

## What is this thing called *management-concerns diagramming* in the Agile Literature Review Approach (ALRA)? An explanation

JOSEPH KIM-KEUNG HO  
Independent Trainer  
Hong Kong, China

### Abstract

*The agile literature review approach (ALRA), proposed chiefly to support part-time MBA students to do applied business research projects, relies on a properly produced management-concerns diagram to offer a clear sense of direction for its effective practice. As such, the management-concerns diagramming needs to be informed by clearly articulated as well as sound underlying thinking and practice guidance. In response to this need, this article presents a more detailed account of this underlying thinking and diagramming steps for its construction. A full example is provided to illustrate how the diagramming can be performed. This discussion thus contributes to the theoretical development of the ALRA, notably on the topic of management-concerns diagramming.*

**Key words:** applied business research, management-concerns diagram (MVD), management-concerns diagramming, the agile literature review approach (ALRA), the research project orientation phase (RPOP).

### INTRODUCTION

A management-concerns diagram (MCD) is one that is constructed by the researcher in the initial phase of an applied business dissertation project that utilizes the agile literature

review approach (ALRA) (Ho, 2018a; 2018b). This article takes a closer look at the nature and practice of management-concerns diagramming in the ALRA based on this writer's reflection on the experience of his recent practice on this kind of diagramming in the context of dissertation project supervision and teaching. It offers further conceptual development of the ALRA, especially on management-concerns diagramming. The article begins with a brief account on the agile literature review approach (ALRA); this account provides the approach context explanation so as to make the discussion on the topic of management-concerns diagramming more readily comprehensible to the readers.

### **A brief account of the agile literature review approach (ALRA)**

The agile literature review approach (ALRA) is a literature review approach formulated by this writer in 2017 (Ho, 2017; 2018a; 2018b). This approach is agile, lightweight, evolutionary and management concerns-focused. As a lecturer on the MBA subject of applied business research in Hong Kong, the writer initially formulated the ALRA for part-time MBA students doing applied business research projects because they experience many difficulties in their projects. Subsequently, it has also been adapted and employed by the writer's housing studies students doing their final year dissertation projects. The objective for the ALRA theoretical venture is to provide a suitable literature review mode to guide busy MBA students to do applied business research which is very much problem-driven. It has been argued by the writer that the mainstream literature review approaches very often are (i) targeted at primarily academic business research with a project timeframe longer than that for the MBA applied business research projects and (ii) for producing research findings with mainly academic value, rather than practical value (Ho, 2018a; 2018b).

The original ALRA (Ho, 2018a) comprises the following 4 phases:

*Phase 1* is ideas search

*Phase 2* is ideas collection

*Phase 3* is ideas categorization

*Phase 4* is ideas systemic diagramming

These four ALRA phases span the activities of literature search and literature review that have been much expounded on in research methods textbooks (e.g., Saunders *et al.*, 2016: chapter 3). Together these ALRA phases represent a theoretical framework-driven approach to guide the literature search and review process directed at responding to a set of related management concerns (Ho, 2017) identified in an applied business research project. The theoretical framework construction involved in these four phases has now been specified to include a theoretical framework set called (i) theoretical framework level 0, (ii) theoretical framework level 1a, (iii) theoretical framework level 1b and (iv) theoretical framework level 1c (re: the Facebook group of *The agile literature review approach group*). More importantly for our discussion here, this theoretical framework construction relies on the management-concerns diagram (MCD) constructed by the researcher as the basis of justifications to launch the dissertation projects; the theoretical framework is by nature an intellectual response by the researcher to address a specific set of management concerns (Ho, 2017; 2018a; 2018b). As such, the management-concerns diagramming is the first diagramming exercise for an applied business research project that employs the ALRA; the MCD produced is a vital diagram offering a sense of direction to steer the rest of the ALRA application. Obviously it has to be properly produced. The nature and practice of the management-concerns diagramming are to be examined in the next section.

## **The underlying thinking of the management-concerns diagramming**

For an applied business research project, primarily with a single case study, the first project stage is an orientation one carried out by the researcher. This phase (i.e., the research project orientation phase (RPOP)) is enabled by the access feasibility on the researcher's part to the client organization. Such feasibility to access<sup>1</sup> is usually due to one of the following three conditions:

- (i) the researcher is an employee of the client organization;
- (ii) the researcher is an ex-employee of the client organization;
- (iii) the researcher has a few friends or relatives being employees of the client organization.

