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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building Usable Management Knowledge: A Framework of Bridging Mechanisms Between Research and Practice

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| ABSTRACT

This article develops a conceptual framework for how management research becomes usable knowledge for practitioners. While the theory–practice gap has been widely acknowledged, existing discussions have focused primarily on diagnosing the divide rather than explaining the organizational and intellectual mechanisms through which research gains relevance. Integrating insights from organizational theory, knowledge management and institutional analysis, this narrative review identifies three categories of bridging mechanisms—interface mechanisms, interpretive mechanisms and institutional mechanisms—that shape the translation of scholarly insights into actionable managerial understanding. Interface mechanisms structure interaction between researchers and practitioners; interpretive mechanisms facilitate meaning-making across epistemic communities; and institutional mechanisms create the conditions for long-term knowledge integration. Together, these mechanisms provide a structured account of how management knowledge becomes usable without sacrificing conceptual rigor. The framework contributes to ongoing debates on research impact by reframing knowledge relevance as an outcome of organizational design and knowledge governance rather than as a trade-off with rigor. Implications highlight how intentionally structured interfaces and interpretive processes can enhance the strategic value of management research and support evidence-informed decision-making in organizations.

| KEYWORDS

Management knowledge; Research–practice interface; Knowledge integration; Organizational mechanisms; Knowledge governance; Conceptual framework

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Scholars and practitioners operate with fundamentally different assumptions about knowledge—its purpose, acceptable forms of evidence, the language through which it is conveyed, and even the criteria by which it is valued (e.g., Shapiro, Kirkman & Courtney, 2007; Aguinis et al., 2020). These differences create systematic barriers to the uptake of scholarly knowledge, regardless of its intrinsic quality. Both empirical evidence and extensive literature highlight the urgency and complexity of this issue.

From an empirical standpoint, the volume of management research has increased fourfold over the past fifteen years—exceeding 200,000 published articles—yet its impact on practice remains marginal. Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft (2001) reported that only 10 per cent of managers read academic articles, with just 1 per cent acknowledging their influence on decision-making. More recent studies by Sandler (2015, 2022) show that managers' willingness to engage with academic research has declined further, shifting from "unlikely" to "absolutely not [likely]." These findings suggest that the gap between academia and practice is widening rather than narrowing, leaving many executives to rely on anecdotal evidence or consultancy trends instead of empirically grounded insights.

From an academic standpoint, numerous bridging strategies have been proposed—ranging from engaged scholarship and

action design research to contextual theorizing and knowledge translation models, among others. Yet part of the complexity in addressing the divide lies in the fact that these contributions often remain isolated, evaluated through different lenses, and rarely compared systematically. The absence of shared criteria for assessing bridging strategies across contexts makes it difficult for researchers to select approaches aligned with the practical usability of their work. This misalignment is not merely theoretical: it directly affects how managerial problems are framed, investigated, and ultimately addressed in organizational settings.
This article argues that what is needed is not another bridging solution but a comprehensive, theory-informed map of existing ones that clarifies how and when to use them. Such a map helps make sense of the diversity of approaches, illuminates their epistemic and practical features, and demonstrates how they can be aligned with specific research purposes—embedding managerial usability from the outset of the research process. It offers researchers interpretive tools to design studies that are both epistemically sound and managerially actionable, thus increasing their intelligibility, impact, and transferability across academic and practice domains. For practitioners and decision-makers, it provides an orientation tool to interpret research outputs more critically and recognize which types of scholarly knowledge can genuinely inform managerial judgement.

2. Literature Review: Where and Why Bridging Strategies Fall Short

There is broad agreement on the institutional, epistemological and communicative sources of the rigor–relevance divide. This review therefore concentrates on the strategies proposed to reduce it—surveying the contributions, indicating where they fall short and showing why their limitations call for a more systematic and comparative approach.

2.1 Causes of the Rigor–Relevance Divide

We begin by acknowledging that prior work has already mapped the root causes in depth.
At the institutional level, incentive systems privilege theoretical rigor, and publication counts over practical impact (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001; Shapiro, Kirkman & Courtney, 2007). At the epistemological level, divergent logics of inquiry generate tension between generalizable scientific knowledge and situated managerial insight (Tsang & Ellsaesser, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). At the communicative level, differences in language and dissemination channels impede the translation of scholarship into practice (Aguinis et al., 2020).
While these causes are well documented, what remains under-specified is how to transform awareness into practically usable research outcomes—ones that can inform real organizational decisions and strategic learning processes.

