

## A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING MANAGERIAL CHALLENGES: INSIGHTS FROM EMPIRICAL STUDY

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**Abstract.** Considering the nature, complexity and importance of the current managerial challenges, there is a need for a systematic study that offers guidance to their holistic analysis, and no overarching structure to guide this type of research could have been identified to date. This article lays the groundwork for a comprehensive examination of managerial challenges. Based on the review of 78 empirical works, the key practices in studying managerial challenges are synthesized and presented as a reference framework. The framework is designed using the 5W and 1H method. It offers an up-to-date understanding of the substance of managerial challenges, which contributes to both the theoretical understanding and practical execution of managerial work.

**Keywords:** managerial role, managerial process, managerial challenge, managerial challenges conceptual framework, 5W and 1H method.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's business environment managers act as integrators, overseeing functions that keep companies operating efficiently. Their role is context-dependent (Korica et al., 2017) and often involves highly versatile duties positioned between superiors and subordinates, demanding exceptional adaptability and skillset. A broad expertise, strategic vision of the company's long-term goals, and awareness of day-to-day operations are prerequisites for strong performance in this role (Rostron, 2022). However, this perspective, although accurate, only offers a snapshot of managerial work, which evolves over time.

According to Boyatzis' contingency theory of action and job performance, best performance occurs when (1) the organizational environment, (2) job demands and (3) individual capabilities align (Boyatzis, 1991). Thus, as the organizational environment evolves, managerial duties and competencies must also adapt (Mellahi & Wilkinson, 2004). The organizational environment is continuously changing: businesses operate in a VUCA world, which influences their decisions and strategies (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Managerial duties are shifting too, with collaboration outweighing supervision (Zhang, 2023), and managerial roles requiring high level of discretion with inherent trade-offs (Sandhu & Kulik, 2019). Regarding capabilities, purposeful learning and unlearning have become vital for handling crises (Vu & Nguyen, 2022), while emotional intelligence differentiates high-performing managers (Bas et al., 2023).

Managers operate in an increasingly unprecedented environment, some of which can be attributed to a wide range of factors often framed as grand challenges or wicked problems, such as climate change, sustainability, or cybercrime. These issues give rise to previously unrecognized management challenges that shape managerial work (Barkema et al., 2002). One certainty is that ensuring the smooth operation of the manager's area of responsibility – and overcoming emerging challenges – is among their most critical tasks. As Mintzberg (2013) stated, “managers are only as good as their ability to work things out”. However, these new challenges may require new measures that neither organizations (Sandhu & Kulik, 2019) nor managers (Seeck & Kantola, 2023) have a blueprint for. The potential consequences of not reacting effectively can be severe (Mellahi & Wilkinson, 2004).

Studying managerial challenges is a timely and diverse research area, and the related empirical knowledge base is extensive. Some studies focus on identifying context-specific challenges (Boehm & Turner, 2005), or anticipating their occurrence based on relevant signals (Hearn et al., 2023). Others aim to organize these challenges – by categorizing, ranking, or prioritizing them – to establish conceptual order, either for business (Knol et al., 2014) or research purposes (Schneider, 2018). Another major research theme examines the aftermath of managerial challenges, exploring ways to overcome them (Sieg et al., 2010), or assessing their impact on company activities (Nitsche, 2020). However, despite the frequent discussion of managerial challenges as context or focus of research, there is no universally agreed-upon understanding of this construct's meaning and scope. Furthermore, no overarching structure has yet been identified in this research stream, leaving a substantial gap.

The current state of research on managerial challenges is highly fragmented, encompassing a wide range of approaches to understanding, delineating and studying them. Given the construct's relevance, our goal is to provide deeper insights into how managerial challenges can be explored. Like Short et al. (2010), who examined how the concept of *opportunity* can be operationalized in entrepreneurship research, we intend to synthesize the diverse body of past research to inform future studies on managerial challenges. To deconstruct the managerial challenge construct, we analysed its operationalization in the literature through six key perspectives: what, when, where, who, why, and how, following the 5W and 1H method. Originally a journalism technique for communicating news (Waisbord, 2019), it is also used in research for problem identification (Knop & Mielczarek, 2018), effective summarization (Zhang et al., 2018), or systematic examination of phenomena (Jia et al., 2016). This review helped derive a structure that future studies can follow, enabling a holistic understanding of the topic and generating reliable insights into various managerial challenges. This reference framework offers significant advantages for future research by providing a foundational structure for inquiry and helping position studies within the field (Birkinshaw et al., 2014; Partelow, 2023). Since studying managerial challenges remains an ongoing task, offering well-informed guidance can contribute to numerous impactful research directions (von Nordenflycht, 2023; Wickert et al., 2021).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: first, we provide a brief review of relevant literature. Next, we outline the methodology used in this study, followed by a presentation of the analysis. The final part presents a results discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Literature background

