

Reevaluating Classical Management Approaches in Global Organizations: Relevance and Integration

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Abstract

This article investigates the continuing relevance and contextual application of classical management theories—scientific management, administrative theory, and bureaucracy—in contemporary international organizations. Amid global shifts in technology, workforce structure, and cultural dynamics, the foundational models of Taylor, Fayol, and Weber offer both stability and limitations. This study utilizes qualitative document analysis to examine how organizations across sectors and regions interpret, adapt, and integrate classical principles with modern frameworks such as agility, contingency theory, and transformational leadership. Findings show that while rigid applications of classical models may constrain innovation and responsiveness, their selective integration enhances clarity, accountability, and efficiency. The research identifies a trend toward hybrid management systems that combine the structural advantages of classical theory with the flexibility of modern approaches. By reassessing classical thought through a global and empirical lens, this article contributes to theory and practice: it redefines the applicability of historical models and offers a pathway for designing context-sensitive, high-performing systems. The study concludes by advocating balanced integration strategies aligned with cultural, technological, and institutional demands of the 21st century.

Keywords

Classical management theory; hybrid management; organizational design; administrative theory; global management

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid technological advances, shifting labor dynamics, and globalization, the foundations of classical management theory are undergoing critical re-examination. Management thinkers such as Frederick Taylor, Henri Fayol, and Max Weber established principles that prioritized efficiency, hierarchy, and formalized processes—values that continue to influence organizational design and behavior globally. While modern theorists often critique these models for their rigidity, the resurgence of interest in operational discipline and standardized procedures during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores their enduring relevance (Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 28; Wren et al., 2020).

The theoretical significance of classical management theories lies in their foundational contribution to organizational structure and control. Taylor's scientific management, with its time-motion studies and labor optimization, and Fayol's administrative principles, offering a clear hierarchy and functional specialization, remain embedded in management education and practice (Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 64; Fayol, 1949). Meanwhile, Weber's model of bureaucracy introduced a legal-rational framework that informs governmental and corporate institutions to this day (Weber, 1978). Empirical evidence suggests that organizations operating in highly regulated or industrial environments continue to rely on classical frameworks to maintain predictability and operational discipline (Daft, 2021; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 117).

Despite their value, classical approaches face growing criticism for their lack of adaptability and employee-centered perspectives, especially in knowledge-based economies. Contemporary organizations prioritize flexibility, innovation, and employee autonomy—traits often underrepresented in classical models (Mintzberg, 2009; Yukl, 2020, p. 94). As digital transformation reshapes workspaces, the limitations of rigid hierarchies and central decision-making become increasingly apparent. Nonetheless, scholars argue that a hybrid model, integrating classical stability with modern agility, could bridge these theoretical gaps (Jones & George, 2022; Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 133).

The research gap lies in the lack of holistic, comparative studies exploring the adaptive application of classical principles in diverse organizational settings and cultures. While individual studies have addressed historical models and contemporary practices separately, few have examined how classical frameworks are operationalized—or challenged—within modern international organizations, especially across varying cultural and regulatory landscapes (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 71; Hofstede et al., 2010). This gap necessitates a closer inspection of classical relevance through empirical and contextual lenses.

This article aims to evaluate the contemporary applicability of classical management theories across global organizational settings. It specifically investigates how traditional models are modified or retained in the face of modern demands for innovation, decentralization, and cultural diversity. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following questions: (1) How are classical management principles currently implemented in international organizations? (2) What limitations or challenges arise from applying these theories in modern contexts? (3) How can classical and contemporary approaches be integrated to improve organizational performance? These questions shape the ensuing analysis and will be answered thematically in the Results and Discussion section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical management theory forms the intellectual cornerstone of modern organizational science. Its evolution began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when industrialization and bureaucratization demanded a systematic approach to work and administration. Taylor's scientific management emphasized efficiency through task standardization and worker specialization. Fayol's administrative theory introduced fourteen principles of management, focusing on planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Fayol, 1949; Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 71). Weber's ideal bureaucracy, with its clearly defined rules, hierarchy, and merit-based advancement, added a sociological dimension to managerial studies (Weber, 1978; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 138).

Subsequent scholars expanded these ideas by contrasting them with human relations and systems theories. For instance, the Hawthorne studies conducted by Elton Mayo revealed the limitations of mechanistic views and emphasized social factors in productivity (Mayo, 1933; Daft, 2021). Contemporary management texts often frame classical theories as "foundational but incomplete," urging their integration with behavioral and contingency approaches (Jones & George, 2022; Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 126). In addition, institutional and postmodern theorists criticize the classical paradigm for oversimplifying complex social realities within organizations (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 84).