2.2 A Scattered Landscape of Bridging Strategies

Across traditions, scholars have clarified the purposes of academic research—explanation, integration, intervention, problem-solving and practical impact. Conceptual work distinguishes *elucidation, integration* and *extension* (MacInnis, 2011), contrasts *explanation*- with *design-oriented* theorizing (Jaakkola, 2020) and emphasizes mechanisms, causal accounts and novel constructs (Cornelissen, 2017). Building on this foundation, several approaches to bridging have emerged, each with its own central idea, assumptions, terminology and evaluative criteria.
Engaged scholarship foregrounds collaboration between academics and practitioners throughout the research process. Knowledge attains contextual fit—and thus relevance—when co-produced with intended users (Van de Ven, 2007; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). This view resonates strongly with collaborative consulting and innovation projects, where practitioners' experiential knowledge can inform theoretical refinement. Rigor is not only methodological precision but also whether findings prove meaningful and applicable in real organizations. Relevance is gauged by collaborative quality—practitioner involvement in framing questions, interpreting findings, and shaping outputs—and by whether insights inform actual decisions.
Design science follows an engineering logic in which the primary product is an artefact—a model, framework, procedure or system that solves a problem (Hevner et al., 2004; Peffers et al., 2007). Knowledge advances through iterative build–evaluate cycles. *Internal validity* concerns whether the artefact performs as intended (e.g., a decision-support model improving forecasts). *Functional effectiveness* asks whether it works in practice (e.g., a redesign increasing efficiency). Relevance is the artefact's transferability beyond the original case (Gregor & Hevner, 2013). This orientation mirrors the logic of managerial experimentation, where iterative prototyping and feedback loops determine adoption success. Interpretive approaches aim to produce situated explanations of organizational life by uncovering how actors understand and give meaning to their practices and environments (Tsang, 2014; Johns, 2017). Such inquiry resembles the reflective practice used by managers to interpret cultural or behavioral dynamics in their teams. Rather than pursuing universal generalization, it privileges deep contextualization. Rigor is assessed via plausibility—faithful reflection of lived experience—and credibility and richness, i.e., coherent, detailed narratives revealing underlying assumptions and meaning patterns (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Knowledge translation addresses intelligibility and usability across communities of practice. Translation is literal: reformulating and repackaging scholarly knowledge so it resonates with managerial audiences and circulates beyond academia (Carlile, 2004; Nicolini et al., 2008; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). It may simplify technical language, render findings as tools or guidelines, or reframe concepts to fit managerial concerns. Relevance is communicative effectiveness—understanding, adoption and application—evidenced by uptake in training, policy or decision routines. This is where academic insight most directly influences managerial reasoning, turning theoretical advances into actionable mental models. Together, these approaches demonstrate rich efforts to

address the divide. Yet the field remains fragmented: each defines its own standards of rigor and relevance and speaks a distinct methodological language. This fragmentation hinders cumulative dialogue and leaves a scattered landscape rather than a coherent repertoire.

2.3 Lack of Comparative Assessment of Bridging Strategies

Beyond this mosaic of disconnected options lies a second-order challenge—and opportunity: developing robust, theory-informed criteria to evaluate how different strategies, or their combinations, meet specific bridging needs. Many contributions provide strong within-paradigm criteria—*internal validity* in design science (Gregor & Hevner, 2013), *contextual plausibility* in interpretive work (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), *collaborative fit* in engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007). What remains underexplored is a set of shared evaluative dimensions operating across paradigms. The lack of such trans-paradigmatic criteria hampers comparison and systematic reflection on complementarity (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). For management professionals, this means that potentially powerful research often remains locked within disciplinary silos, inaccessible in both language and evaluative framing.

2.4 The Challenge of Comparison: Absence of Cross-Paradigmatic Criteria

Recent work has clarified what research seeks to achieve, but far less often connects those aims to the how—the configuration of methodological repertoires (i.e., strategies, approaches and tools spanning inquiry logic, engagement mode and data generation/analysis). Although awareness of alignment between aims and design is growing (Post et al., 2020; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), frameworks seldom offer actionable guidance. In critical and engaged scholarship alike, the absence of cross-paradigmatic criteria makes methodological reflection harder and undermines deliberate selection (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). Developing shared dimensions would support cumulative learning, enable comparison without flattening epistemic diversity and help assess how strategies contribute to usability—ultimately benefiting managerial decision-making processes that rely on nuanced, context-sensitive insight rather than prescriptive models.

2.5 The Need for Purpose-Driven Combinations of Strategies

Researchers increasingly need to identify and combine strategies for specific purposes. As Post et al. (2020) argue, advancing theory and practice requires structured support to navigate inherent trade-offs. Yet the limitations above expose a structural gap: the absence of a guiding approach that enables such alignment and informed selection. Calls for methodological pluralism and hybridity address this challenge. Multiparadigm perspectives can better capture organizational complexity (Lewis & Grimes, 1999); combining methods and logics helps tackle pressing managerial problems (Bansal et al., 2018); integrating academic and practical knowledge is central to knowledge production (Nicolini, 2017); and coherent yet context-sensitive configurations are needed (Delbridge & Fiss, 2013; Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Even advanced proposals—such as integrative theorizing (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020)—tend to emphasize epistemological justification more than methodological articulation.

Against this backdrop, an approach that aligns research aims with coherent methodological configurations—grounded in how strategies, individually and in combination, perform along the dimensions of rigor and relevance—appears critical. In practice-oriented research, epistemic goals and practical constraints interact, demanding choices that are both theoretically sound and context-sensitive (Van de Ven, 2007; Bansal et al., 2012). For managers, recognizing these configurations helps them evaluate which research outputs are more likely to translate into usable insights within their own organizational contexts.