### 2.1. The managerial challenge construct

Managerial challenges are a common theme in management literature, usually in one of two ways: as a contextual background or as a distinct subject of research. In line with the first approach, Griffin in *Fundamentals of Management* (2016) emphasized that challenges arise across all management functions, making them an inevitable part of managerial work. Similarly, Drucker in *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (2007) offered a broad perspective, arguing that challenges are at the core of management and that only managers who proactively anticipate and address them can secure organizational leadership. The second approach, which focuses specifically on managerial challenges, is more common in empirical studies. For example, Boehm and Turner (2005) identified challenges in agile process management, while Cunningham et al. (2015) categorized challenges that principal investigators face. Recognizing and responding to various challenges is a prerequisite for staying competitive and adapting in dynamic business environments (Barkema et al., 2002).

Although many authors discuss managerial challenges, either directly or indirectly, few attempt to define them specifically. However, some explanations have been proposed. Kolbaek (2019) described a managerial challenge as an issue requiring top management's attention because it cannot be resolved otherwise, emphasizing its managerial nature. In contrast, Kapuścińska and Matejun (2014) focused on the challenge itself, defining it as a situation that demands significant additional actions. Jagstedt (2016), drawing on the semantic meaning of the term's components, characterized a managerial challenge as a test of managerial abilities in problem-solving. Several key characteristics of managerial challenges have been identified. Smith (1992) noted that they typically involve multiple stakeholders with differing opinions, arise under diverse and interdependent conditions, and may require temporary solutions. Bucăța (2018) highlighted their impact and efforts they require, encapsulated in the notion of "rising to the challenge". Despite these valuable insights, no formal definition has yet been established.

A likely reason for the lack of formal definitions is that authors tend to view managerial challenges as self-explanatory, seeing no need to define them explicitly. While this assumption makes the construct broad and flexible, it also renders it vague. Managerial challenges are sometimes equated with barriers (Riege, 2005), problems (Tymowicz, 2022), or dilemmas (Mintzberg, 2009), among other similar terms. Such associations can significantly expand the scope of research relevant to this review but may also shift its focus. For example, Lazenbury (2020) argues that a problem explains *why* we act, whereas a challenge explains *how*. Conversely, Tymowicz (2022) suggests that "challenge" is a corporate word for "problem". Given these considerations, we do not pursue this etymological debate. Instead, we focus on the phenomena that authors explicitly label as "managerial challenges". By doing so, we aim to consolidate existing research and trace emerging connections between interpretations of this construct, providing deeper insights into its meaning, attributes, and scope.

### 2.2. Managerial challenges among managerial processes

Addressing managerial challenges occurs at all levels of a company's structure and across its operations, as they affect organizational processes, strategy, and behaviour (Barkema et al., 2002). However, the literature also highlights specific connections between managerial challenges and other management processes and functions. One perspective views a managerial

challenge through the lens of risk management. A challenge may arise as an unexpected consequence of an unplanned event (Hopkin, 2017) or from risk materialization (Dobrotă, 2012).

While risks and their occurrence may often be the root of a managerial challenge, planning and decision-making processes typically shape their resolution. Drucker (2006) identified the first phase of decision-making as defining the situation – clearly outlining the challenge to be addressed. However, he cautioned against equating decision-making with problem-solving, arguing that success lies not only in finding the right answer but also in asking the right question to ensure meaningful results. According to the model proposed by Supernat (1997), the process of transforming a decision into effective action turns decision-making into problem-solving.

When necessary, the natural consequence of making and implementing a decision is change (Narayanan et al., 2011). Therefore, managerial challenges can also be understood in relation to organizational change and change management. Change must align with organizational strategy, yet it is often a reactive process, triggered by the emergence of a challenging situation (By, 2005). However, successful implementation of change – and consequently, successful resolution of the challenge that necessitated it – depends on the organization's readiness for change: its willingness and ability to adapt (Weiner, 2009).