In this research project orientation phase (RPOP), the researcher contacts a few of the insider stakeholders of the client organization to gain some overall impression of the internal and external environments facing the client organization. This learning endeavor on the researcher's part is both about some preliminary fact-gathering as well as a speedy SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) study on this organization. Based on this overall impression, the researcher then needs to come up with a list of the main management issues and concerns raised by the stakeholders of the client organization<sup>2</sup>. In the ALRA subject, the terms of management issues (MIs) and management concerns (MCs)<sup>3</sup> have specific meanings. They are defined as follows:

---

<sup>1</sup> That is, primarily, the researcher has acquaintance with a few key insider stakeholders of the problem-situation who are willing to participate in some of the researcher's research exercises. An example is being an interviewee in an interview research.

<sup>2</sup> The preliminary orientation phase (RPOP) findings on the client organization's environment and management issues/ concerns are also necessary for writing up the dissertation project proposal and subsequently the dissertation report's introduction chapter that describes the research project background.

<sup>3</sup> As an MBA applied business research project, the issues and concerns are mainly taken from the managerial perspective, with also social and critical awareness.

*Management issues (MIs)*: They are business issues that the management team is worried or excited about, while not strongly feeling that they need to be seriously addressed in near future. They are not urgent issues.

*Management concerns (MCs)*: They are business issues that the management team is quite worried or excited about as well as strongly feels that they need to be seriously addressed in near future. They are prime and urgent concerns.

MCs, compared with MIs, are stronger ingredient candidates for building up the basis for justifying a research project launch. This is because the management team of the client organization to be studied is keener to consider the research project report recommendations in this regard. For the researcher, it is also useful to express these management issues and concerns explicitly in the form of management issues and concerns statements to make them comprehensible to others (Ho, 2017). Together, these management issues and concerns statements could reveal relatedness among them as well as some conflicts of interests, perceptions disagreement, paradoxes and dilemmas that are embedded in the problem-situation facing the client organization. Such attribute of soft complexity has long been studied in the "rich picture building" topic in soft systems thinking, e.g., Ho (2015). Regardless of the existence of this attribute of a problem-situation, when doing a dissertation project, it is very often not feasible to intellectually respond in details to a large number of management issues and concerns; a research project simply must have a project scope that cannot be too broad nor ambitious. In this respect, out of the full list of management issues and concerns, the researcher has to choose a smaller set of related management issues and concerns based on his/her personal intellectual competence and interests to conduct the research investigation (Ho, 2018c). This shortlist of management issues and concerns constitutes the confined basis

of justification of launching the dissertation project. Specifically, the questions of "who cares?", "why bothers?" and "what's the point of doing the dissertation project?" can be answered with this shortlist of management issues and concerns. On top of that, the choice made on the chosen set of management issues and concerns as well as the contextually related management issues and concerns should be done in a way to endorse the "complicated understanding" orientation commitment of the ALRA of "developing a complicated understanding of the problem-situation and the chosen set of management concerns [for the dissertation project] facing the client system as embedded in its problem-situation" (Ho, 2018d). Indeed, it is not worth spending 4-6 months on research and writing a dissertation report with 15,000 words by the researcher to merely study a few trivial managerial issues in a client organization or perceived problem with major blind spots. Endorsing this orientation commitment is a way to anchor this diagramming technique theoretically onto critical systems thinking (Jackson, 2003). Having clarified the underlying thinking of management-concerns diagramming, the diagramming steps involved are to be described in the next section.

### **The five steps involved in management-concerns diagramming**

The five steps to be performed for management-concerns diagramming are as follows:

*Step 1:* Identify in the orientation phase (RPOP)<sup>4</sup> of an applied business research project a number of variables and factors directly and indirectly related to a set of management concerns, issues and associated contextual drivers/ consequences of a client organization.

---

<sup>4</sup> Desirably, this requires, at the onset, some brief exploratory discussion with the client organization's gatekeeper and the key stakeholders (both internal and external), some of whom holding management positions.

*Step 2:* Locate these variables and factors into the three zones of environmental drivers (zone 1), organization capabilities (zone 2) and outcomes/ solutions (zone 3)<sup>5</sup>.

*Step 3:* Clearly identify the variables of management issues (MIs) and management concerns (MCs) in the diagram. Make sure that the ownership of these MIs and MCs are clear.

*Step 4:* Link up the variables and factors, notably including a set of management issues/ concerns (MIs and MCs), to portray a plausible and comprehensible problem-situation scenario that exhibits some level of soft complexity.

*Step 5:* Review the management-concerns diagram to ascertain that it provides an appropriate and convincing basis<sup>6</sup> for your research project launch justification.