Table 1 summarizes the core limitations in the literature that hinder progress towards more integrative and usable knowledge production and outlines their implications for scholars seeking to bridge the rigor–relevance divide through more intentional and reflexive methodological choices.

Table 1. Core limitations in the literature on bridging rigor and relevance

Problem area	Contributions in literature	Identified gap	Implications for bridging research
Fragmentation of bridging strategies	Multiple strategies developed across paradigms (collaborative, interventionist, interpretive, translational)	No comparative clustering; strategies remain isolated and non-systematized	Limits ability to identify complementarities, trade-offs, and reusable methodological logics
Lack of shared assessment criteria	Evaluation practices remain confined within paradigms; limited cross-paradigm reflections	No common metrics to assess usability or guide combinations of strategies	Undermines cumulative learning and weakens design of usable research architectures
Research purposes not operationalized	Typologies of purposes well defined but not connected to methodological choices	No guidance on which strategies (or clusters) align with which research purposes	Constrains ability to tailor methodological designs to specific knowledge objectives
No integrative methodological logic	Calls for pluralism and integration remain conceptual	No actionable structure that connects purposes, strategies, and assessment dimensions	Researchers lack tools to construct reflexive, purpose-driven combinations able to bridge the divide

3. Methodology: Developing a Structured Approach to Address Limitations

This study adopts a **structured conceptual review** as its methodological foundation. Conceptual reviews are particularly suited to fields marked by theoretical fragmentation, where progress depends on organizing and integrating dispersed contributions (MacInnis, 2011; Jaakkola, 2020; Post et al., 2020). The rigor–relevance divide exemplifies such a field: numerous responses have accumulated without converging towards a unified analytical structure. This diversity reflects deeper epistemological pluralism and the coexistence of divergent knowledge traditions that resist empirical synthesis (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

In this context, not using empirical observation was a deliberate and necessary design choice. The phenomenon under investigation—the complex, multi-layered conceptual process involved in bridging the rigor–relevance divide—does not manifest in controlled or isolable settings. Bridging strategies are theoretical logics, articulated through academic discourse rather than enacted as discrete behaviors. A structured conceptual review, by contrast, allows interpretive sensitivity, analytical transparency and integrative reasoning across heterogeneous contributions—qualities essential for producing knowledge that is methodologically sound yet meaningful for management practice.

The aim of this review is to develop a structural basis for navigating the landscape of bridging strategies—one that helps researchers classify, evaluate and purposefully combine existing approaches to better address the divide (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020). Rather than generating new data, the objective is to provide conceptual guidance that enables more informed and reflexive methodological decisions, supporting both scholarly rigor and managerial usability.

To achieve this, the review pursues four interrelated analytical objectives. First, it seeks to reduce fragmentation by identifying and clustering bridging strategies according to their underlying logics and assumptions. Second, it aims to develop comparative, theory-informed profiling criteria that can be used to evaluate each cluster, clarifying their respective strengths and limitations in producing research that is managerially usable. Third, it endeavors to identify archetypical research purposes that may guide the selection of bridging clusters and enhance their practical relevance. Finally, it explores how these clusters can be purposefully combined to create a versatile methodological toolkit, enabling researchers to design strategy configurations aligned with their intended contributions. The following subsections address each of these objectives and outline the methodological steps undertaken to pursue them.

3.1 Clustering Bridging Strategies

To reduce fragmentation, the review began by constructing a corpus of 42 conceptual contributions, selected from an initial pool of over 80. Sources were identified through iterative keyword searches across *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, and *Google Scholar*, complemented by backward and forward citation tracking. Inclusion criteria required that each contribution explicitly address the rigor–relevance divide, propose a conceptual or methodological response to it, and offer sufficient theoretical elaboration to enable abstraction and synthesis.

Given the heterogeneity of the literature, the review followed an interpretive and inductive approach, consistent with grounded theorizing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and aligned with theory-building review models (MacInnis, 2011; Jaakkola, 2020). Coding was conducted in MAXQDA, a CAQDAS-supported environment ensuring transparent and traceable analysis. Open codes were generated through close reading, then grouped into higher-order categories based on convergence across dimensions such as practitioner engagement, knowledge logic, epistemological stance, and methodological structure.

The clustering process went beyond description: it sought to articulate a set of strategy configurations capable of supporting both analytical profiling and informed methodological choice. Clusters were treated as heuristic constructs—conceptually

aligned families that often cut across disciplinary and epistemological boundaries. Their formulation drew on configurational theorizing (MacInnis, 2011) and typification as a tool for integration in pluralistic fields (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021).
Each cluster was named to reflect its generative logic rather than procedural features, enabling comparative insights into distinct families of bridging strategies and their potential contributions to the rigor–relevance conversation. Robustness was reinforced through convergence with prior typologies and meta-triangulation principles (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; George et al., 2016; Bansal et al., 2018; Burgelman et al., 2022), ensuring alignment with recurring theorising patterns in the field.
The resulting clusters—a synthesis of conceptually distinct yet complementary families—are presented in Section 4.1, together with the coding structure supporting their formulation (Table 2). For practitioners, this clustering provides a clearer lens to understand how different types of research outputs connect to organizational learning, design, or decision-making processes.

