

Systematic Literature Reviews in Business Administration: Dead, Alive, or in Need of Reinvention?

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ABSTRACT

Systematic literature reviews (SLRs) have become a fixture of management scholarship, yet a commensurate rise has not matched their exponential proliferation in theoretical contribution. This editorial argues that SLRs in management are neither dead nor merely alive; they are at an inflection point that demands both methodological and intellectual reinvention. The core problem is not the method itself but the predominance of a descriptive, bibliometric mode of execution that delivers mapping when leading journals increasingly demand explanation, critical reflection, theoretical insight, and forward-looking research agendas. Drawing on recent advances in theory development and research methodology, this editorial proposes a portfolio of approaches ranging from framework-based integrative reviews and meta-analytic structural equation modeling to realist synthesis and theory-driven reviews organized by the level of theoretical contribution each can generate. A decision framework guides researchers in choosing the approach most aligned with their epistemological commitments and the field's maturity. The editorial concludes with explicit expectations for SLR submissions to the *Brazilian Administration Review*.

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THE PARADOX OF ABUNDANCE

The current state of systematic literature reviews (SLRs) in management is paradoxical. As [Lim \(2025\)](#) illustrates by tracking the growth of systematic review publications in consumer and marketing journals from 1976 to 2024, the trajectory shows near-exponential expansion. While the SLR protocol was historically native to the medical sciences, it has rapidly consolidated itself as a legitimate and increasingly prominent form of independent scholarship in business administration ([Kraus et al., 2022](#); [Palmatier et al., 2018](#)). The proliferation of bibliometric techniques and accessible software tools has further accelerated this trend ([Donthu et al., 2021](#); [Mukherjee et al., 2022](#)), making SLRs one of the most common submission types in management journals. More recently, the diffusion of generative artificial intelligence has further lowered the technical barriers to producing SLRs by accelerating the identification, summarization, coding, and synthesis of literature. However, this acceleration also creates new risks: AI may amplify the production of reviews that are procedurally sophisticated but theoretically shallow. The proliferation of SLRs has not been accompanied by a proportional increase in conceptual advancement ([Krlev et al., 2025](#)). This creates a troubling paradox: an expanding body of reviews that maps more knowledge while generating fewer transformative insights.

The explanation is not difficult to find. The majority of SLRs published in management follow a recognizable and increasingly formulaic pattern: a PRISMA or SPAR-4-SLR protocol, a bibliometric or co-citation analysis, a cluster-and-describe structure, and a future research agenda assembled with modest analytical effort. The result is what [Lim \(2025\)](#) accurately diagnoses as “descriptive systematic literature reviews” that are ‘thorough’ but ‘often limited in their ability to provide deeper insights or advance theory’ (p. 1500). These reviews catalog competently, even comprehensively, but they do not explain. In this context, AI has not created the problem of descriptive reviewing, which should increase and render this kind of review redundant ([Krlev et al., 2025](#)); rather, it has exposed and intensified an existing tendency to conflate methodological transparency with theoretical contribution. This is not merely a stylistic critique. It reflects a structural misalignment between what the SLR can produce and what it is routinely asked to produce. Nor should this critique be interpreted as a rejection of systematic reviewing itself.

In contrast, in addition to helping condense knowledge in the field and being considered the highest level of evidence-based research ([Denyer & Tranfield, 2009](#)), SLRs represent an essential starting point in many research programs. In doctoral education, scholars are often encouraged to systematically map a research stream because understanding the structure, assumptions, and unresolved debates of a field is necessary before meaningful theoretical contributions can be developed. Some of the most impactful review-based contributions have originated from doctoral research, where systematic engagement with a literature stream serves as the foundation for developing scholarly expertise and identifying opportunities for theoretical advancement.

SLRs are treated as ends in themselves when they should be treated as platforms for synthesis, theoretical testing, the generation of middle-range theory, and the diagnosis of epistemic politics within a field. Therefore, the challenge is not the increasing number of SLRs but the growing separation between reviewing as a technical procedure and reviewing as an act of theorizing. This editorial argues that methodological diversification and a clearer understanding of what constitutes a theoretical contribution in the context of review research are required.

WHY DO WE NEED SLRS?