### 2.3. Attempts to structure managerial challenges research

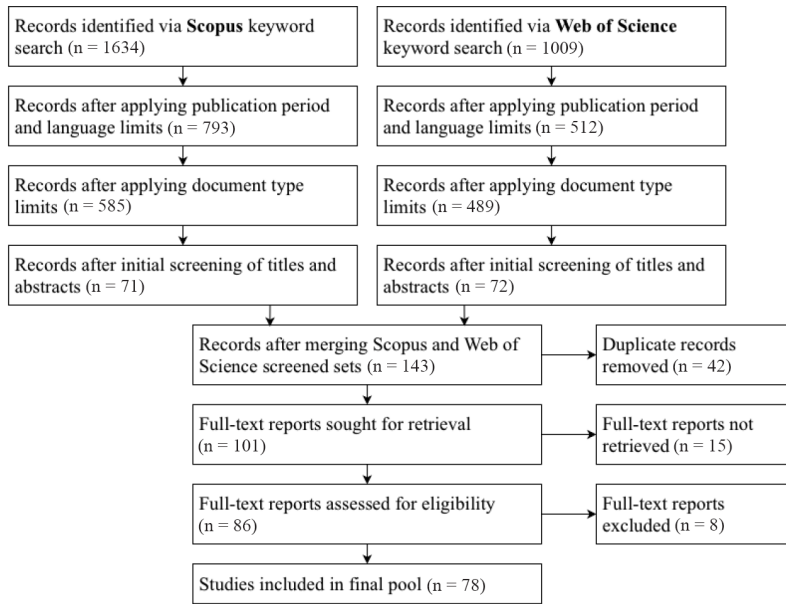
The management of challenges has not yet been formally framed as a distinct management process, although some instances of using the term “challenge management” to describe a specific managerial process can be found in the literature (e.g., Hoque et al., 2014; Kossek & Lee, 2008). However, such references are infrequent and have not led to broader recognition of “challenge management” as a distinct construct. Instead, the management of challenges is regarded as an inherent aspect of management, encompassing various functions, processes and roles. Most research focusing specifically on managerial challenges aims to identify, categorize, and assess them within established contexts.

For example, Griffin (2016) briefly outlined modern management challenges at three levels: global (e.g., globalization and diversity management), within the business environment (e.g., economic, political-legal and cultural factors), and inside the organization (e.g., HR management). Similarly, Cunningham et al. (2015) identified three levels of managerial challenges: the macro level, addressing issues affecting all firms; specific organizational levels, such as product development; and external networks, including relationships with buyers and suppliers. Mintzberg (2009), on the other hand, proposed a more functional classification, grouping challenges into categories related to thinking, information, people, action, and general issues. However, none of these authors presented their frameworks as universal typologies; rather, they offered ways of approaching managerial challenges on these levels individually.

## 3. Study design and data extraction

The study includes a literature analysis on managerial challenges. To ensure it remains both comprehensive and focused, we introduced several boundaries in the design (Bokun & Nazarko, 2023; Wilczewska & Nazarko, 2024). First, we limited our review to articles that explicitly address managerial challenges by using this term and its variations in the database search while excluding synonyms to ensure conceptual precision and in-depth examination of the construct under investigation. Second, we focused solely on challenges occurring in organiza-

tions, omitting other contexts (e.g., disease management, or other unrelated cases). Third, we included only recent research, restricting the review to studies published in the last 10 years (2014–2024). Lastly, we conducted a two-stage eligibility assessment: an initial screening based on titles and abstracts, followed by full-text review.



**Figure 1.** Flowchart of the literature search process steps

The first stage of the study involved gathering relevant literature within the established scope, in line with the PRISMA 2020 recommendations for documenting the identification and selection of studies (Page et al., 2021), as shown in Figure 1. Articles were sourced through systematic searches in Scopus and Web of Science databases that applied inclusion/exclusion criteria presented in Table 1. Following these limits, an initial screening of titles and abstracts was performed to remove records unrelated to the topic. Next, the screened sets from both databases were merged, and duplicate records were removed, resulting in the pool of studies eligible for full-text retrieval. Of these, 86 full-text reports were accessed, and 78 articles were ultimately included in the review.

**Table 1.** Search strategy parameters applied in the review

Search date	2025-01-05
Keywords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Title contains “managerial challeng*” OR “challenge for manage*” OR “management challeng*” OR (manage* AND challeng*)</li> <li>– Title, abstract or keywords contain (“compan*” OR “enterpris*” OR “firm*” OR “busines*”)</li> <li>– Title, abstract or keywords do not contain ((forest manage*) OR (waste manage*) OR (cancer) OR (disease) OR (nutritio* manage*) OR (data manage*))</li> </ul>
Publication period	2014–2024
Language	English
Document type	Article, review article, conference proceedings

The 78 included studies covered a broad spectrum of topics, including human resource management (Agarwal et al., 2021; Feng, 2021), digital transformation and technology-driven management (Heavin & Power, 2018; Bencsik, 2020), project and product management (Hoda & Murugesan, 2016; Cooper & Sommer, 2020), or knowledge and innovation management (Almeida et al., 2019; Sieg et al., 2010). The common denominator emerging from this body of literature is the growing multidimensionality of managerial challenges, and their implications are analysed more comprehensively in the sections that follow. A complete metadata table for all 78 included studies is provided as supplementary material in the Figshare repository (Wilczewska & Nazarko, 2025).

## 4. Article analysis process

### 4.1. 5W and 1H approach

To analyse the 78 records selected for the review, we applied the 5W and 1H method, involving examining an issue by answering six fundamental questions about it, as shown in Figure 2.

