee & Edmondson (2017): self-management fails without intrinsic motivation, right scale	Ingaggiati et al. (2025): bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy coexist as productive paradox	Hierarchy as one contextual option

Figure 4: Three objections to the evolution argument, the evidence on each side, and the resolutions proposed

Objection one: new management is old management with new vocabulary

Terms such as agile, holacracy, OKR and squad are applied to structures that have not materially changed; managers retain authority, workers remain supervised, efficiency remains dominant. [Spicer and Alvesson \(2025\)](#), reviewing critical management studies from 2008 to 2020, identify control and resistance among ten enduring themes and describe managerialism spreading into ever more areas of organisational life — a tradition sustaining the view that managerial power adapts through new vocabularies rather than being displaced by them. They also criticise their own field for thick critique resting on thin empirical understanding, which limits how much evidential weight this objection carries.

Resolution. The resolution separates two routinely conflated things: language adopted without structural change, which is widespread, and structural reorganisation producing measurably

different outcomes, which is also documented. [Bremer \(2026\)](#), reviewing 180 articles, finds decentralised decision-making authority and self-organising teams recurring as defining features of new organisational forms, and these are differences in who holds authority rather than differences of vocabulary. No single study reviewed here decisively separates genuine structural change from its linguistic imitation; [Weirauch et al. \(2023\)](#) come closest, associating post-bureaucratic governance with measurable differences in person–organisation fit and job satisfaction, under conditions they describe as highly context-dependent.

Objection two: algorithmic management has intensified Taylorism

This is the hardest objection and should not be softened: the evidence in Sections 4.1 and 4.7 describes the technological amplification of classical control in one of the world's largest employers.

Resolution. Context rather than denial. Operational work involves narrow margins, standardisable tasks and large scale — conditions making algorithmic control economically attractive and largely absent from knowledge work, where the hybrid reconfiguration [Naqshbandi \(2025\)](#) describes has made observation-based control impracticable and relational alternatives necessary. Two concessions follow. This rescues the thesis by restricting its scope, and a thesis holding only where conditions favour it is weaker than one holding generally. And the claim that algorithmic control is confined to standardisable work concerns *present* capability, which [Doshi et al. \(2025\)](#) give reason to doubt. The position defended here is therefore contingent on a technological trajectory that could reverse it.

Objection three: post-bureaucratic structures do not scale

[Lee and Edmondson \(2017\)](#), reviewing the literature on less-hierarchical organizing across post-bureaucratic, humanistic and organisational-democracy traditions, argue that scholarly understanding of radical decentralisation remains limited and its success conditions unestablished. There is a research agenda rather than a set of findings. If the alternative to hierarchy works only narrowly, hierarchy remains the default and little has changed.

Resolution. The resolution turns on what "default" means. Given the coexistence [Ingaggiati et al. \(2025\)](#) document and the conditional benefits [Weirauch et al. \(2023\)](#) measure, hierarchy has become one option among several *requiring justification* rather than the unexamined starting point — a change in its epistemic status rather than its prevalence, and a real departure from classical management even where the resulting structures look similar.

4.10 Weighing three competing explanations

Three explanations account for the same evidence, and the choice should be made explicitly rather than by default.

The **continuity** explanation holds that management is fundamentally unchanged and theoretical development epiphenomenal. It accounts well for the persistence of hierarchy, the algorithmic evidence and the decoupling of language from structure; poorly for the measured differences associated with post-bureaucratic governance in [Weirauch et al. \(2023\)](#); and not at all for the abandonment of universalism by scholars with every professional incentive to defend an established paradigm.

The **transformation** explanation holds that a paradigm shift has occurred and classical thinking is residual. It accounts well for the theoretical trajectory and the professional-work evidence; poorly for algorithmic management, bureaucratic persistence and the scaling limits of flat structures, and it rests on a literature with documented survivorship bias.

The **accumulation** explanation, defended here, holds that theory has advanced by abandoning universalism, that the resulting framework is contingent and integrative rather than a replacement paradigm, and that practice therefore diverges systematically by the nature of the work. It accounts for the full range of evidence including the counter-evidence, at the cost of being considerably less falsifiable than either alternative. This cost should not be understated. An account that can read hierarchy as contingency, decentralisation as contingency, Taylorism as contingency and post-bureaucracy as contingency invites the reasonable objection that no observation could disconfirm it, and an explanation compatible with everything explains less than it appears to. The hypothesis advanced in Section 4.8 is the report's answer to that objection: it specifies a variable, a predicted direction of effect and a disconfirming observation, and so gives the accumulation account a testable mechanism it would otherwise lack.