These steps should be performed in an evolutionary prototyping style, as this diagramming is essentially an exploratory endeavor at the orientation phase of an applied business research project (RPOP). To illustrate these steps, let us consider the following list of factors and variables gathered from the management-concerns diagramming step 1<sup>7</sup>:

1. Marketplace is becoming more competitive
2. Business environment is getting tough due to trade war

---

<sup>5</sup> *Environmental drivers* are factors that influence an organization but quite beyond the organization to control; *organizational capabilities* are the organizational abilities and resources employed to achieve the organizational goals; they can be controlled and enhanced by the organization given the required time, determination and appropriate methods to do so; finally, *outcomes and solutions* items are to do with the organizational financial and on-financial results (i.e., outcomes domain) as well as the attempted and intended organizational change initiatives (i.e., the solutions domain).

<sup>6</sup> The diagram (i) portrays a situation of reasonable soft complexity and (ii) is suggestive of benefits with reasonable academic and practical values if the chosen management issues and concerns can be addressed well.

<sup>7</sup> These factors and variables have been the frequent ones raised in the applied business research projects supervised by this writer.

3. Quite a number of key senior aged technical staff will retire soon
4. Organizational culture is defensive and conservative
5. Weak managerial capability to recruit and retain employees
6. Weak organizational innovation capability
7. Low staff morale
8. Weak managerial leadership competence at the top level
9. High staff turnover at the operational level
10. Infrequent introduction of new products
11. Not clear how to figure out a business diversification strategy
12. Continuous sales revenue decline over the last 3 years
13. Working environment is stressful and error-prone

These 13 variables are now grouped into the three diagramming zones of environmental drivers, organizational capabilities and outcomes and solutions (re: management-concerns diagramming step 2) (re: Table 1):

**Table 1: Grouping of variables by zones**

| Environmental drivers<br>(Zone 1)                                       | Organizational capabilities<br>(Zone 2)                         | Outcomes/ solutions<br>(Zone 3)                                       |
|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |
| <i>External environment-related</i>                                     |   | <i>Outcomes-related</i>   |
| Marketplace is becoming more competitive (V1)                           | Weak managerial capability to recruit and retain employees (V5) | Low staff morale (V7)   |
| Business environment is getting tough due to trade war (V2)             | Weak organizational innovation capability (V6)                  | High staff turnover at the operational level (V9)                     |
|   | Weak managerial leadership competence at the top level (V8)     | Infrequent introduction of new products (V10)                         |
|   |   | Continuous sales revenue decline over the last 3 years (V12)          |
|   |   | Working environment is stressful and error-prone (V13)                |
| <i>Internal environment-related</i>                                     |   | <i>Solutions-related</i>  |
| Quite a number of key senior aged technical staff will retire soon (V3) |   | Not clear how to figure out a business diversification strategy (V11) |
| Organizational culture is defensive and conservative (V4)               |   |   |



The management issues and concerns variables in Table 1 are identified in Table 2 as follows (re: management-concerns diagramming step 3):

**Table 2: Identification of management concerns and management issues**

| Environmental drivers<br>(Zone 1)                                       | Organizational capabilities<br>(Zone 2)                             | Outcomes/ solutions<br>(Zone 3)                                       |
|---|---|---|
| <i>External environment-related</i>                                     |   | <i>Outcomes-related</i>   |
| MI: Marketplace is becoming more competitive (V1)                       | MI: Weak managerial capability to recruit and retain employees (V5) | MI: Low staff morale (V7)   |
| Business environment is getting tough due to trade war (V2)             | MC: Weak organizational innovation capability (V6)                  | High staff turnover at the operational level (V9)                     |
|   | MC: Weak managerial leadership competence at the top level (V8)     | MI: Infrequent introduction of new products (V10)                     |
|   |   | Continuous sales revenue decline over the last 3 years (V12)          |
|   |   | Working environment is stressful and error-prone (V13)                |
| <i>Internal environment-related</i>                                     |   | <i>Solutions-related</i>  |
| Quite a number of key senior aged technical staff will retire soon (V3) |   | Not clear how to figure out a business diversification strategy (V11) |
| Organizational culture is defensive and conservative (V4)               |   |   |

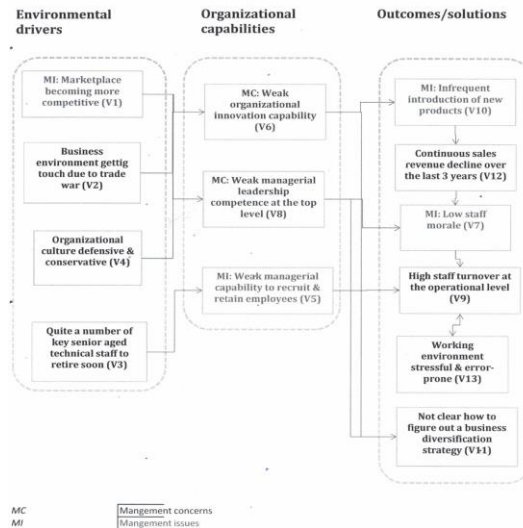
*Legend*

|                         |
|-------------------------|
| Management concern (MC) |
| Management issues (MI)  |