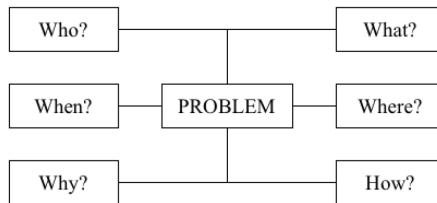


Figure 2. 5W and 1H approach

The analysis considers six perspectives in line with the method's scope. It examines how managerial challenges are approached as a research topic (*what*), the timing of their occurrence (*when*), their scope (*where*), the range of their impact (*who*), the reasons for their emergence (*why*), and the strategies to address them (*how*). This in-depth examination supports the development of a framework to guide future studies, based on identified good practices and key insights from the literature (Muñoz et al., 2025; Udonsathian & Worapun, 2024).

### 4.2. What: nature and classification

The analysed articles reveal a degree of arbitrariness in understanding managerial challenges. Apart from one study that explicitly defines them as "any issue an organization may have that may prevent them from adopting SM for HRM" (Poba-Nzaou et al., 2016), others avoid clear definitions. Over 20 alternative terms are used, from common ("difficulties", "barriers") to less frequent (e.g., "limitations"; Springer & Miler, 2022). This variation suggests that authors interpret managerial challenges differently, though the extent of these differences remains unclear.

The varied ways of perceiving managerial challenges mean they can differ in scope as well. Some studies add this context by assessing the challenges' severity and frequency (Springer & Miler, 2022), potential threats they bring (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016), their business impact (Hearn et al., 2023), or recommendations, solutions, or mitigation methods (Agarwal et al., 2021), indirectly indicating the resource intensity of these actions. Other focus solely on identifying challenges (Mossberg et al., 2020).

The analysed challenges were derived from primary data (e.g., interviews, documentation, surveys, observations), secondary sources (e.g., empirical literature, theories), or both. Study contexts influenced scope, covering company- (Feng, 2021), industry- (Kho et al., 2017), or domain-specific challenges (Vestin et al., 2022). The degree of categorization also varied – some studies grouped challenges into broad categories (e.g., technology, process and people-related; Vestin et al., 2022), while others listed challenges without patterns (e.g., Tidd & Bessant, 2018). While categorization can enhance generalizability, using predefined categories sometimes made results harder to replicate (Poba-Nzaou et al., 2016). Consequently, some findings remain context-specific, while others allow broader generalization.

### 4.3. When: emergence timing

Managerial challenges are typically examined in the context of their origin. Identifying *when* they occur is a key first step, providing a backdrop for analysis (Sarker et al., 2021) and enabling a systematic deconstruction of information to clarify whether a challenge is widespread or specific to one company (Muñoz et al., 2025; Udonsathian & Worapun, 2024). In the reviewed studies, two main perspectives emerged: challenges arising from broader external circumstances and those rooted in internal company dynamics.

From the external perspective, authors framed their research within broader circumstances, often linked to grand challenges or wicked problems. These include long-term global shifts that affect companies on a large scale, such as digital transformation (Hearn et al., 2023), or more abrupt events, such as a global pandemic (Sarker et al., 2021). In a narrower sense, challenges often arise from business-specific factors, such as rising corporate responsibility expectations (Eriksson & Svensson, 2018), and economic complexity (Okęglicka et al., 2015).

From the internal perspective, authors examined challenges linked to a company's own circumstances. These may relate to external interactions, such as entering a new market (Feng, 2021) and partnering with intermediaries (Sieg et al., 2010), or to operational decisions like adopting new practices such as enterprise architecture (Olsen, 2017). Within the intra-company view, two approaches were noted: proactive, where challenges are identified before materialization (Eriksson & Svensson, 2018), and reactive, where lessons-learned are assessed afterwards (Dezi et al., 2019).

### 4.4. Where: scope of occurrence

Managerial challenges may arise in various areas of business, which may be represented by both the *where* and the *who* perspective. However, some differentiation is evident in the analysed articles, since the impacted part of the company and its business environment (i.e., *where*) and the part of the staff (i.e., *who*) are generally presented separately, aligning with the logic of systematic information deconstruction (Muñoz et al., 2025; Udonsathian & Worapun, 2024).

Some studies take a broad view, identifying challenges specific to geographical contexts, such as regions (Meyer et al., 2018) or countries (Mossberg et al., 2020). These studies highlight common experiences among certain types of companies in a given area, making their results somewhat universal but limited in detail. Others adopt a more detailed perspective, examining groups of peer companies (e.g., supply chain participants; Hegedűs & Peeva-Müller, 2014), companies and their stakeholders (Tidd & Bessant, 2018), or factors such as company type (Feng, 2021) and size (Dezi et al., 2019).

Finally, some studies focused on challenges within a narrower scope of the company's structure, such as departments, cross-departmental teams, or small teams (Almeida et al., 2019). At the most detailed level, challenges were identified at the process or task level (Hoda & Murugesan, 2016). As the study scope narrowed, so did the potential generalizability of findings, pertaining to specific areas of a company's operation.