Despite such critiques, recent literature indicates that classical principles are far from obsolete. Studies in international public administration, lean manufacturing, and healthcare management demonstrate the continued use of hierarchical control and specialization for efficiency and accountability (Mintzberg, 2009; Hofstede et al., 2010). For example, Fayol's scalar chain principle is mirrored in military and multinational corporation (MNC) hierarchies, while Weber's model informs legal-institutional design in global governance. Scholars such as Wren et al. (2020) argue that a contextualized

application of classical management—one that adapts to cultural, technological, and sectoral conditions—offers significant value for managing complexity in the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

Classical management theory comprises a trio of foundational perspectives: scientific management, administrative theory, and bureaucracy. Each offers a distinct yet complementary framework for understanding organizational structure and performance. These paradigms form the analytical lens through which this study examines contemporary organizational relevance.

Frederick W. Taylor's scientific management emphasizes productivity through task optimization and worker efficiency. His core ideas rest on the rational analysis of work processes, advocating for time studies, performance standards, and specialization (Taylor, 1911). In contemporary practice, this theory informs lean operations, workflow analysis, and job design. Schermerhorn (2021, p. 82) notes that many global manufacturing and logistics companies still apply Taylorist principles, particularly in optimizing repetitive tasks and reducing waste through standardized procedures.

Henri Fayol's administrative theory shifts the focus from task-level analysis to organizational-wide planning and control. Fayol proposed fourteen management principles, such as unity of command, division of work, and scalar chain (Fayol, 1949). These remain embedded in managerial education and enterprise systems. For instance, ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) software often mirrors Fayol's organizing and controlling functions. Robbins and Coulter (2021, p. 155) argue that administrative theory provides a strategic-level perspective that enhances decision-making and role clarity in complex organizations.

Max Weber's bureaucratic theory introduces a formalized structure grounded in rules, impersonality, and meritocracy. Weber conceptualized bureaucracy as a rational-legal authority system, essential for consistency and objectivity in large institutions (Weber, 1978). Contemporary public administration and corporate compliance systems draw heavily from this model. According to Jones and George (2022), bureaucracy supports fairness and accountability but must be moderated to avoid rigidity. Schermerhorn and Bachrach (2022, p. 134) emphasize that modern bureaucracies have evolved into "post-bureaucratic" systems incorporating flexibility without sacrificing procedural clarity.

In addition to the classical triad, contingency theory provides a bridge between historical models and contemporary realities. It posits that there is no "one best way"

to manage; instead, organizational effectiveness depends on contextual variables such as environment, technology, and workforce (Daft, 2021). This complements classical theories by justifying their application in certain settings while acknowledging their limitations in others. For example, Fayol's hierarchical clarity may be effective in a traditional government office but less so in a tech startup requiring innovation and decentralized decision-making.

Together, these theoretical foundations enable this study to examine classical management as both enduring and adaptable. Their principles offer consistency and order, while contingency theory provides the necessary lens to understand their practical relevance in diverse modern environments. By engaging with these interrelated frameworks, this research builds a solid base for analyzing how classical thought persists, transforms, or fades within contemporary organizational settings across global contexts.

Previous Research

A review of past studies reveals an evolving discourse on the relevance of classical management in modern organizations. Early research by Wren and Bedeian (2009) systematically traced the historical lineage of management thought, asserting that foundational concepts from Taylor, Fayol, and Weber provided the structure for modern administrative science. Their study, based on archival and comparative analysis, emphasized the pedagogical importance of classical theories in management curricula worldwide. This formed the basis for later empirical inquiries that evaluated their real-world application.

Mintzberg (2009) offered a critical perspective by investigating managerial behavior across industries and found that classical models oversimplified complex managerial roles. His qualitative observations challenged the notion of formalized decision-making as effective in dynamic environments. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that classical structures still governed routine and operational levels in large firms. This critique added nuance to the debate by contrasting normative prescriptions with observed managerial realities.

A study by Hofstede et al. (2010) explored organizational culture in over 70 countries, revealing how cultural dimensions influence the applicability of classical principles. For instance, high power distance cultures tend to accept hierarchical structures akin to Fayol's scalar chain or Weberian bureaucracy. Their cross-cultural comparative analysis demonstrated that the success of classical approaches depends on contextual alignment with cultural values and expectations.