3.2 Identifying Profiling Criteria

To address the absence of shared standards for analyzing how different bridging strategies operate, the second phase focused on developing profiling criteria that could support nuanced comparison across clusters. The aim was twofold: to highlight distinctions between clusters and to assist researchers in selecting or combining strategies based on research purpose and intended managerial usability.
Existing taxonomies did not fully capture this objective, so we developed original dimensions grounded in theoretical analysis and guided by conceptual synthesis principles (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). The process integrated insights from epistemology, knowledge translation, design science and theory sensemaking to isolate dimensions along which bridging strategies differ in structure and practical implication.
From an epistemological standpoint, the analysis drew on concepts of knowledge legitimacy, theoretical portability, and the capacity of research to shape organizational discourse (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Tsoukas, 2017). From knowledge translation and design science, it incorporated usability, re-combinability and contextual alignment (Carlile, 2004; Hevner et al., 2004; Nicolini et al., 2008). Finally, literature on theory as a sensemaking and learning device justified the inclusion of relational and integrative dimensions (Weick, 1995; Van Aken & Romme, 2009; Cornelissen, 2017).
Three requirements guided the identification of profiling criteria: analytical distinctiveness, theoretical anchoring, and practical relevance. Candidate dimensions were first extracted through focused coding of literature addressing epistemological robustness, knowledge portability, and usability. They were then refined iteratively in relation to the identified clusters, ensuring coherence between the profiling criteria and the conceptual logics of each. The theoretical guidance for this process was drawn from multiple domains. Literature on theory legitimacy and robustness emphasizes logical consistency, internal coherence, and the capacity of theoretical constructs to evolve through scholarly dialogue (Bacharach, 1989; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Suddaby, 2006). The tradition of multi-paradigm theorising and epistemic reflexivity stresses modularity and compatibility as prerequisites for meaningful integration (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Van de Ven, 2007). Research on theoretical pluralism and hybrid design approaches highlights the importance of metacognitive awareness and methodological flexibility (Cornelissen, 2017; Fiss, 2011), while the literature on knowledge translation and design science foregrounds intelligibility, contextualization, and usability as determinants of practical impact (Carlile, 2004; Hevner et al., 2004; Markus & Robey, 1988; Romme & Endenburg, 2006).
These perspectives provided the analytical foundation for profiling dimensions that capture both conceptual integrity and practical potential. Each criterion profiles how a cluster behaves along key axes of knowledge production, translation and combination—enabling purposeful strategy selection. For practitioners, such profiling also helps recognize which types of academic contributions are more likely to inform real-world problem-solving or design-oriented innovation.

3.3 Identifying Archetypical Research Purposes

To enable researchers to select clusters of bridging strategies appropriately, it was essential to identify typical research purposes emerging from the literature and their associated epistemic logics. Research purpose plays a critical role in guiding the design and combination of strategies: without clarity of intent, methodological selection lacks direction and risks incoherence. Identifying these purposes ensures that the analytical structure supports strategic decision-making rather than remaining purely descriptive.
The process followed a theory-informed inductive logic, drawing from established classifications of scholarly contributions and from the practical need to support decision-making in research design. The foundation combined MacInnis's (2011) typology of clarification, extension, integration and critique; Jaakkola (2020) and Cornelissen (2017) on theorising for explanation, intervention and systematization; and Van Aken and Romme (2009) on design science outputs, which introduced the dimension of *knowledge for understanding, knowledge for action,* and *organizational learning intent*. Further inspiration came from multi- and cross-paradigm theorising (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), which adds epistemic awareness as a component of scholarly reflexivity.
Candidate purposes were extracted and synthesized through iterative comparison across the corpus, identifying high-level intents that recur across epistemological traditions. This required balancing theoretical abstraction with applicability to research design—so that the typology would be relevant to real-world project planning and evaluation. The final set of archetypical purposes was retained based on *distinctiveness, recurrence,* and *strategic usefulness*. These purposes are illustrated in the Findings section, where they anchor the mapping of clusters to specific research goals. Their articulation also enables managers

and policymakers to better interpret the type of value a given research contribution can offer—whether conceptual clarification, actionable design, or diagnostic understanding.

3.4 Combining Bridging Strategies for Specific Research Purposes

The final phase explored how bridging strategies, once profiled, can be meaningfully combined to support more robust and context-sensitive research designs. In multi-epistemic fields such as management, impactful contributions often rely on thoughtful combinations of approaches that balance epistemic coherence and functional complementarity (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011; Cornelissen & Durand, 2014). Bridging strategies were therefore treated as modular design elements, offering researchers a flexible space to enhance both theoretical depth and managerial usability.