#### 4.5. Who: stakeholders and entities

The scope of managerial challenges within a company and its environment (i.e., *where* they emerge) is often closely linked to their target (i.e., *who* they affect), with parallel patterns in both perspectives. Some studies focus on challenges faced by staff across cooperating organizations (Sieg et al., 2010), individual companies (Kindström et al., 2024), or specific teams (Almeida et al., 2019). However, the *who* perspective focuses on the employer and employee standpoints.

To establish a human-focused context, authors often framed findings around specific manager types: either decision-makers in general (Agarwal et al., 2021) or specialized roles such as supply chain managers (Hegedús & Peeva-Müller, 2014). However, this represents only one side of managerial relations, the other being the managed employees. Springer and Miler (2022) stressed the distinction between those experiencing the problem and those whose work is affected by it, noting that the challenge owner (typically a manager) is not always the only one impacted. Some studies examine manager-employee relations (Feng, 2021), while others consider multiple perspectives (e.g., structural and personnel-related challenges; Grenda & Tuikka, 2020), showing how similar issues affect different roles within a company. Beyond studying internal dynamics, Santos and de Carvalho (2022) also explored how managerial challenges influence customer relations.

Some studies adopted a purely employee-oriented perspective. For example, Greblikaite et al. (2016) examined large companies where employees work in cross-cultural environments. This study highlighted that managers are most closely tied to challenges and bear responsibility for addressing them, but it also emphasized that both managers and subordinates experience their consequences.

#### 4.6. Why: root causes

Identifying the causes of managerial challenges (*why* they emerge) was often a key focus of the research. Their emergence creates disruption and uncertainty, requiring significant effort to restore stability (Bencsik, 2020). Within this framework, the "why" perspective serves as a connecting analytical layer that helps deduce the reasons behind specific phenomena (Udonathian & Worapun, 2024) and explain the underlying causes of an event (Muñoz et al., 2025). Thus, understanding these causes helps in planning and implementing countermeasures. In the analysed studies, two main approaches to finding root causes of these challenges were identified.

One approach was the broad identification of challenges, which provided an initial understanding of the context by emphasizing major challenges (Kindström et al., 2024) or even confirming their existence (Hearn et al., 2023). A thorough identification process helps examine the interplay between challenges and their causes (Olsen, 2017) and is considered "the first, yet the most fundamental step" in managing them (Hegedús & Peeva-Müller, 2014). When done in time, it allows companies to address the emerging challenges proactively

(Kindström et al., 2024), but even if delayed, it helps determine corrective actions. This process can also highlight critical challenges that should be prioritized, whether to ensure early resolution for successful outcomes, or to allocate resources effectively under budget constraints (Agarwal et al., 2021).

A second approach supplemented identification with close examination of potential or actual emergence. Authors analysed whether factors such as the intra-company environment (e.g., team maturity, number of teams; Almeida et al., 2019), organization size (Dezi et al., 2019) or organization type (Mossberg et al., 2020) contributed to materialization. Cultural differences between countries were also explored, since comparing country-specific challenges offered broader perspective (Greblikaite et al., 2016). Additionally, studies examined differences in how challenges were experienced, for instance due to socio-economic factors such as age, education, or work experience (Meyer et al., 2018). This type of assessment helped identify diverse perspectives that should be considered when addressing challenges.

#### **4.7. How: methods of handling**

Determining the overall circumstances of managerial challenges – what constitutes a challenge, when and where it may arise, who is affected, and why it occurs – helps establish a comprehensive understanding of the research context through systematic information deconstruction (Muñoz et al., 2025; Udonsathian & Worapun, 2024) and enable actionable insights. On this basis, some of the analysed studies explored measures for addressing challenges, focusing on how they can be approached and managed.

One key perspective was the managerial approach to challenges, both in their anticipation and emergence. If not properly managed, minor challenges can escalate, affecting company performance, increasing failure risk, or hindering goal achievement (Meyer et al., 2018; Mossberg et al., 2020). To address this, authors aimed to provide thorough diagnosis: assessing whether reactions were appropriate (Okřeǵlicka et al., 2015), evaluating preparedness (Bencsik, 2020), and identifying existing solutions (Hoda & Murugesan, 2016). Studies also identified potential negative impacts (Meyer et al., 2018) alongside possible positive organizational changes (Okřeǵlicka et al., 2015), ensuring that proposed responses were justified and necessary.

Beyond overall managerial response, research also examined concrete actions and tangible solutions for challenge management. These contributions included direct action recommendations (Springer et al., 2023) and comprehensive management strategies, such as a transformation decision support guide (Heavin & Power, 2018). Since ineffective challenge management can waste resources through poorly directed solutions, other studies focused on identifying appropriate responses and resources, including soft skills, competencies, and dedicated tools (Vestin et al., 2022).

