



READINESS FOR CHANGE RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT: A SCOPUS-BASED BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW AND THEMATIC SYNTHESIS (2021-2026)

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ABSTRACT

Readiness for change has become a central construct in management and human resource management (HRM) scholarship because organizational change outcomes depend not only on formal change design but also on the psychological and structural preparedness of organizational members. Despite its relevance, the literature remains fragmented across levels of analysis, adjacent constructs such as resistance, buy-in, and engagement, and diverse organizational contexts including public organizations, healthcare, regulated industries, and digital transformation. This study conducts a Scopus-based bibliometric review and thematic synthesis of readiness-for-change research in management and HRM-oriented literature published between 2021 and 2026. Bibliographic data were retrieved from Scopus on 3 May 2026 using a TITLE-ABS-KEY search strategy and refined to final-stage, open-access journal articles in Business, Management and Accounting, resulting in a final corpus of 52 articles. The analysis combines descriptive bibliometric mapping, VOSviewer keyword co-occurrence analysis, and country-level bibliographic coupling. The results show an uneven publication trajectory, with the literature concentrated among a limited group of authors, affiliations, and countries. The co-word structure positions change management and organizational change as central hubs linking six mechanism-oriented themes: communication and sensemaking, leadership and trust, culture and change capability, intervention design and implementation gaps, technology-enabled change contexts, and employee well-being risks. Building on these findings, the study proposes an HRM-grounded conceptual model connecting readiness-building mechanisms to proximal and distal change outcomes under explicit boundary conditions. The review contributes by clarifying the multi-level nature of readiness for change, translating science-mapping outputs into theory-building mechanisms, and outlining a future research agenda for cross-level, longitudinal, and context-sensitive readiness research.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are increasingly expected to execute both planned and continuous change digital transformation, new performance systems, post-crisis restructuring, and regulatory driven adaptation under conditions of heightened uncertainty. In such contexts, change outcomes are not determined solely by the technical quality of the change design but by whether leaders and HR systems can mobilize employees to adopt, enact, and sustain new routines. This places readiness for change at the center of Human Resource Management (HRM) because it represents the extent to which individuals and organizations are psychologically and structurally prepared to engage with change initiatives (Alolabi et al., 2021; Armenakis et al., 1993; Weiner, 2009). From a strategic HRM standpoint, readiness is consistent with the view that organizational performance is shaped by the extent to which HR systems build employees' ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform (AMO), and that HRM affects outcomes through identifiable mediating mechanisms (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Jiang et al., 2012). Evidence from high-performance work system research also suggests that HR practices influence productivity and organizational outcomes through workforce-related pathways such as commitment, skills, and discretionary effort (Huselid, 1995), implying that readiness for change is not merely a psychological state but an HR-enabled condition for implementing new routines.

Empirical evidence within the Scopus corpus used in this review (exported 3 May 2026) reinforces the importance of micro-level mechanisms that convert change demands into employee acceptance. Communication emerges as one of the most actionable levers: change agents' communication behaviors can transform resistance into readiness by shaping recipients' interpretations of change and their willingness to engage (Endrejat et al., 2021). Complementing this, change is also created through interactional processes: organizations can 'change the conversation' to build shared meaning, coordinate action, and reduce ambiguity during implementation (Blackman et al., 2022). These mechanisms resonate with the broader HRM/OB insight that reactions to organizational change are not fixed traits but are shaped by contextual cues, social dynamics, and how change is enacted (Oreg et al., 2011). Leadership functions as an enabling mechanism within these processes. Leadership is not only a leader attribute but can be co-constructed through change-related leader-follower interactions, implying that readiness is negotiated in everyday exchanges rather than imposed unilaterally (Güntner & Kauffeld, 2021). Moreover, leadership influences employee reactions through relational pathways such as organizational trust (Hamza et al., 2022), which aligns with social exchange logic that employee willingness to reciprocate organizational initiatives depends on perceived support, fairness, and relationship quality (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). From the HRM lens, this also connects to perceived organizational support (POS), where employees' perceptions that the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being can shape receptivity to organizational initiatives, including change programs (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Despite the construct's practical and scholarly relevance, readiness-for-change research remains conceptually and empirically fragmented. First, readiness is used at multiple levels of analysis individual, managerial, and organizational which complicates the accumulation of findings and the development of integrative HRM explanations (Alolabi et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2024; Vanhengel et al., 2026). Second, readiness is often entangled with adjacent constructs such as resistance, buy-in, commitment, support, and engagement. While such constructs are central to HRM and organizational behavior, many studies do not consistently specify the mechanisms that connect them, limiting

theory building and practical translation. For example, employee buy-in has been modeled as a proximal outcome of organizational change (Som & Chan, 2024), while other studies highlight that “resistance to change” itself is conceptually contested and should not be treated as a simplistic barrier variable (Dent et al., 2026). Third, recent scholarship challenges binary framings (ready vs resistant) and argues that organizational actors may be resistant, ready, or engaged depending on the nature of change and how it is enacted suggesting the need for more precise conceptualization and stronger boundary conditions (Teerikangas et al., 2026).