The construction of combinations followed a structured process grounded in lens combination (Greene, 2007), multi-paradigm theorising (Lewis & Grimes, 1999), and configurational design (Van Burg et al., 2022). Rather than aggregating features, the approach identified alignments that preserve epistemological integrity while enhancing practical applicability. Each combination was developed as a design artefact, consistent with the *means–ends* logic of design science, where purposeful construction serves defined goals (Gregor & Hevner, 2013). In this sense, combinations were analytically composed to enhance managerial usability—notably intelligibility, actionability and transferability. The procedure unfolded in four stages. First, we limited combinations to two clusters to maintain conceptual clarity and avoid dilution; second, we filtered combinations using the profiling criteria to exclude incoherent pairings and retain those showing at least partial convergence; third, we explored integration logics, distinguishing between reinforcing and balancing synergies; fourth, we conducted an iterative resonance check, verifying that each combination reflected recognized patterns in the conceptual literature through meta-triangulation (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). The resulting combinations are proposed as heuristic tools that researchers can adapt and refine to align with their inquiry's logic and intent. Each enhances one of three dimensions of managerial usability: *intelligibility*, the conceptual clarity and resonance of the theoretical contribution; *actionability*, the operational usefulness for guiding managerial decision-making; *transferability*, the adaptability of insights across organizational settings without loss of meaning. These design-oriented configurations make academic research more usable by structuring its complexity so that both scholars and practitioners can act on it.

4. Findings

The findings are organized to reflect the analytical sequence outlined in the methodology. First, the results of the clustering process are presented, identifying four distinct families of bridging strategies. Second, the section introduces the profiling criteria that distinguish these strategies in terms of epistemological stance, combinability, and capacity for translation into managerial usability. Third, it outlines the archetypical research purposes that underpin different orientations to knowledge production. Finally, it illustrates how bridging strategies can be purposefully combined to match distinct research intents, providing researchers with modular configurations that enhance both rigor and relevance.

4.1 Clusters of Bridging Strategies

Building on the clustering process described in Section 3.1, four clusters of bridging strategies emerged from the analysis, each articulating a distinct conceptual logic for addressing the rigor–relevance divide. Rather than representing mutually exclusive alternatives, these clusters capture different configurations of assumptions, methods, and knowledge goals that can be mobilized in complementary ways depending on the focus of inquiry. Developed as heuristic constructs, they group together conceptually coherent approaches that cut across disciplinary and epistemological boundaries, supporting both analytical insight and contextual adaptability.

The first cluster, Collaborative bridging logics, emphasizes mutual engagement between researchers and practitioners. Its defining characteristic is co-creation, whereby research questions, data collection, and interpretation are developed jointly through dialogical or participatory processes. The objective is to generate locally relevant and co-owned knowledge that supports situated problem-solving. This cluster is particularly valuable in contexts requiring trust-building, iterative feedback, and relational proximity (Van de Ven, 2007; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). However, its strengths in local embeddedness may present limitations, such as reduced portability or generalizability, and its relational intensity can be time-consuming. Researchers may mitigate these drawbacks by embedding dialogical engagement within broader multi-site or longitudinal designs, thereby maintaining local depth while extending analytical reach.

The second cluster, Context-anchored theorising, seeks to generate theory through close observation of organizational dynamics. Strategies within this cluster emphasize empirical grounding and contextual sensitivity, often drawing on grounded theory, process research, or engaged scholarship (Langley et al., 2013; Eisenhardt et al., 2016). The resulting insights are conceptually robust yet deeply anchored in real-world complexity. This cluster is particularly effective in exploratory settings or under-theorized domains where new constructs and relationships can emerge from immersive empirical work. Its main limitation lies in reduced generalizability and the high investment required in data collection and contextual familiarization. Comparative designs or cross-case theorising can help to overcome these barriers and to position findings within broader theoretical debates.

The third cluster, Constructive design strategies, follows a solution-oriented logic grounded in the principle that knowledge can be designed, tested, and refined. Drawing on design science and constructive research (Hevner et al., 2004; Lukka & Suomala,

2014), these strategies generate conceptual artefacts such as models, tools, or frameworks that address specific managerial challenges. They excel in contexts where actionability, scalability, and methodological control are key priorities. However, their effectiveness depends on the availability of well-defined problems and robust implementation environments, which may be absent in early-stage or exploratory research. These constraints can be mitigated by adopting iterative prototyping and feedback mechanisms that progressively align artefacts with practical constraints and managerial expectations.

The fourth cluster, Flexible translation frameworks, focuses on enhancing the usability and reach of academic knowledge. These strategies employ translation mechanisms such as rhetorical reframing, boundary objects, and simplified conceptual templates (Carlile, 2004; Nicolini et al., 2008). Translation here is conceived as selective adaptation—preserving conceptual integrity while improving communicative fit. This cluster performs particularly well when the goal is to engage multiple audiences across institutional or disciplinary boundaries, such as in executive education or policy-oriented research. Its main vulnerability is epistemic dilution: simplification may risk undermining theoretical precision. To preserve rigor, researchers should delimit the scope of translation and ensure explicit connections to the original constructs.

