

Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence-Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review*

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Undertaking a review of the literature is an important part of any research project. The researcher both maps and assesses the relevant intellectual territory in order to specify a research question which will further develop the knowledge base. However, traditional ‘narrative’ reviews frequently lack thoroughness, and in many cases are not undertaken as genuine pieces of investigatory science. Consequently they can lack a means for making sense of what the collection of studies is saying. These reviews can be biased by the researcher and often lack rigour. Furthermore, the use of reviews of the available evidence to provide insights and guidance for intervention into operational needs of practitioners and policymakers has largely been of secondary importance. For practitioners, making sense of a mass of often-contradictory evidence has become progressively harder. The quality of evidence underpinning decision-making and action has been questioned, for inadequate or incomplete evidence seriously impedes policy formulation and implementation. In exploring ways in which evidence-informed management reviews might be achieved, the authors evaluate the process of systematic review used in the medical sciences. Over the last fifteen years, medical science has attempted to improve the review process by synthesizing research in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible manner with the twin aims of enhancing the knowledge base and informing policymaking and practice. This paper evaluates the extent to which the process of systematic review can be applied to the management field in order to produce a reliable knowledge stock and enhanced practice by developing context-sensitive research. The paper highlights the challenges in developing an appropriate methodology.

Introduction: the need for an evidence-informed approach

Undertaking a review of the literature to provide the best evidence for informing policy and

practice in any discipline, is a key research objective for the respective academic and practitioner communities.

The post-World-War-II era witnessed a sharp focus of attention by academics and practitioners on the discipline and profession of management (Blake and Mouton, 1976; Tisdall, 1982). The pace of knowledge production in this field has been accelerating ever since and has resulted in a body of knowledge that is increasingly fragmented and transdisciplinary as well as being interdependent from advancements in the social

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