Hatch and Cunliffe (2013, p. 92) further problematized classical theories through a postmodern lens, arguing that they promote managerial control and ignore complexity, identity, and meaning-making. Their theoretical synthesis urged scholars to rethink objectivity and order, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors. However, they also noted that in regulated or high-risk sectors—such as healthcare or aviation—classical structures often ensured safety and accountability.

More recent empirical work by Robbins and Coulter (2021, p. 165) reaffirmed the practical use of classical methods in global enterprises. Their comparative case studies showed that while innovation and autonomy are crucial, classical hierarchies enhance clarity and performance metrics in organizations with high volume operations. Similarly, Schermerhorn and Bachrach (2022, p. 142) highlighted the application of Fayol's planning and control in project-based industries and the use of bureaucratic standards in multinational corporate governance.

Finally, Jones and George (2022) examined how classical principles are embedded within modern hybrid structures. Their longitudinal study of multinational corporations found that many retained core bureaucratic traits, such as role specialization and procedural documentation, while introducing flexibility at operational layers. This reflects a trend toward "post-classical synthesis," in which historical models are selectively preserved and strategically adapted.

From these studies, it becomes clear that classical management theories remain functionally relevant but require contextual calibration. The research gap lies in the lack of integrated frameworks that analyze how classical and contemporary approaches can co-exist within international and culturally diverse organizational environments. This study seeks to fill that gap by evaluating the adaptive use of classical principles across different global organizational models and proposing a hybrid framework for their modern application.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, document-based methodology that synthesizes academic theories with empirical literature. The primary data consist of scholarly articles, academic books, and institutional reports that explore the application of classical management theories in contemporary organizational settings. This textual approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how these theories are interpreted, modified, and applied across global and sectoral contexts (Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 73; Wren & Bedeian, 2009, p. 108).

The data sources include international books on management and organizational behavior, peer-reviewed journal articles, and institutional reports published by organizations such as the World Bank, the International Labour Organization, and major universities. Preference is given to materials published no later than 2025, ensuring the inclusion of the most current theoretical and empirical insights. These sources reflect diverse perspectives from various disciplines, allowing for triangulation across managerial, sociological, and economic viewpoints (Daft, 2021; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 187).

Data were collected using document analysis techniques, emphasizing interpretive reading and thematic classification. Each document was analyzed for its discussion of classical management elements—scientific management, administrative principles, and bureaucratic structures—and their relevance or transformation in modern contexts. This technique facilitates the extraction of patterns, contradictions, and evolving applications of classical thought in practice (Yukl, 2020, p. 133; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 103).

The analysis followed a thematic approach, organizing data into conceptual categories: (1) persistent classical applications, (2) contextual adaptations, and (3) theoretical integrations. These categories were developed iteratively during the document review process to reflect emerging relationships between classical models and contemporary organizational demands. This interpretive lens ensures analytical depth and flexibility, capturing both structural continuities and dynamic shifts (Jones & George, 2022; Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 117).

Conclusions were drawn by synthesizing thematic insights and linking them to the research questions. The triangulation of classical theory with real-world applications allowed the development of a hybrid framework that acknowledges the persistent value of classical principles while integrating flexibility and innovation from contemporary management theory. This conceptual synthesis addresses the research gap identified in prior sections and provides a robust foundation for both academic discourse and practical application in modern organizations (Mintzberg, 2009; Hofstede et al., 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The enduring relevance of classical management theory continues to shape contemporary organizations, though not without significant reinterpretation. Theoretical dialogue with contingency theory and institutional perspectives reveals that while classical models provide essential structure and discipline, their application in dynamic environments necessitates adaptation. Previous research has outlined this

evolution, yet empirical integration of classical principles in global organizational contexts remains underexplored (Wren et al., 2020; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 163). This section addresses the three research questions thematically, demonstrating how foundational principles can still inform modern practice through hybridization and contextual sensitivity.

New expert perspectives indicate that classical models, when selectively applied, can reinforce organizational reliability, especially in high-stakes sectors such as public administration, manufacturing, and defense. For example, Fayol's administrative principles, such as unity of command and division of labor, remain central to hierarchical organizations operating in environments with low uncertainty (Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 148; Weber, 1978). These insights bridge theoretical gaps by showing that classical theory's perceived inflexibility is not universally limiting but highly contingent on context and purpose.

This general discussion also confirms that the integration of classical and contemporary approaches provides a viable strategy for managing complexity. The combination of structure (from classical theory) and agility (from modern paradigms) helps organizations respond to change without losing coherence. Accordingly, the following subsections examine how classical management principles are currently applied, where their limitations arise, and how hybrid strategies are being implemented across diverse organizational environments.