The current literature in management and social sciences provides robust frameworks for conducting SLRs, often structured around rigorous sequential steps and critical methodological decisions (e.g., [Denyer & Tranfield, 2009](#); [Sauer & Seuring, 2023](#)). These standardized designs typically begin with the precise formulation of a research question, which dictates subsequent phases, such as locating, selecting, and critically appraising primary studies ([Denyer & Tranfield, 2009](#); [Petticrew & Roberts, 2006](#); [Sauer & Seuring, 2023](#)).

However, before researchers immerse themselves in these demanding technical procedures, it is critical to reflect on whether a systematic review is the most appropriate tool for the task at hand ([Petticrew & Roberts, 2006](#); [Siddaway et al., 2019](#)). Therefore, it is necessary to answer the following question: Do we really need another systematic review of the literature? Based on previous studies, to assist researchers in management in deciding whether to undertake an SLR, this editorial proposes a reflexive checklist summarized into five critical dimensions: (1) the state of knowledge; (2) the goal; (3) the method; (4) the mindset; and (5) resources.

(1) The state of knowledge: Is a summary truly needed?

- Information overload: Is there a 'mountain of information' on the topic that it is now impossible for a single person to understand without a structured search?
- Conflicting results: Do existing studies yield different or contradictory answers to the same question, requiring an authoritative source (e.g., an SLR) to resolve the conflict?
- Fragmented groups: Is the research area divided into different 'camps' or communities that do not communicate with one another, necessitating the integration of their ideas?

(2) The goal: What will this review achieve?

- New direction: Will this review do more than just 'list what we know' and help reshape or renovate how we think about the topic?
- Better decisions: Is there a clear possibility that these findings will help managers or policymakers make better real-world choices?
- Clear research gaps: Will this review pinpoint exactly where the 'missing pieces of the puzzle' are, so others know what to study next?

(3) The method: Is the SLR the right tool?

- Fairness and openness: Do I need a method that is transparent and repeatable so that other researchers can trust that I did not just pick my favorite articles?
- Major project commitment: Am I ready to treat this review as a full-scale research project with the same rigor as an empirical study?
- Answerable question: Does the topic allow me to ask a specific, answerable question using clear rules for choosing and analyzing data?

(4) The mindset: Am I ready to think critically?

- The 'judge' role: Am I prepared to act like a 'judge and jury' (looking at all evidence fairly) rather than a 'lawyer' (trying to find only papers that support my own view)?
- 'Review with Attitude': Am I willing to challenge common assumptions in the field instead of just summarizing them?

(5) Resources: Do I have what it takes to finish?

- Time: Do I have the time (often 6–12 months) required to complete a high-quality review?
- Workforce: Do I have at least one other person to help double-check my choices regarding which papers to include to avoid mistakes?
- Database access: Do I have access to paid databases (such as Web of Science or Scopus) needed to find all the important research?
- Software and budget: Do I have the tools (such as citation managers or data analysis software) and funds to pay for full-text access to articles?

This checklist shows that starting a systematic review involves more than just following technical steps. A high-quality review depends on the researcher's critical reflection, analysis, and commitment.

WHAT LEADING JOURNALS DEMAND AND WHAT MOST SLRS DELIVER

The expectations that top-tier journals hold for SLR submissions have evolved substantially. [Lim \(2025\)](#) identifies five dimensions along which SLRs must improve, spanning the quality of motivational problematization, the rigor of methodological choices, the analytical depth of reporting, the coherence of the research agenda, and the shift toward multi-method designs. Across all five dimensions, the modal SLR submitted to management journals falls short.

The most fundamental deficiency is theoretical. Lim (2026a) proposes a hierarchy of theoretical contributions ranging from generalizability (testing an existing theory in a new context) to new theoretical development (building a theory from scratch). The majority of SLRs currently occupy the lowest rung of generalizability, and many do not even reach it rigorously, stopping at description rather than attempting generalization. A well-executed meta-analysis with moderator testing can reach modification; a qualitative meta-synthesis can reach extension; and a truly ambitious review can generate a new theory. The question is not whether SLRs can deliver such contributions but whether researchers are designing them to do so.

An additional epistemological dimension exists. Management research is conducted by scholars who inhabit distinct epistemic traditions: empiricism, strong paradigm advocacy, instrumentalism and critical realism (Kilduff & O'Sullivan, 2026). A bibliometric SLR speaks primarily to the empiricist tradition and accumulates facts about what exists in the literature. It has little to say to the instrumentalist who wants to know how phenomena work in practice, to the paradigm advocate who wants to know where anomalies lie, or to the critical realist who wants to understand what structural forces produced the literature as it is. An SLR that aspires to contribute across epistemic traditions must be more than a literature census.