Table 2 illustrates the axial coding structure that informed the identification of these clusters, highlighting the conceptual dimensions and representative sources underpinning each.

Table 2. Conceptual coding structure informing the identification of bridging strategy clusters

Code label	Frequency (n)	Conceptual dimension	Strategy cluster	Representative source
Embedded researcher role	5	Practitioner engagement	Collaborative bridging logics	Van de Ven, 2007
Relational trust-building	4	Collaborative process	Collaborative bridging logics	Bartunek & Rynes, 2014
Theory–practice proximity	6	Problem orientation	Collaborative bridging logics	Amabile et al., 2001
Iterative artifact testing	7	Knowledge production logic	Constructive design strategies	Hevner et al., 2004
Engineering orientation	4	Problem-solving logic	Constructive design strategies	vom Brocke et al., 2020
Situated theorizing	6	Epistemic stance	Context-anchored theorizing	Tsang, 2014
Local immersion	5	Context sensitivity	Context-anchored theorizing	Gherardi, 2016
Translation toolkit	6	Dissemination logic	Flexible translation frameworks	Carlile, 2004
Semantic portability	5	Boundary spanning	Flexible translation frameworks	Star & Griesemer, 1989
Rhetorical reframing	4	Framing strategy	Flexible translation frameworks	Corley & Gioia, 2011

4.2 Profiling Criteria and Assessment of Bridging Clusters

The second analytical step identified three profiling criteria—epistemic sustainability, combinability, and translation capacity—which enable a structured comparison among the clusters. Because these clusters are not mutually exclusive, their comparative assessment reveals how each contributes differently to the dual imperatives of academic rigor and managerial relevance.

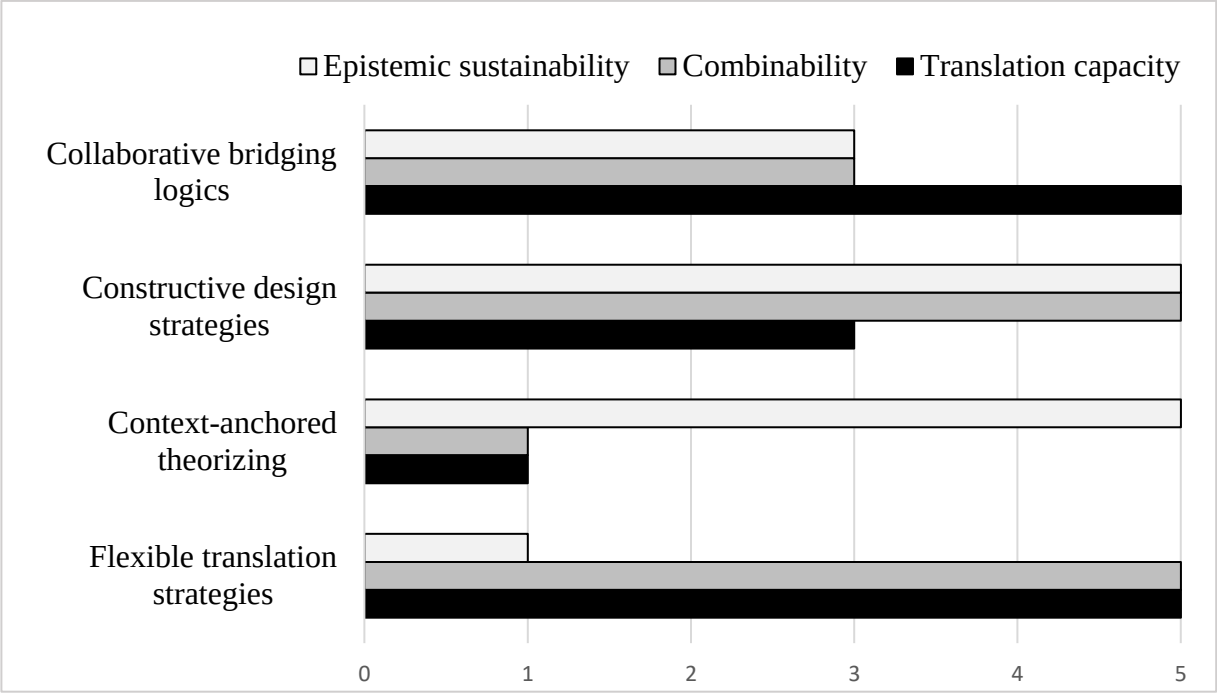
The first profiling criterion, epistemic sustainability, refers to the internal coherence, theoretical grounding, and potential for cumulative development within each strategy. This dimension captures a cluster's capacity to produce knowledge that retains conceptual validity over time, remaining robust across institutional and scholarly shifts. It resonates with Bacharach's (1989) notion of theory longevity, highlighting the ability of research to sustain dialogue within and beyond its original context. Clusters with lower epistemic sustainability may priorities contextual responsiveness and local insight, often at the expense of generalizable structure.