Using the information from Table 2, the writer now links up all the variables to produce a management-concerns diagram as shown in Figure 1 (re: management-concerns diagramming step 4):

Joseph Kim-Keung Ho- What is this thing called *management-concerns diagramming* in the Agile Literature Review Approach (ALRA)? An explanation

Figure 1: A management-concerns diagram



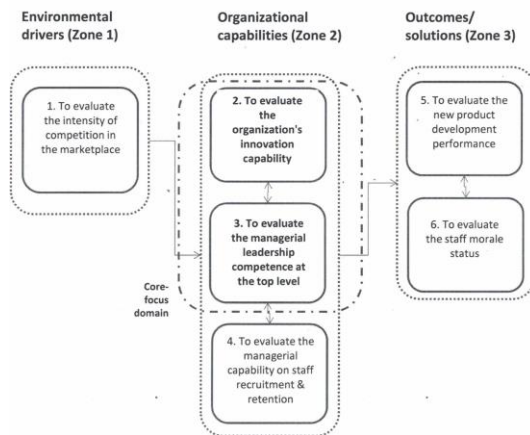
Regarding Figure 1, the identification of management issues (MIs) and management concerns (MCs) is based on the researcher's impression on them out of the discussion with some of the stakeholders in the client organization during the RPOP. Thus, the identification exercise is relatively interpretive and inter-subjective in nature. It is clear that the researcher should not rely solely on one informant's opinion to construct this diagram, even if that person is the researcher's best friend.

Lastly, the management-concerns diagramming step 5 reminds us the whole diagramming exercise as an evolutionary prototyping one in essence. Especially, as the researcher gains more understanding of the developing problem-situation facing the client organization over time, his/ her view on the organization's MIs and MCs also evolves. Also refer to **Appendix 1** which offers a checklist to evaluate the quality of a management-concern diagram (MCD). Once the MCD is produced, it is not normally expected to be modified in a significant way because, the management-concerns diagram is to be employed to construct a theoretical framework level-0 in

the ALRA. If there is a major change on the management-concerns diagram, the theoretical framework derived from it has also to be substantially revised. This leads consequently to a tremendous amount of additional literature review effort on the researcher's part.

Conceptually, an ALRA theoretical framework, as derived from the management-concerns diagram (MCD), represents (i) the researcher's intellectual response to the management issues and concerns as indicated in the management-concerns diagram and (ii) an agenda for the researcher to conduct literature search and review in the ALRA mode (re: the *agile literature review approach group* on Facebook). Using the management-concerns diagram example of Figure 1, a theoretical framework level-0 is derived and presented as follows for illustration (re: Figure 2):

Figure 2: A theoretical framework (level-0) based on the management-concerns diagram of Figure 1



Regarding Figure 2, the six associated theoretical framework components represent six high-level research tasks in need of literature review, such as "to evaluate an organization's innovation capability" and "to evaluate the managerial capability on staff recruitment and retention". All of the

theoretical framework tasks incorporate academic topics and themes on which literature search and review are to be carried out by the researcher. Further discussion of theoretical framework in the ALRA is outside the scope of study for this article. The whole point of this discussion is to underline the importance of the management-concerns diagram in the ALRA.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The MCD is the first diagram constructed in the agile applied business research approach, in which the ALRA plays a pivotal role. The management issues and concerns, as depicted in the MCD, are what the ALRA is chiefly employed to address. Thus the MCD deserves serious and sincere effort for its construction by the researcher. From the writer's dissertation project supervision experience, very often, a management-concerns diagramming learner has to make 5 to 6 diagramming attempts before he/she is able to come up with a useful MCD. If this diagram is not constructed well for various reasons (e.g., being diplomatic, showing insufficient social and critical awareness, and possessing weak theoretical sensitivity), the research project will experience tremendous research problems subsequently.

Readers might get the impression that the management-concerns diagramming steps proposed here are somewhat too structured and restrictive, e.g., the provision of diagramming steps and zoning scheme with the three zones of environmental drivers, organizational capabilities and outcomes/solutions, for such an exploratory endeavor at the project orientation phase (RPOP). This concern on technique restrictiveness the writer accepts as valid. Nonetheless, the writer would like to point out that more specific guidelines on diagramming steps might as well be what inexperienced researchers, such as quite a number of the part-time MBA students the writer has come across,

badly need. For more experienced and intellectually skillful researchers, the ideas and guidelines presented here can indeed be treated in a more flexible way.