#### **4.8. An overview: managerial challenges captured through 5W and 1H analysis**

The conducted analysis examined managerial challenges from six perspectives derived from the 5W and 1H method, providing a comprehensive view. Table 2 presents an overview of the current practices commonly used in research on managerial challenges and illustrative insights that emerged so far from the analysis. It includes the six framing questions, the main themes derived from the analysed articles, and some corresponding sources, allowing further inquiry into each theme.

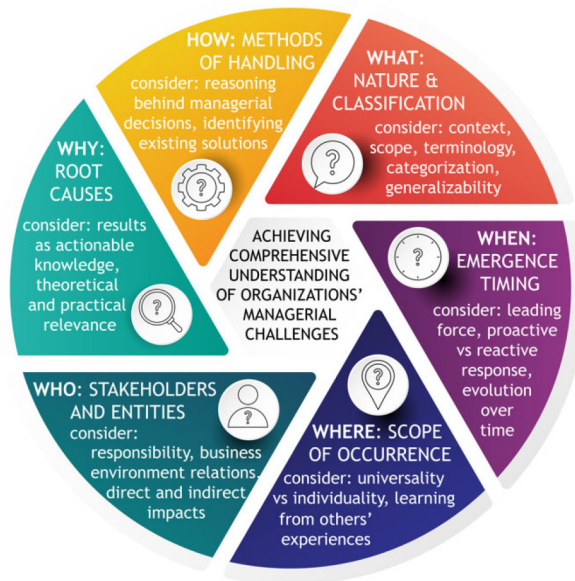
**Table 2.** An overview of the literature analysis results on studying managerial challenges

Question	Emerged themes	References
<i>What</i> constitutes a challenge	a phenomenon of significant severity and frequency	(Springer & Miler, 2022)
	a phenomenon that brings severe consequences	(Hofacker & Belanche, 2016)
	a phenomenon that impacts the business practice	(Hearn et al., 2023)
<i>When</i> did the challenge emerge	during the change of global circumstances	(Agarwal et al., 2021; Sarker et al., 2021)
	during changes in the business environment	(Eriksson & Svensson, 2018; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016)
	during the intra-company developments	(Feng, 2021; Sieg et al., 2010; Olsen, 2017)
<i>Where</i> did the challenge emerge	within the company and its environment	(Froese et al., 2020; Mossberg et al., 2020; Hegedűs & Peeva-Müller, 2014)
	within the company structure	(Cooper & Sommer, 2020; Almeida et al., 2019)
<i>Who</i> is impacted by the challenge	a manager	(Whysall et al., 2019; Famiyeh et al., 2014)
	an employee	(Greblikaite et al., 2016; Donnelly, 2015)
	multiple parties	(Zolfagharian & Naderi, 2019)
<i>Why</i> did the challenge emerge	identifying challenges' shape and form	(Kindström et al., 2024; Olsen, 2017)
	identifying challenges' context and prerequisites	(Froese et al., 2020; Almeida et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2018)
<i>How</i> the challenge can be managed	managerial attitude and level of preparedness	(Bencsik, 2020; Okręglicka et al., 2015)
	managerial action and tangible solutions	(Springer et al., 2023; Vestin et al., 2022)

The presented overview reflects an aggregated perspective on managerial challenges from the research standpoint, often informed by managerial practice. It provides well-founded answers to the questions posed by the analysis categories, helping to recognize and delineate the coverage of managerial challenges across categories. This synthesis of existing research results enhances understanding of the issue; however, it does not yet provide a consistent structure that can be operationalized in future studies. Instead, it served as a substantial foundation for deriving future-oriented insights: the interim results formed the basis for a conceptual framework to inform and support further studies in this area. In developing the framework, we began with the overview in Table 2 and moved beyond this state-of-the-art stage towards generalizing the most prominent insights. As a result, the framework incorporates replicable, universal patterns that can guide the exploration of managerial challenges, drawing on best practices from existing research.

## 5. Conceptual framework development

The review of 78 scientific articles on managerial challenges confirms that this field is diverse and integrates multiple research approaches. To structure the examination of managerial challenges, a reference framework was proposed, shown in Figure 3. It synthesizes key insights from the review, offering a structured analytical lens for information decomposition and extraction (Muñoz et al., 2025; Udonsathian & Worapun, 2024). The framework includes six perspectives with main conclusions for each. Although presented separately, the perspectives gain significant value when their interrelations are explored (Jia et al., 2016) – for instance, how scale of impact (*where*) shapes the management approach (*how*), thereby enabling a systematic inquiry into complex organizational phenomena (Udonsathian & Worapun, 2024).



**Figure 3.** Reference framework for studying managerial challenges of companies

The *what* perspective focuses on managerial challenges as the research object, making it the starting point for consideration with several decision points. First, clearly defining the study premise – such as the circumstances forming its context or the area defining its scope – helps position the study and clarify its outcomes, both in terms of rigor (von Nordenflycht, 2023) and applicability (Wickert et al., 2021). Next, clarifying how managerial challenges are understood helps avoid confusion caused by differing views. For instance, the analysed articles present three ways of distinguishing *managerial* from *organizational* challenges: treating them as synonyms (Grenda & Tuikka, 2020), as separate concepts (Santos & de Carvalho, 2022), or as one being a facet of the other (Poba-Nzaou et al., 2016). Finally, organizing results and assessing their relevance to other contexts enhances the overall clarity of the study's contribution.