Fragmentation is further amplified by the diversity of contexts in which readiness is examined. Public-sector research shows that change effectiveness depends on broader organizational systems such as accountability, knowledge management, and culture through which leadership affects change management outcomes (Ferede et al., 2024), and that public organizations require context-sensitive constructs such as organizational change capability for measurement and diagnosis (Vanhengel et al., 2026). Intervention evidence also points to an implementation paradox: organizations may deploy measurement systems that cover multiple change steps, yet leadership passivity can undermine actual enactment (Norrman & Näslund, 2026). In service contexts, change management is linked to organizational performance via cultural mediation (Luciano-Alipio et al., 2026), while healthcare change settings highlight retention and emotional risks under change pressures (Khraim, 2023). Digital transformation and technology implementation extend readiness into technology-enabled change, where managerial readiness shapes strategic decision-making (Chen et al., 2024) and organizational readiness is tied to behavioral intention in information systems implementation (Turner & Whittaker, 2024). These contextual differences are theoretically valuable, yet they also call for a systematic synthesis that can separate what is generalizable from what is context-dependent.

Given this fragmentation, a systematic and reproducible review is required to consolidate the knowledge base and clarify how readiness-for-change scholarship is structured within management and HRM-oriented literature. Existing reviews call for more explicit mechanisms linking change management interventions to employee and organizational outcomes (Hagl et al., 2024) and for moving beyond reductive labels to specify “readiness for what change” in turbulent contexts (Teerikangas et al., 2026). Building on these foundations, the present study conducts a bibliometric science-mapping SLR using a Scopus-derived corpus retrieved on 3 May 2026 (final dataset: 52 open-access journal articles, 2021-2026, after predefined Scopus refinements). The review is guided by three research questions: (1) What are the descriptive characteristics of the readiness-for-change literature within this corpus (publication trends, leading sources, and key contributors)? (2) What thematic clusters emerge from co-word mapping and how are they conceptually connected? (3) How can these clusters be synthesized into an HRM-grounded conceptual framework and future research agenda that clarifies core mechanisms communication, leadership and trust, culture, and organizational capability linking readiness to change outcomes across contexts?

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, this study is positioned as a systematic bibliometric review with thematic synthesis rather than a conventional full-text systematic literature review. Its primary purpose is to map the intellectual and thematic structure of readiness-for-change research in management and HRM-oriented scholarship using Scopus metadata and VOSviewer science-mapping techniques. The thematic synthesis complements the bibliometric mapping by interpreting the resulting clusters through HRM and organizational behavior lenses. Therefore, the study does not claim to

exhaustively evaluate all readiness-for-change studies across databases; rather, it provides a reproducible and focused mapping of a clearly bounded Scopus-derived corpus.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a Scopus-based bibliometric science-mapping review to examine the thematic structure of readiness for change research in management and HRM and to explore cross-country knowledge relatedness. The approach combines descriptive bibliometric mapping and network-based science mapping to reveal the organization of the field and the relationships among key themes (Hamsal & Binsar, 2025; Kirby, 2023; Gandasari et al., 2024).

Descriptive Bibliometric Mapping

Descriptive analysis was used to summarize publication trends, source outlets, prolific authors, and other Scopus metadata, providing an overview of the field's growth and publication patterns.

Co-word Analysis (Keyword Co-occurrence)

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted in VOSviewer to identify dominant themes and conceptual relationships. Co-word analysis reveals the conceptual structure of a research field by examining keyword co-appearances across publications (Hamsal & Binsar, 2025; Kirby, 2023). Given the relatively small corpus ($n = 52$), the minimum occurrence threshold was set to one to retain emerging topics. Consequently, the results were interpreted through broader mechanism-oriented themes rather than relying solely on raw cluster labels.

Country-Level Bibliographic Coupling

Country-level bibliographic coupling was performed using VOSviewer with full counting to assess geographical knowledge relatedness. Countries were linked when their publications shared common references, indicating similar intellectual foundations. Analysis parameters included a minimum of one document per country and zero minimum citations, following the established workflow.