A PORTFOLIO OF APPROACHES FOR THEORY-BUILDING SLRS

The solution to the descriptive impasse is not the abandonment of SLRs, but their reframing. This requires expanding not only the methodological toolkit available to researchers but also the intellectual ambition of reviews, from organizing what we know to explaining what it means and where scholarship should go next. To support this shift, we outline a portfolio of seven approaches that can move SLRs beyond description toward deeper synthesis and theory development. Table 1 summarizes each approach according to its central question, the level of theoretical contribution it can generate (Lim, 2026a), its epistemological foundations (Kilduff & O'Sullivan, 2026), the capabilities it requires, and the challenges it presents.

Table 1. A portfolio of approaches for theory-building systematic literature reviews in management.

Approach	Central question	Theoretical contribution (Lim, 2026a)	Epistemological Tradition (Kilduff & O'Sullivan, 2026)	Key requirements	Key limitations
Bibliometric / Scientometric	What is the structure of the field?	Generalizability	Empiricist	VOSviewer, Bibliometrix, co-citation data	Descriptive; does not explain mechanisms
Framework-based integrative review (ADO, TCCM)	What do we know, how is knowledge organized, and where are the gaps?	Adaptation / Modification	Normal science / Instrumentalist	Strong organizing framework; systematic coding	Can become classification if categories are populated rather than interrogated
Quantitative meta-analysis	What is the average effect and what moderates it?	Modification	Empiricist / Normal science	Compatible measures across studies; adequate N	Requires commensurable operationalizations
MASEM	What is the nomological network structure across studies?	Modification / Extension	Empiricist / Normal science	Correlation matrices from primary studies	High methodological demands; assumes structural invariance
Qualitative meta-synthesis	What does the integrated meaning of qualitative findings reveal?	Extension / New Development	Instrumentalist / Critical Realist	Rich qualitative primary studies; interpretive competence	Labor-intensive; translation challenges across contexts
Realist synthesis	For whom, under what conditions, and why does this work?	Modification / Extension	Critical Realist	CMO logic; theory-driven sampling	Requires deep engagement with program theory
Theory-driven review	What are the limits, anomalies, and extensions of this theory?	Adaptation / Modification / New Development	Normal science / Critical Realist	Clear theoretical lens; boundary condition logic	Risk of confirmation bias if not rigorously designed
Umbrella review	What do existing reviews collectively reveal, contradict, or miss?	Extension / New Development	Pluralist	Multiple high-quality SLRs on the same topic	Requires mature, saturated field

Note. Authors, based on Lim, W. M. (2026a). Theory and theory development: Guidelines for establishing theoretical gaps, foundations, contributions, and implications. *Journal of Business Research*, 202, 115745. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115745> and Kilduff, M., & O'Sullivan, D. (2026). Where's the theory contribution? An answer in four parts. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 16(1), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20413866241233739>.

Bibliometric and scientometric analysis: Legitimate but insufficient

Bibliometric analysis, performance analysis, keyword co-occurrence, co-citation, and bibliographic coupling occupy a legitimate role in the SLR portfolio. When a field is emerging, its boundaries remain contested, or scholars require a structural understanding before engaging in deeper inquiry, bibliometric analysis provides the aerial view needed to navigate the intellectual landscape (Lim, 2025). The problem is not bibliometric analysis itself, but the tendency to mistake mapping a field for advancing it. Bibliometrics should illuminate the intellectual structure of a domain, not become the endpoint of scholarly inquiry. The solution is to treat bibliometric findings as inputs for sensemaking rather than as outputs in themselves: identifying patterns, explaining their emergence, and substantiating interpretations with evidence (Lim & Kumar, 2024).