1. Contemporary Implementation of Classical Management Principles

One of the central research questions of this study explores how classical management principles are implemented in international organizations today. Across industries, foundational practices like hierarchical authority, formalized planning, and task specialization remain integral to organizational stability. For instance, Weber's bureaucratic model is still embedded in public sector organizations, providing predictable and lawful processes critical for accountability and fairness (Weber, 1978; Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 102).

Taylor's scientific management influences operations management, especially in lean manufacturing and logistics sectors. Standard operating procedures, performance measurement systems, and task optimization strategies are prevalent in global firms such as Toyota and Amazon, reflecting Taylorist influence (Daft, 2021; Jones & George, 2022). These systems rely on repetition and measurable efficiency, hallmarks of classical thinking.

Fayol's principles continue to inform organizational design. His emphasis on centralization, discipline, and unity of direction are particularly useful in multinational corporations with diverse workforces and geographically distributed teams (Fayol, 1949; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 172). Administrative clarity supports project coordination across different cultural and regulatory environments.

However, implementation often involves modifications. Organizations adapt classical frameworks using digital tools and flexible procedures. For example, hierarchical decision-making is increasingly supported by real-time data analytics, allowing faster response while maintaining order (Mintzberg, 2009; Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 152). Thus, classical management is not applied in pure form but as a strategic foundation upon which modern tools are layered.

2. Limitations and Challenges of Classical Theory in Modern Contexts

This section addresses the second research question by analyzing the limitations and challenges associated with applying classical management principles in contemporary organizational contexts. While foundational in design, classical theories often conflict with the demands of agility, creativity, and participatory culture that define modern organizational environments (Mintzberg, 2009; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 101).

One major limitation is rigidity. Weber's bureaucratic model, though effective for establishing control and fairness, can lead to inflexibility, excessive rule-following, and demotivating routines. In fast-paced industries such as tech or creative media, such rigidity can hinder innovation and adaptability (Weber, 1978; Daft, 2021). Similarly, Taylor's emphasis on task simplification may suppress worker autonomy and intrinsic motivation, critical in knowledge-based environments (Yukl, 2020, p. 121).

Fayol's scalar chain and centralized decision-making structures may result in communication bottlenecks and delayed responses to market shifts. Contemporary organizations often require flat hierarchies and cross-functional teams, especially when addressing complex, customer-centric challenges (Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 136; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 191). Thus, excessive reliance on classical structures can compromise responsiveness and interdepartmental collaboration.

Cultural misalignment is another challenge. Hofstede et al. (2010) demonstrated that classical models, particularly those emphasizing hierarchy and impersonality, may not align with low power-distance or collectivist cultures that value participatory leadership and communal goals. This misalignment can result in resistance or disengagement among employees.

Moreover, the digital transformation of work has rendered some classical assumptions obsolete. For example, classical theory assumes co-location and face-to-face supervision, while remote and hybrid work environments require trust-based leadership and digital collaboration tools (Jones & George, 2022). These shifts highlight the need to reevaluate classical assumptions within today's technological and social realities.

Finally, critics argue that classical theories fail to account for emotional intelligence, organizational identity, and ethics—elements now essential in leadership and strategic planning (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 112; Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 161). As such, organizations must reconcile the structural advantages of classical approaches with the human-centric focus demanded by modern organizational life.

3. Hybrid Integration of Classical and Contemporary Approaches

This final thematic subsection addresses the third research question by examining how organizations integrate classical management principles with contemporary approaches to create hybrid systems that meet today's dynamic operational demands. The process of selective adaptation allows firms to preserve the structural benefits of classical models while enhancing flexibility, employee engagement, and innovation capacity (Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 172; Daft, 2021).

Organizations increasingly utilize Fayol's planning and coordination functions as frameworks for agile project management. Rather than rigidly adhering to hierarchical chains, modern organizations restructure these principles to support cross-functional collaboration, sprints, and iterative decision-making (Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 201). For example, a multinational pharmaceutical company may retain central strategic oversight (Fayol) while empowering autonomous teams to innovate in localized markets (Yukl, 2020, p. 138).

Weberian bureaucracy is similarly transformed in contemporary governance. While rules and standard procedures remain essential in public services and compliance-heavy industries, digital platforms enable decentralized access,

real-time transparency, and automated enforcement of policies (Weber, 1978; Jones & George, 2022). This creates a more agile form of bureaucracy that aligns with institutional accountability yet responds quickly to stakeholder needs.