The interpretation was grounded in HRM and organizational behavior perspectives, emphasizing employee reactions to change, leadership, trust, organizational culture, and performance outcomes as central dimensions of readiness for change (Hamza et al., 2022; Som & Chan, 2024; Abawari et al., 2024; Luciano-Alipio et al., 2026).

Data Collection

Data Source and Retrieval Date

Data were obtained from Scopus due to its extensive journal coverage and structured metadata suitable for bibliometric analysis. Data retrieval was conducted on 3 May 2026.

Search Strategy

The search was performed in the TITLE-ABS-KEY field using multiple readiness-for-change related terms, including "readiness for change," "change readiness," and "organizational readiness for change."

Refinement Logic and Final Corpus

The initial search yielded 22,419 records. Sequential filters were applied for publication years (2021–2026), subject area (Business, Management and Accounting), journal articles, the "Change Management" keyword facet, final publication stage, and open-access

status. These criteria resulted in a final corpus of 52 journal articles. While the open-access filter facilitated content accessibility, it may have excluded relevant closed-access studies.

Screening and Eligibility Assessment

Records were screened using titles, abstracts, keywords, and source information. Included studies explicitly addressed readiness for change, organizational change, change management, employee reactions to change, or related HRM/OB mechanisms such as trust, communication, leadership, culture, and well-being. Studies outside organizational or management contexts were excluded. No additional records were removed after applying the predefined Scopus filters.

Tools

Scopus

Scopus was used for search execution, refinement filtering, bibliographic data export, and descriptive analysis.

VOSviewer

VOSviewer v1.6.20 was employed for science mapping and visualization, including keyword co-occurrence networks and country-level bibliographic coupling networks. Full counting was used in all analyses, following recommendations for transparent and reproducible bibliometric mapping (Hamsal & Binsar, 2025; Kirby, 2023).

Spreadsheet Software

Spreadsheet software, such as Microsoft Excel, was used for data preprocessing, documentation, refinement logs, and preparation of extraction templates for subsequent content analysis

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Study selection and corpus overview

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA-style flow diagram derived from the Scopus filtering audit trail. The initial TITLE-ABS-KEY query identified 22,419 records. Sequential database refinements reduced the corpus to 9,474 records after the year filter, 2,599 records after the Business, Management and Accounting subject-area filter, 2,033 journal articles, 103 records under the “Change Management” keyword facet, 96 final-stage publications, and 52 open-access journal articles. These 52 articles formed the final analytic corpus for bibliometric mapping and thematic synthesis. Because the selection process was primarily database-filter driven, the PRISMA diagram is interpreted as a transparent audit trail of corpus construction rather than as evidence of a full manual systematic review across multiple databases.