Framework-based integrative review (ADO, TCCM)

Framework-based integrative reviews offer an important pathway for moving SLRs beyond descriptive mapping by providing a conceptual architecture for synthesizing fragmented knowledge. Frameworks such as Antecedents–Decisions–Outcomes (ADO) and Theory–Context–Characteristics–Methodology (TCCM) represent widely adopted approaches in management research, providing alternative lenses for structuring synthesis and developing future research agendas (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019; Paul et al., 2021). ADO is particularly useful when scholars seek to explain a phenomenon by connecting its drivers, managerial choices, and consequences, as illustrated by ADO-based reviews examining complex organizational issues (e.g., Pimentel et al., 2024). TCCM provides a diagnostic lens for evaluating the theoretical, contextual, and methodological development of a research domain (e.g., Chen et al., 2021). Yet, like any framework, ADO and TCCM create value only when they become tools for interpretation rather than classification. Their contribution does not come from organizing articles into categories, but from using those categories to reveal tensions, explain gaps, and identify opportunities for theory development.

Quantitative meta-analysis and MASEM

Classical meta-analysis goes beyond bibliometry by statistically synthesizing effect sizes from primary studies, providing more precise estimates of relationships and revealing moderator patterns that individual studies may obscure (Paul & Barari, 2022). Its theoretical contribution lies in modification-level insights: by examining why effect sizes vary across contexts, cultural settings, and measurement choices, meta-analysis can refine and deepen existing theory. Ladeira et al. (2025) exemplify this in their large-scale study of Internet of Things adoption, synthesizing data from over 52,000 respondents across 138 studies. Meta-Analytic Structural Equation Modeling (MASEM) extends this logic by synthesizing correlation matrices to test structural equation models on pooled datasets (Cheung & Cheung, 2016), asking not ‘what is the average effect?’ but ‘what is the structure of the nomological network across studies?’ In management, MASEM remains underutilized relative to its potential (Jak & Cheung, 2024), yet it is the methodological choice best suited to testing competing theoretical models and assessing structural integrity across a body of evidence.

Qualitative meta-synthesis

Among the approaches with considerable untapped potential, qualitative meta-synthesis offers a distinctive route for transforming qualitative evidence into conceptual insight. The central objective of qualitative meta-synthesis is to integrate findings from qualitative studies addressing a shared research phenomenon to develop a more comprehensive and theoretically meaningful understanding of the accumulated knowledge (Habersang et al., 2019; Timulak, 2009). Unlike approaches that aggregate evidence or map publication patterns, qualitative meta-synthesis asks what deeper meanings, mechanisms, and explanations emerge when qualitative findings are interpreted collectively. Its distinctive feature is its interpretive orientation: rather than accumulating evidence, it translates concepts and interpretations across studies, connecting and reinterpreting findings to generate higher-order explanations or what Noblit and Hare (1988) describe as interpretations of interpretations. For management research, qualitative meta-synthesis is particularly valuable when a field does not suffer from a lack of evidence but from a lack of theoretical integration. In domains such as organizational culture, identity, institutional logics, sensemaking, and entrepreneurship, rich qualitative insights often remain dispersed across contexts and studies.

Realist synthesis

Realist synthesis (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) addresses a question that neither bibliometric analysis nor standard meta-analysis can answer: for whom, under what conditions, through what mechanisms, and why does a given phenomenon occur? The central analytical unit is the context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configuration: a mechanism is the reasoning and resources that lead actors to respond in ways; a context is the set of conditions that activate or suppress it; and an outcome is the resulting pattern of events. Assembling CMO configurations from a body of evidence is inherently a theory-building exercise that directly maps onto the modification and extension levels of Lim's (2026a) taxonomy. For management research, realist synthesis is particularly valuable in studies of organizational interventions, policy effects, and complex social phenomena, where the 'black box' between treatment and outcome contains the theoretical contribution.

Theory-driven review

A theory-driven review departs from the standard review's descriptive ambition, using a well-specified theoretical lens as the organizing principle for the synthesis. Rather than asking 'what is known about X?' it asks 'what does the literature on X reveal about the limits, extensions, and anomalies of Theory T?' This design is particularly useful when a field has a dominant theoretical framework whose scope conditions have never been systematically examined. The theoretical contribution lies at the levels of adaptation, modification, and potentially new development: by systematically identifying where a theory holds and where it fails, a theory-driven review produces precisely the material needed for theoretical refinement (Hollebeek et al., 2025).