The second criterion, combinability, assesses the extent to which a cluster can be integrated with others in a coherent and synergistic manner. It focuses on modularity, methodological openness, and epistemological compatibility—conditions that allow researchers to combine strategies purposefully. High combinability facilitates multi-strategy designs, supporting adaptation to pluralistic research environments. Approaches grounded in relational or flexible epistemologies, such as collaborative or translation-based strategies, typically exhibit stronger combinability (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

The third criterion, translation capacity, measures a cluster's ability to render conceptual insights intelligible and actionable beyond academia. It captures how effectively a strategy enables the uptake of scholarly knowledge by practitioners, whether through simplification, reframing, or co-creation (Carlile, 2004). High translation capacity reflects an aptitude for crossing

cognitive and organizational boundaries without compromising conceptual clarity. In managerial terms, it marks the degree to which theoretical insights can be mobilized as decision tools or learning mechanisms in practice.
Figure 1 summarizes the comparative profiling of the four clusters across these three dimensions, using a qualitative scale (1 = low, 3 = medium, 5 = high). The visual comparison highlights that while each cluster demonstrates distinctive strengths, no single approach dominates across all dimensions—emphasizing the need for purposeful combination to achieve both epistemic and practical impact.

Figure 1. Comparative profiling of bridging clusters
across epistemic sustainability, combinability, and translation capacity
Scores indicate the relative strength of each cluster on a qualitative scale
(1=Low, 3=Medium, 5=High)



This comparative analysis clarifies the unique contributions and limitations of each cluster and provides the analytical foundation for the subsequent discussion on combining strategies according to specific research purposes.

4.3 Archetypical Research Goals

While analytically independent from the preceding steps, the definition of archetypical research goals constitutes a pivotal component of this analytical structure. Once the landscape of bridging strategies has been mapped and profiled, the central question becomes how to align them with the intended knowledge contribution of a research project.
To facilitate this alignment, the analysis identified three recurrent research purposes—clarifying meaning in context, designing interventions for organizational action, and mapping complex systems for cross-context sensemaking. These purposes represent distinct epistemic orientations and modes of translation, each calling for different configurations of strategy clusters.
The first purpose, clarifying meaning in context, reflects the ambition to conceptualize, extend, or challenge theoretical frameworks through close empirical engagement. This mode of inquiry produces generalizable conceptual insights while retaining sensitivity to local meaning structures. It aligns with contributions that aim to advance theoretical understanding through rigorous and plausible abstraction (Weick, 1995; Eisenhardt, Graebner & Sonenshein, 2016).
The second purpose, designing interventions for organizational action, characterizes research that directly addresses managerial or organizational challenges. It emphasizes the co-production of actionable outcomes while maintaining theoretical rigor. This purpose is strongly associated with practice-engaged research traditions such as design science and action design (Van Aken & Romme, 2009; Hevner et al., 2004), in which iterative testing and stakeholder collaboration underpin knowledge development.
The third purpose, mapping complex systems for cross-context sensemaking, seeks to explain and systematize organizational dynamics, offering interpretive frameworks that can inform managerial reflection and learning. This orientation embraces complexity and ambiguity to uncover relational patterns and tensions across settings (Nicolini et al., 2008; Cornelissen, 2017). Its contributions are especially valuable when the objective is to foster systemic awareness rather than prescriptive solutions.

These three archetypes are not meant to be exhaustive, but to serve as representative anchors for diverse knowledge aims in management research. They provide a conceptual foundation for aligning research design choices with the epistemic and practical outcomes desired.

4.4 Purposeful Combinations: Tailoring Strategy Clusters to Research Goals

This final step illustrates how bridging strategies can be meaningfully combined to address distinct research purposes. While each cluster offers a coherent mode of engaging with the rigor–relevance divide, they often achieve greater impact when integrated. Purposeful combinations can reinforce conceptual robustness, strengthen usability, and enhance the communicative reach of research outputs.

The proposed configurations build on the comparative profiling presented in Section 4.2 and the integration logic outlined in Section 3.4. They highlight combinations that preserve epistemological coherence while enhancing methodological complementarity. Each pairing is conceived as a design artefact—a structured composition that aligns scholarly and practical objectives through the lens of managerial usability.

For research aimed at clarifying meaning in context, the combination of Context-anchored theorising and Constructive design strategies proves most effective. The first ensures close empirical grounding in organizational realities, while the second introduces conceptual scaffolding through iterative abstraction. Together, they enable managers to recognize familiar patterns within rigorous theoretical frameworks, enhancing intelligibility and conceptual resonance.

When the goal is designing interventions for organizational action, combining Collaborative bridging logics with Constructive design strategies provides a robust methodological platform. The collaborative dimension embeds the researcher in co-creative problem-solving, fostering contextual responsiveness and shared ownership, while the constructive dimension offers structured experimentation and iterative refinement. This integration enhances actionability and supports the development of adaptable, practice-ready solutions.