Judgement. Accumulation is preferred because it accommodates the strongest evidence for both rivals without discarding either, and because each rival requires dismissing a methodologically sound body of work. Its comparative unfalsifiability is a genuine cost, and one of the strongest single piece of evidence against it is also the one most likely to strengthen over time.s

5. Managerial Implications and Application to Practice

If the argument of Section 4 holds, the practical consequence is not a new model to adopt but a different obligation. Under universalism the manager's task was to apply the correct method; under contingency it is to diagnose which method the work in front of them requires, and to justify the choice. This section sets out what that involves, the constraint that most often defeats it, its implications for two core management systems, and the risks of acting on it.

5.1 A diagnostic for practising managers

The hypothesis in Section 4.8 yields three questions that discriminate usefully between contexts and can be applied to any organisational unit.

How specifiable is this unit's output in advance? Where output is highly specifiable, measurement-based control is legitimate and efficient,. Where it is not, measurement tends to capture activity rather than value, and risks degrading the performance it purports to manage — consistent with [Butler et al.'s \(2024\)](#) finding that goal-setting remains difficult regardless of the framework adopted, and that its success turns on the translation layer and on what employees believe about it.

Where does the knowledge required to do the work actually reside? Where it sits below the level of formal authority, decision rights retained above it impose a coordination cost that no amount of managerial effort recovers. This is the operational form of Ashby's (1956) requisite variety constraint, and it is the analytical basis for the decentralisation [Bremer \(2026\)](#) finds recurring across new organisational forms.

What does external accountability actually require, as distinct from what custom has accumulated around it? Regulated organisations routinely defend as compliance a volume of process that regulation does not demand,.

The most costly error the contingency literature identifies is importing a logic appropriate to a different context: applying algorithmic measurement to non-specifiable work, or dismantling formal accountability where it is externally required.

5.2 Organisational culture as the binding constraint

Diagnosis is necessary but not sufficient, because the evidence indicates that structural change fails at a predictable point. Schein's model of culture as three levels — visible artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions held below conscious examination — supplies

the explanation. A new framework is adopted at the level of artefacts and espoused values quickly, because those levels are amenable to decision. Underlying assumptions about authority, error and accountability change slowly or not at all, because they are not experienced as choices.

This is the decoupling [Spicer and Alvesson \(2025\)](#) document: progressive vocabulary operating at the espoused level while the assumptions beneath remain classical. It is the risk [Lee and Edmondson \(2017\)](#) identify in cases such as Zappos, where formal structure changed while assumptions about accountability did not, and the inverse of [Salameh and Bass \(2022\)](#), where structural change succeeded because it was accompanied by investment in governance capability.

[Dryzin-Amit \(2025\)](#), studying organisation development consulting, finds effective interventions treating change as bounded and iterative rather than total, and as co-created with the client rather than imposed.

The practical implication is specific. Assumptions change through altered experience rather than through communication, so interventions that change what people actually do — decision rights, reward criteria, who is present when decisions are made — outperform those that change what people are told.

5.3 Implications for performance management and career development

Two systems encode classical assumptions more directly than any other and are therefore where the diagnosis bites hardest.

Performance management is recognisably Taylorist: work decomposed, measured against standard, rewarded differentially. The documented movement away from annual ratings towards continuous feedback and team-level assessment (Cappelli and Tavis, 2016) rests on an admission that individual measurement fails under interdependent knowledge work. But Section 4.7 shows the replacement instrument is not the operative variable, so changing the instrument without changing the authority configured around it will reproduce the problem under a new name.

Career development has moved in parallel. The linear organisational career depended on structural stability that no longer obtains, and the alternatives — portable capability, lateral mobility, skill accumulation across employers — place responsibility for development on the

individual. It is also, stated plainly rather than buried, a transfer of risk from employer to employee, and managers adopting it should recognise that they are redistributing risk as well as autonomy.

5.4 Risks, limitations and implementation challenges

Four risks attach to acting on this analysis, and understating them would weaken rather than strengthen the recommendation.

The first is measurement reversion. Where outputs resist specification, organisations tend to revert to measuring activity because activity is measurable. This feedback loop returns organisations to classical control through the back door and accounts for much of the gap between stated and actual management philosophy.

The second is displacement rather than removal. Removing formal hierarchy does not remove the coordination problem hierarchy was solving; it relocates it into informal networks where influence is less visible and therefore less contestable ([Lee and Edmondson, 2017](#)).