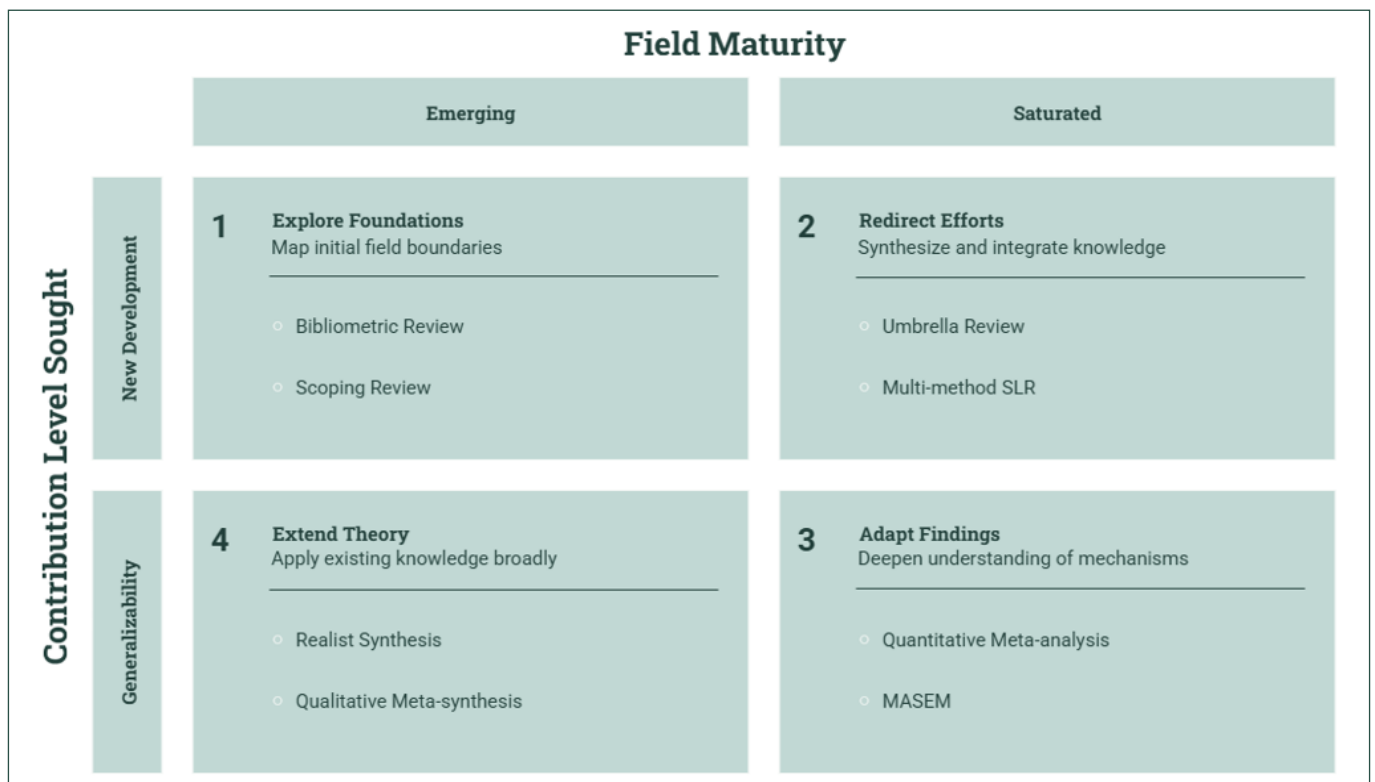
The choice of theoretical lens shapes both the questions asked and the insights generated. Actor-Network Theory (Callon, 1984; Latour, 2005) can serve as a lens for examining how certain concepts, methods, and frameworks have become dominant in a field, thereby making visible the epistemic politics that stabilization has foreclosed. Institutional theory offers a different lens, as demonstrated by Galleli and Amaral (2026), who reviewed 720 studies in the *Journal of Management* to develop a multi-level model mapping how actors respond to and reshape institutional structures in social and environmental efforts. Their review illustrates how a strong theoretical commitment can transform a literature synthesis into a genuine framework for future research. The key principle is that the theory should not merely organize the review but be interrogated by it.