Finally, mapping complex systems for cross-context sensemaking benefits from integrating Context-anchored theorising with Flexible translation frameworks. The former provides interpretive depth and contextual richness, while the latter facilitates communicative clarity and conceptual portability. Combined, they promote transferability and interpretive generalization, allowing insights to travel across organizational levels and domains without losing nuance.

These combinations are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. Rather, they serve as reflective tools to guide researchers in composing strategies that align epistemic coherence with managerial relevance. In practice, research often spans overlapping purposes, requiring hybrid configurations that can accommodate plural aims while maintaining theoretical integrity.

Table 3 summarizes these purpose–strategy alignments, highlighting the dimensions of managerial usability they enhance and the rationale underpinning each configuration.

Table 3. Combinations of research strategies by research purpose

Research purpose	Suggested Combination	Managerial Usability Enhanced by Combination	Rationale
Clarifying meaning in context	Context-anchored theorizing + Constructive design strategies	Intelligibility and conceptual resonance	Balances empirical grounding with abstraction, enabling managers to recognize familiar patterns within theoretical frameworks.
Designing interventions for organizational action	Collaborative bridging logics + Constructive design strategies	Actionability and operational alignment	Combines co-creation with iterative design to support the development of solutions that are adaptable and ready for use in real settings.
Mapping complex systems for cross-context sensemaking	Context-anchored theorizing + Flexible translation frameworks	Transferability and interpretive generalization	Offers contextual depth and communicative clarity, enabling insights to be understood and applied across organizational levels and domains.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings offer an integrated account of how the persistent gap between academic rigor and managerial relevance can be addressed through a structured, theory-informed process. The identification of strategy clusters provides a framework for navigating the current fragmentation of approaches, while the comparative profiling highlights their distinctive features and capacity to address specific facets of the rigor–relevance divide. The delineation of archetypical research purposes adds contextual guidance, enabling scholars to select and, where appropriate, combine clusters in ways that align with their intended contributions. Collectively, these analytical steps articulate a conceptual process that embeds managerial usability within epistemic robustness, offering scholars a navigational structure for designing research that is both theoretically grounded and practically consequential.

5. Conclusion

This study revisits a long-standing challenge in management research: the persistent distance between academic rigor and practical relevance. Addressing this divide requires a rethinking of how knowledge is produced and used. Research should be designed with usability in mind from the outset, shaping the way questions are formulated, evidence is interpreted, and insights are shared. When rigor and relevance evolve together, research becomes a generative process that informs both understanding and action. The framework presented here introduces a shared vocabulary and a structured approach to navigating the diversity of strategies that connect theory and practice. It helps researchers classify, evaluate, and combine bridging approaches to design studies that are coherent, reflective, and useful.

For the academic community, this framework supports methodological awareness and encourages alignment between purpose, design logic, and expected contribution. It also offers a language for comparison, enabling researchers to position their work clearly within broader conversations about relevance and impact.

For academic institutions and policy bodies, the framework provides a foundation for evaluating research quality through coherence and intent. It recognizes that impactful scholarship emerges when epistemic soundness and practical usability are treated as complementary dimensions of quality. This perspective can inform review processes, funding evaluations, and research assessment systems, encouraging environments that value both intellectual depth and societal contribution.

For doctoral students and early-career researchers, the framework offers structured guidance in selecting methodological configurations aligned with their objectives. By linking research purposes to appropriate bridging strategies, it helps younger scholars make deliberate and transparent design choices. It clarifies the function of their research—whether it aims to explain, intervene, or translate—and enhances their ability to communicate its contribution to academic and professional audiences alike.

For reflective practitioners and managers, the framework serves as a conceptual map to interpret and apply academic knowledge in practice. It helps them assess the credibility and relevance of research outputs, understand how different forms of inquiry generate distinct kinds of insight, and translate those insights into organizational learning and strategic decision-making. The framework thus strengthens the dialogue between research and practice, enabling organizations to become informed users and co-creators of management knowledge.

- Taken together, these contributions point toward a more connected research ecosystem. Scholars, institutions, and practitioners can use this framework to design, evaluate, and apply management knowledge in a way that integrates analytical discipline with contextual awareness. Research conceived in this way becomes both a process of inquiry and a means of engagement with the real-world challenges that shape organizational life.

The study also acknowledges several limitations. The conceptual constructs are drawn from published scholarship and may reflect theoretical idealizations more than actual research practices. The proposed combinations of strategies are heuristic tools intended to guide reflection and adaptation, not standardized templates. Furthermore, the focus on management studies may limit transferability to other disciplines with different epistemic foundations. These limitations suggest directions for further research. Empirical work could examine how the adoption of specific bridging configurations influences the design and outcomes of management studies. Longitudinal and comparative analyses could explore how bridging strategies evolve across contexts and over time. Collaborative initiatives between scholars and practitioners could test the framework's capacity to enhance the usability of research in organizational settings. Overall, the framework contributes to a more integrated understanding of how rigor and relevance can coexist in management research. It invites a discipline that connects conceptual depth with practical wisdom and develops knowledge that is both analytically grounded and usable for decision-making, learning, and change within organizations.

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