The third is coherence cost. Running multiple management logics simultaneously generates conflicting signals — an employee evaluated on initiative in one process and procedural compliance in another — and [Kusmaryanto and Santoso \(2025\)](#) find middle managers absorbing precisely this strain, navigating demands no classical framework anticipated.

The fourth is that the diagnostic itself requires judgement of a kind neither classical nor contemporary theory specifies. Knowing which logic applies to which activity, and holding conflicting logics together without collapsing into either, is a competence the literature describes far better than it explains. Recommending contingent management is therefore recommending something harder than what it replaces, and any implementation plan that does not budget for that difficulty will fail for reasons unrelated to the merits of the analysis.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Limitations of this study

The evidence base is geographically concentrated in developed economies; [Vo et al. \(2024\)](#) offers some breadth, but Hofstede's (1980) demonstration of systematic cross-cultural variation is reason to expect incomplete transfer. It is also recent in a way that limits inference: AI-assisted decision-making ([Doshi et al., 2025](#)) and the hybrid reconfiguration of work ([Naqshbandi, 2025](#)) are phenomena of the last few years, with no longitudinal evidence on their durability. The fourth control mode proposed in Section 4.5 is accordingly a conceptual extension awaiting empirical test rather than an established finding. The method has intrinsic limits: a critical synthesis reflects what has been studied and published rather than practice as it exists, and cannot establish absences across a field. Finally, this report set out to examine an assertion it initially expected to reject, and confirmation bias in that direction is the operative risk; Section 4.9 is the principal control against it.

6.2 Conclusion

The assertion is not without merit, and this report has established where its merit lies rather than dismissing it. It draws attention to real continuities: the persistence of hierarchy, the decoupling of progressive vocabulary from actual authority ([Spicer and Alvesson, 2025](#)), the intensification of measurement-based control in algorithmically managed work ([Miszczyński and Zanoni, 2025](#)), and the unsettled evidence on post-bureaucratic alternatives ([Lee and Edmondson, 2017](#)).

Taken as a complete account of management in 2026, however, the assertion does not hold, and it fails for a specific reason: it conflates the persistence of classical *components* with the persistence of the classical *paradigm*. The commitment at the heart of classical management thought was universalism — that a single rational best method could be discovered and applied everywhere. That commitment has been substantially displaced on the basis of a century of research rather than of fashion, and displaced because five drivers progressively undermined it: technology altered what could be measured and automated, society altered what authority could assume, knowledge relocated productive capability to the worker, globalisation removed the assumption of cultural homogeneity, and complexity removed the assumption that correct procedure could be specified in advance. Retaining a component is not retaining a paradigm.

The position defended is deliberately qualified. Evolution is real but differentiated by the nature of the work rather than general; incomplete, since bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic logics coexist as the normal state of organisations ([Ingaggiati et al., 2025](#)); and productive of no replacement paradigm, since [Joseph and Sengul \(2025\)](#) find a field marked by variety rather than convergence. Evolution yields a wider set of options and a corresponding obligation on managers to justify which they have chosen.

Two conclusions are held with less confidence than the rest, and it would be dishonest to present them otherwise. The claim that algorithmic control remains confined to standardisable work is a claim about present capability that [Doshi et al. \(2025\)](#) give reason to doubt. And the accumulation account defended in Section 4.10 is less falsifiable than the rivals it displaces.

The agenda ahead is nonetheless visible. How managers and AI systems share decision-making, how accountability is distributed when both contribute, and how organisations are governed as the boundary between human and machine judgement blurs, are questions Taylor, Fayol and Weber could not have posed and current frameworks do not answer. Management theory has consistently evolved when the nature of work changed, and the evidence reviewed gives little reason to expect that process to stop — which is itself the strongest argument against the claim that it stopped in the nineteenth century.

6.3 Recommendations for practice and future research

Three directions for future research follow. First, longitudinal work on AI-augmented management addressing how accountability is distributed when human and machine judgement jointly produce a decision — the question [Joseph and Sengul \(2025\)](#) identify as unresolved, and the one on which the argument of this report is most exposed. Second, comparative work across developed and developing economies, testing whether the differentiation by work type documented in Section 4.7 holds where institutional conditions differ. Third, research on hybrid working across organisational sizes and workforce compositions, where the evidence is thinnest relative to the weight currently placed on it.

For practice, the recommendation is the diagnostic set out in Section 5.1 rather than the adoption of any named model, together with the caution that a management logic that succeeded in one work context is the least reliable guide to a different one.

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