The *when* perspective addresses the circumstances of challenges' occurrence, clarifying when they may materialize and thus framing the broader context of their presence. The analysed articles identified two main views: external (developments outside the company), and

internal (intra-company events), often interlinked, as companies must continuously adapt to their environment, and such changes often create managerial challenges (Kindström et al., 2024). When studying the emergence of managerial challenges, it is important to look beyond the event itself and identify its underlying cause (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016), preventing future recurrences. This connects to the next point: examining the potential for proactive versus reactive responses, so that, when possible, major challenges are prevented rather than resolved. It is also useful to consider how an emerged challenge may evolve over time (Bencsik, 2020), particularly in relation to the company's stage of development (Mossberg et al., 2020).

Within the *where* perspective, the analysed articles explore a wide variety of contexts in which challenges arise: from macro-level views – such as challenges specific to regions or business environments – to close-up, company-level perspectives. This range influences how challenges are perceived within the affected part of the company (Okřęglicka et al., 2015): either as universal issues shared by similar companies (e.g., size-wise; Dezi et al., 2019), or as challenges unique to a particular company, though with some degree of generalizability. Considering whether similar challenges arise outside the company is valuable, as company's responses can be informed by peers' experiences, drawing lessons from both successful and unsuccessful attempts.

Assessing the impact of emerging managerial challenges (*who* is affected) can be approached similarly to evaluating their scope: by examining the company, its broader environment, and the specific areas involved (e.g., staff at different organizational levels; Hoda & Murugesan, 2016). To deepen the human-centered view, it is important to examine responsibility for addressing challenges. This helps identify solutions and assign them to appropriate roles within the company structure (e.g., the manager as a supervisor, the employer as a policymaker, or HR department; Hearn et al., 2023). Additionally, the object of a challenge's impact should be carefully analysed, considering both direct and indirect effects (Springer & Miler, 2022). Finally, the impact may extend beyond the company, influencing external relations such as those with customers (Kho et al., 2017).

Among the practices for finding the causes of challenges (i.e., *why*), two were most prevalent. First, the challenge identification process provided an initial understanding of the problem area. By tracing challenges back to their root causes, it became possible to recognize the immediate factors that needed to be addressed, either proactively or reactively, and to plan the appropriate responses. Second, recognizing the circumstances of a challenge's occurrence deepened this initial insight, moving beyond a simple cause-effect view to include additional factors shaping its emergence. Another key consideration in the *why* perspective is the findings' theoretical and practical relevance and actionable guidance they can offer, with the latter strengthened by evaluating scientific results against real-life managerial work (Sieg et al., 2010; Tidd & Bessant, 2018).

In the final perspective (*how*) responses were typically informed by insights gained through the other perspectives of analysis (Hearn et al., 2023; Springer & Miler, 2022). In examining managerial reactions – both in anticipation of and after challenge's occurrence – the reviewed studies explored general attitudes towards challenges as well as specific active responses. This involved two key aspects: first, determining whether a response occurred and if so, what triggered it; and second, identifying the types of appropriate responses (Springer et al., 2023; Heavin & Power, 2018). Between these two considerations, it is also important to examine not just the reaction itself, but also the reason behind it – for example, what motivates a manager to actively address some challenges while neglecting others; Okřęglicka et al., 2015).

## 6. Discussion

Examining managerial challenges can appear both simple and complex. On one hand, managing a company's operations is a fundamental aspect of the managerial role. On the other, numerous factors affect how challenges are perceived and addressed – both within organizations and in research. Consequently, these challenges require attention from both managers and researchers to be effectively overcome. Otherwise, the situation described by Okręglicka et al. (2015) may arise: managerial challenges go unacknowledged, not because they are absent, but because of a prevailing attitude of ignorance. As neglected challenges accumulate, they can escalate into full-blown managerial “crises” (Kindström et al., 2024; Bundy et al., 2017). Moreover, such crises may overlap, compounding their effects and further impacting business performance (Smith et al., 2024). Hence, the ability to identify and manage emerging challenges is crucial not only for organizational success (Sarta et al., 2021; Woods, 2020), but also for managerial effectiveness (Mellahi & Wilkinson, 2004).

The range of possible responses to managerial challenges depends on the circumstances in which they arise (Khaw et al., 2023). Both proactive (Eriksson & Svensson, 2018) and reactive (Dezi et al., 2019) strategies have been identified. However, the extent to which a challenge can be managed depends on multiple factors (Smith et al., 2024). Some challenges are unavoidable, particularly those with broad scope and impact, such as global grand challenges. In such cases, addressing them can be supported with external insights (e.g., from the business environment, which is also affected; Chadwick & Raver, 2015), or internal insights (e.g., from employees – key stakeholders in the challenge situation; Camps et al., 2016).