Taylor's scientific management, traditionally associated with physical labor, is reinterpreted through the lens of data analytics and continuous improvement in knowledge work. For instance, performance dashboards and KPIs mirror Taylorist logic but are applied in domains such as software engineering, customer support, or e-commerce logistics (Mintzberg, 2009; Schermerhorn, 2021, p. 144). When coupled with employee feedback and learning systems, this creates a balance between efficiency and development.

These hybrid strategies also rely heavily on contextual awareness. As contingency theory suggests, the appropriateness of classical or contemporary elements depends on organizational size, industry, culture, and environment (Daft, 2021). For example, a startup in a volatile market may minimize hierarchy and use agile frameworks, while a mature financial institution may emphasize classical structures to mitigate risk and maintain regulatory compliance.

Moreover, leadership practices reflect this duality. Leaders draw on classical theories for establishing strategic direction and accountability, while using transformational or servant leadership styles to cultivate motivation and innovation (Yukl, 2020, p. 152). This integration supports not only structural coherence but also psychological empowerment.

Ultimately, these hybrid models suggest that classical management theories need not be discarded but refined. By blending core classical elements with adaptive, human-centered strategies, organizations can achieve the stability and flexibility necessary to thrive in today's complex global environments (Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 179; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 118).

This study has answered each of the research questions by demonstrating that classical management theories—despite their historical roots—retain operational relevance when adapted to modern organizational conditions. First, classical principles such as Taylor's task optimization, Fayol's organizational coordination, and Weber's bureaucratic structure are actively implemented in today's international organizations, particularly in sectors requiring stability, consistency, and regulatory compliance. These models continue to guide foundational organizational practices, especially in large-scale or public-sector contexts (Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2022, p. 142; Robbins & Coulter, 2021, p. 198).

Second, the study identified critical challenges that arise from applying classical models uncritically. These include inflexibility, poor alignment with employee motivation, and cultural mismatches in global environments. Such limitations suggest that a rigid application of classical frameworks can hinder responsiveness, stifle innovation, and reduce employee engagement (Mintzberg, 2009; Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, acknowledging context and embracing flexibility are essential for modern application.

Third, the analysis revealed that successful organizations do not discard classical approaches but strategically integrate them with modern theories such as contingency theory, transformational leadership, and agile methodologies. This hybridization allows firms to benefit from the clarity and control of classical systems while cultivating innovation, adaptability, and cultural responsiveness (Daft, 2021; Yukl, 2020, p. 147). Such dual frameworks are particularly effective in global organizations that navigate multiple institutional and cultural environments.

Theoretically, this study offers a nuanced framework for reevaluating classical management as adaptable rather than obsolete. It refines our understanding of how foundational principles can evolve alongside shifting organizational paradigms. Practically, it provides actionable insights for managers and policymakers to apply structured management tools while remaining responsive to change. For example, project managers can blend Fayol's planning principles with agile techniques, or public institutions can digitize Weberian bureaucracy to enhance efficiency without sacrificing accountability.

Thus, this research contributes to the academic discourse by reconciling historical theory with contemporary complexity. It highlights that classical management, when recontextualized, offers not only relevance but strategic advantage in guiding the development of robust, adaptable, and culturally competent organizations.

CONCLUSION

This article has reexamined the enduring significance of classical management theories within the context of modern organizational practice. By exploring the foundational contributions of Taylor, Fayol, and Weber, the research established that classical models continue to inform contemporary managerial systems—particularly in areas requiring standardization, procedural clarity, and structural discipline. At the same time, the study illuminated how classical approaches must be adapted to remain effective amidst the complexities of today's digital, global, and human-centered workplaces.

Through detailed thematic analysis, this research affirmed that while classical theories offer valuable frameworks for organization and control, their unmodified application can hinder innovation, agility, and cultural responsiveness. Consequently, the integration of classical and modern approaches—such as agile practices, contingency theory, and participative leadership—presents a more balanced, context-sensitive strategy for managing organizational performance.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the evolution of management discourse by refining the role of classical paradigms in hybrid models. Practically, it equips managers and policymakers with a conceptual toolkit for designing management systems that are both disciplined and adaptable. As organizations continue to face volatility and complexity, this research recommends a strategic synthesis of tradition and innovation—leveraging the structure of the past to navigate the uncertainties of the future. Future studies could expand this analysis by examining empirical case studies of hybrid organizations across different cultural and regulatory environments, offering deeper insights into the operationalization of these findings.

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