## REFERENCES

1. Ho, J.K.K. 2015. "An updated review on the conventional and unconventional rich picture building exercises (RPBEs) in P.B. Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology" *American Research Thoughts* 1(7) May: 1516-1527. (url address: <https://www.slideshare.net/EmilConstantin/an-updated-review-on-the-conventional-and-unconventional-rich-picture-building-exercises-rpb-es-in-pb-checklands-soft-systems-methodology-ssm>) [visited at December 22, 2018].
2. Ho, J.K.K. 2017. "A systems thinking-based review of the topic on an applied business research project background (ABB)" *European Academic Research* 5(8) November: 4021-4040.
3. Ho, J.K.K. 2018a. "On the agile literature review approach for practising managers: a proposal" *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 35: 341-348. Wiley.
4. Ho, J.K.K. 2018b. "Some further conceptual clarification of the recently proposed agile literature review approach (ALRA)" *European Academic Research* 5(12) March: 6313-6328.
5. Ho, J.K.K. 2018c. "On the nature of management-concerns diagram in the Agile Literature Review Approach" *Joseph KK Ho e-resources blog* November 30 (url address: <https://josephho33.blogspot.com/2018/11/on-nature-of-management-concerns.html>) [visited at December 23, 2018].

6. Ho, J.K.K. 2018d. "The "complicated understanding" orientation of the Agile Literature Review Approach" *Joseph KK Ho e-resources blog* December 1 (url address: <http://josephho33.blogspot.com/2018/12/the-complicated-understanding.html>) [visited at December 22, 2018].
7. Jackson, M.C. 2003. *Systems Thinking: Creative Holism for Managers*. Wiley. Chichester.
8. Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. 2016. *Research Methods for Business Students*, 7th edition. Pearson.
9. *The agile literature review approach group*, maintained by Joseph, K.K. Ho (url address: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1789115691385045/>).

## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX 1

**A checklist on evaluating the quality of a management-concerns diagram (MCD) in the ALRA** [There are altogether 15 questions grouped into 3 categories.]

A. About project background knowledge and the researcher's intellectual preference

1. Does the MCD have enough contextual variables to make the variables on management issues (MIs) and management concerns (MCs) comprehensible?
2. Does the MCD distinguish the variables on management issues (MIs) from the variables on management concerns (MCs)?
3. Does the MCD represent a well-considered congruity between the researcher's own intellectual interest and the management concerns with clear concerns ownership of some managers of the client organization under investigation?
4. Does the MCD offer enough space of imagination for the researcher to develop a complicated intellectual response to the MIs and MCs in the MCD?

B. About the process of the MCD construction

1. Is the MCD reasonably informed by a properly conducted research project orientation phase, e.g., by interviewing members of a few stakeholder groups in the client organization and beyond?
2. Has sufficient evaluation by the researcher been made on the appropriateness of the boundary on the MCD scope (i.e., what variables are included in the MCD and what not) as well as on the core-focus domain, if any? Does the MCD's

- boundary judgment suggest social and critical awareness as well as intellectual sensitivity on the researcher's part?
3. Do all the MCD's variables utilize sophisticated academic ideas in their formulation?
  4. Has the MCD construction process embraced the learning commitment by the researcher to "develop a complicated understanding of the problem-situation"? For example, does the MCD merely point to a single root cause on the MIs and MCs of the MCD?
  5. Have the main stakeholders of the client organization's situation to be studied verified the appropriateness of the MCD? Is it even culturally and politically feasible to do so?
  6. Has the MCD construction process of the researcher endorsed the agile and critical systems thinking spirits?

### C. About the features of the MCD

1. Are all the MCD's variables at the appropriate system resolution level? That is, it is not the case that some items are strategic and broad while others are minute and trivial.
2. Does the MCD include variables in all the three zones of "environmental drivers", "organizational capabilities" and "outcomes/ solutions"?
3. Are the labels of the MCD variables clear in meaning? Are these variables properly linked up?
4. Is the MCD structure reasonably systemic? That is, there are a sensible number of variables of reasonably complex nature, linked in a complex way by a reasonable number of linkages. For example, a chain structure is considered too simple and nonsystemic while a web structure is more systemic.
5. Does the MCD enable the readers to better comprehend the soft complexity of certain part of the research project background, especially the diversity of concerns of the stakeholders involved?