The manager plays a key role in any situation involving managerial challenges (Rostron, 2022). The analysis confirmed that, in some cases, challenges can be addressed in a timely manner (Bencsik, 2020; Hoda & Murugesan, 2016), a finding supported by existing literature (Grewatsch et al., 2023). However, when mitigating consequences, the manager's attributes can significantly influence outcomes. Key attributes include their decision-making approach (Paeleman et al., 2024), opportunity-seeking mindset (Shepherd et al., 2017), openness to advice (Ma et al., 2020) and education (Vu & Nguyen, 2022), and emotional intelligence (Bas et al., 2023). Ultimately, success in addressing managerial challenges depends on the alignment between a manager's individual capabilities, the organizational environment, and job demands (Boyatzis, 1991), as well as how well these factors fit the specific demands of the challenge.

## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1. Overview

The study examined how managerial challenges are explored in the current literature by analysing over 70 empirical studies. As a result, a comprehensive overview was achieved, identifying approaches to defining the studied objects (*what*), the contexts in which they arise (*when, where, and who*), their underlying causes (*why*), and the responses they elicit (*how*). The analysis offered insights into the scope and coverage of existing research on managerial challenges, ultimately contributing to the development of a framework for studying them (Figure 3).

The developed framework builds on the 5W and 1H method, synthesising findings from the literature. It highlights key insights, best practices, and lessons learned, drawing from

multiple sources to guide future research. The framework provides both general advice on examining managerial challenges – emphasizing the value of a multifaceted approach using 5W and 1H method – and specific guidance on exploring different perspectives and their interrelations.

## 7.2. Implications

Given the novelty, complexity, and severity of current managerial challenges, the need for a systematic approach to researching them and gaining a holistic understanding has been established. The development of the reference framework for studying managerial challenges was based on the premise that the organizational environment, the nature of managerial work, and a manager's personal traits, along with the interactions among these factors, shape the reality of managerial challenges. This perspective is embedded in the proposed framework and is recommended to guide researchers in this study area.

From a practical standpoint, the framework can also support managers by helping them more precisely position the challenges they face and assess which aspects of their emergence are the most critical to address. By offering a structured lens for analysing challenge situations, it may guide more informed managerial diagnosis and decision-making in complex or uncertain conditions. The effectiveness of resolving managerial challenges can serve as an indicator of managerial performance and may ultimately determine the company's success or failure. Therefore, generating informed insights that advance scientific understanding while supporting managerial practice is a valuable research direction.

The framework offers general guidance and key decision points that researchers may integrate into their study design, either in full or selectively. However, it is important to emphasize that the framework is meant to facilitate research rather than impose rigid constraints. It should be regarded as an advisory tool rather than a prescriptive model, allowing for adaptation depending on the research scope and aim.

## 7.3. Study limitations and future research directions

Studying managerial challenges has proven to be a productive and multifaceted area of research, with the potential to contribute valuably to both our theoretical understanding of managerial work and its empirical application. We firmly believe that to realize this potential, research should be conducted in an informed manner. Therefore, we encourage future studies to explore managerial challenges more thoroughly as a research subject.

While the analysed body of literature reveals a substantial degree of ambiguity in how managerial challenges are understood, it does not provide sufficient grounds for proposing a formal definition of the construct that would be evidence-based and empirically validated. For that reason, we likewise treated managerial challenges as a self-explanatory term; however, our results indicate that there is more to this construct than merely a problem to be solved from a research perspective. We believe that further conceptual clarification is needed, in line with the phenomenon-driven approach to research. Developing a precise and empirically grounded definition of a managerial challenge therefore constitutes an important next step that extends the scope of the present article.

By exploring managerial challenges through six perspectives of the 5W and 1H method, we aim to initiate a more structured discussion around this versatile but still loosely delineated construct. While the present study focuses on works that specifically use the term managerial

challenge, we acknowledge that valuable insights may also lie in neighbouring conceptual domains, in line with critical management studies. Future studies could therefore complement our findings by adopting alternative analytical approaches. Another opportunity could lie in reflecting on the scope and extent of managerial challenge construct and its connection to other synonymous and potentially overlapping constructs, some of which have been noted in this review. Finally, our understanding of managerial challenges could be further enriched by identifying ineffective practices in studying them, helping to avoid repeated unsatisfactory results. Such directions may open new avenues for understanding how managerial challenges are framed, experienced, and theorized across different research traditions.

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## Author contributions

MW: conceptualization; formal analysis; funding acquisition; methodology; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. JN: conceptualization; funding acquisition; methodology; supervision; validation; visualization; writing – review and editing.

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