Umbrella review

When a research domain has accumulated multiple SLRs on the same or overlapping topics, an umbrella review, a review of reviews, becomes appropriate (Aromataris et al., 2015; Fusar-Poli & Radua, 2018). Rather than re-examining primary studies, the umbrella review synthesizes, compares, and evaluates existing SLRs, identifying contradictions among them, gaps shared by all reviews, and patterns that emerge only at the meta-review level. Its theoretical contribution lies in exposing the collective blind spots in a field's literature review: areas where multiple reviews have converged on the same gap without addressing it, questions that reviews consistently postpone, and theoretical assumptions shared across reviews without examination. In management research, topic areas saturated with SLRs, such as corporate social responsibility, digital transformation, and innovation management, are natural candidates for umbrella reviews.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPROACH

Methodological choice should not be arbitrary or fashionable. The appropriate approach depends on the intersection of three factors: the field's maturity, the level of theoretical contribution sought, and the epistemological tradition in which the researcher operates. This logic echoes Edmondson and McManus's (2007) principle of methodological fit: internal consistency among a study's research question, prior work, research design, and theoretical contribution is what distinguishes rigorous from formulaic research. Figure 1 translates this principle into a decision framework for SLR design. It is worth noting that these alignments are indicative rather than prescriptive: a field classified as 'developing' may still warrant a qualitative meta-synthesis if rich case-based evidence has accumulated, and umbrella reviews in saturated fields serve precisely to diagnose redundancy and redirect scholarly effort away from adding more of the same. More ambitious reviews may also complement synthesis with primary data collection, further strengthening their theoretical contribution.



Source: Developed by the authors based on [Lim, W. M. \(2026a\)](#). Theory and theory development: Guidelines for establishing theoretical gaps, foundations, contributions, and implications. *Journal of Business Research*, 202, 115745. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115745>, [Kilduff, M., & O'Sullivan, D. \(2026\)](#). Where's the theory contribution? An answer in four parts. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 16(1), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20413866241233739>, and [Edmondson, A. C., & McManus, S. E. \(2007\)](#). Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4), 1246–1264. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2007.26586086>

Figure 1. Decision framework for SLR approach selection.

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE BAR

As editors of the *Brazilian Administration Review*, we use this editorial to signal a shift in the BAR's approach to SLR submissions. This shift responds to the evolving landscape of management scholarship globally and to the specific demands of consolidating Brazilian management research as a credible international interlocutor in the field. The BAR will now evaluate SLR submissions against the following five criteria:

Problematization. The motivation must go beyond gap spotting. Authors must demonstrate that the gap they address constitutes a genuine theoretical problem, debate, disconnect, or direness, not merely an absence of prior synthesis ([Lim, 2026a](#); [Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011](#)).

Methodological justification. The choice of SLR approach must be explicitly justified relative to the alternatives in the portfolio. Authors must explain why their chosen method is the most appropriate for their field's maturity, contribution level, and epistemological commitments. A bibliometric analysis was chosen because 'the literature uses bibliometrics' is not a justification.

Analytical depth. Reporting must move from a description to an analysis. For bibliometric approaches, this means explaining the causes of the observed patterns. For meta-analytic approaches, genuine moderator analysis. For qualitative approaches, theoretical synthesis rather than thematic cataloging.

Theoretical contribution. Authors must explicitly locate their contribution in [Lim's \(2026a\)](#) taxonomy of theoretical novelty. What makes this contribution nontrivial? What prior assumptions does it challenge, refine, or overturn?

Framework alignment. Following [Lim \(2026b\)](#), SLRs should have discernible theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological and impact frameworks. A review that maps the literature without specifying its theoretical anchors or contextual scope is incomplete, regardless of bibliometric sophistication.

These expectations do not favor any specific method. A bibliometric review that deeply problematizes, rigorously analyzes, and precisely locates its contribution will be as welcome as a meta-synthesis or realist review. A review that competently catalogs the literature is no longer sufficient, as it leaves the field conceptually unchanged.

Returning to where we started: Are systematic literature reviews dead in management? No. Are they intellectually alive, generating insights commensurate with the effort they demand and the space they occupy in the journals? Too often, no. Do they need to be reframed? Decisively, yes.

The portfolio of approaches outlined here reflects a broad spectrum of epistemological commitments, methodological choices and theoretical ambitions. No single approach is inherently superior; each becomes valuable when aligned with the right research questions, field conditions, and contribution objectives of the study. Therefore, the researcher's responsibility is not simply to follow a protocol but to make deliberate methodological choices, justify them transparently, and execute them rigorously.

What is clear is that a review that catalogs the literature competently but stops short of advancing understanding is no longer sufficient. The future of SLRs does not depend on greater procedural sophistication alone but on restoring their central purpose: synthesis, interpretation, and theory development. The method is not problematic. The ambition is.

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