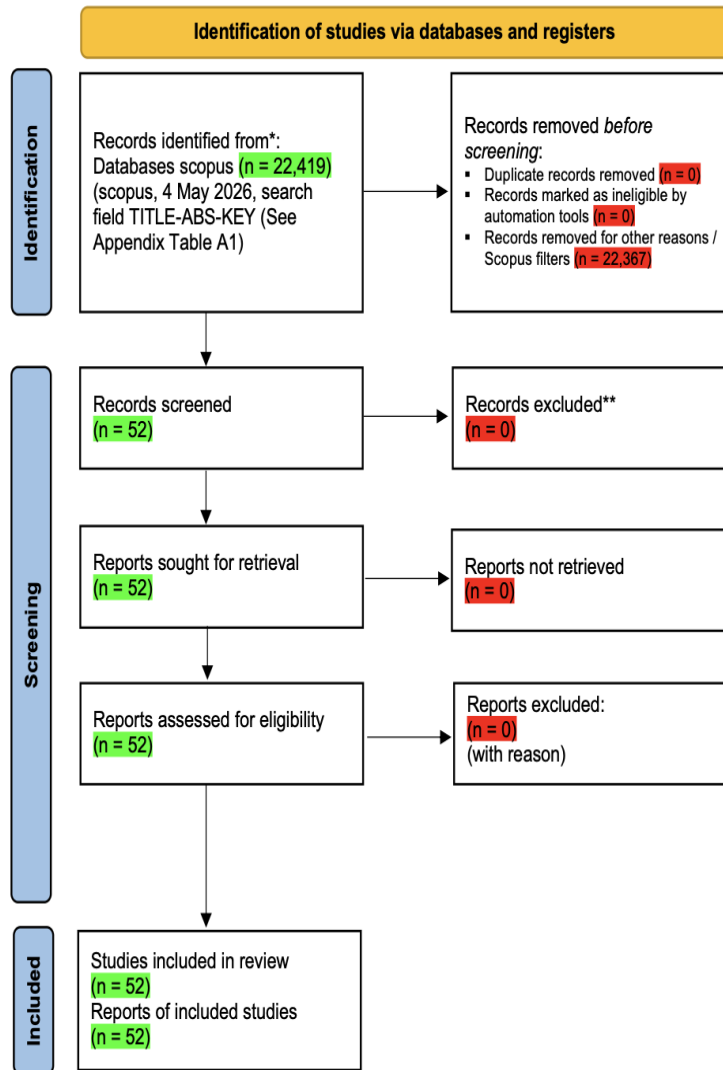


Figure X. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for study selection (Scopus, 4 May 2026).

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for study selection (Scopus exports retrieved on 3 May 2026; diagram compiled on 4 May 2026) Source: authors' compilation based on Scopus filtering log and export.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale
Database	Scopus	Non-Scopus databases	Scopus provides structured bibliographic metadata suitable for VOSviewer mapping.
Search field	TITLE-ABS-KEY readiness-for-change terms	Records outside the defined search field	Ensures reproducibility of the search strategy.
Year	2021–2026	Publications before 2021	Focuses on recent readiness-for-change research.
Subject area	Business, Management and Accounting	Other subject areas	Aligns the corpus with management and HRM scholarship.

Document type	Journal article	Conference paper, book chapter, editorial, note, review note	Focuses on peer-reviewed journal-based evidence.
Publication stage	Final	In press or non-final records	Ensures bibliographic completeness and stable metadata.
Keyword refinement	Scopus "Change Management" facet	Records not tagged under this facet	Improves topical relevance to organizational change and management.
Access	Open access	Closed access	Enables follow-up content interpretation, but may introduce coverage bias.
Language	No language filter applied	Not applicable	Avoids language-based exclusion at the Scopus refinement stage.

Table 2. Sequential Scopus filtering summary (audit trail)

Filtering step	Remaining records (n)
Initial query results	22,419
Year filter (2021-2026)	9,474
Subject area: Business, Management & Accounting	2,599
Document type: Article	2,033
Keyword facet: "Change Management"	103
Publication stage: Final	96
Open Access	52

Descriptive analysis

Figures 2-8 summarize descriptive characteristics of the final corpus (n=52) based on Scopus export metadata and "Analyze search results" dashboards.

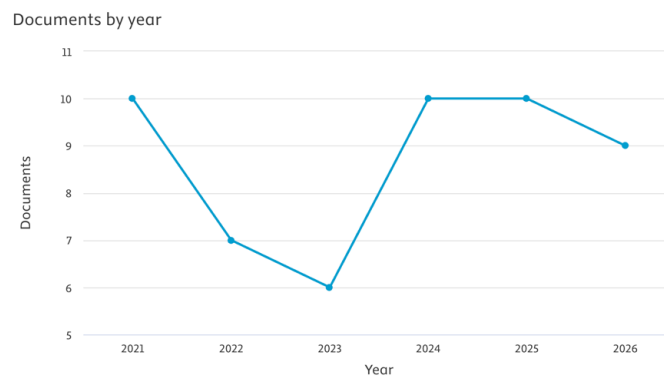


Figure 2. Documents by year (Scopus export; n=52). Source: Scopus export and authors' analysis.

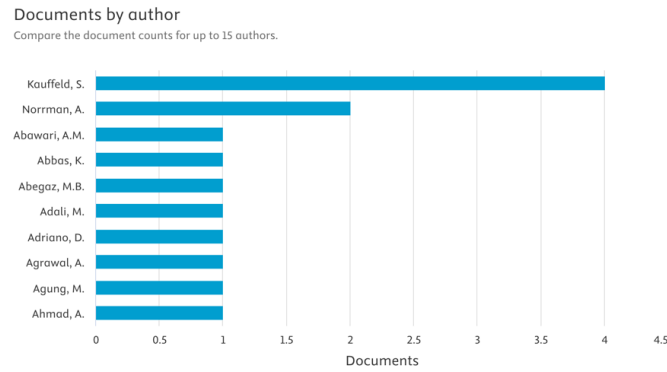


Figure 3. Documents by author (top contributors). Source: Scopus “Analyze search results” dashboard captured by authors.

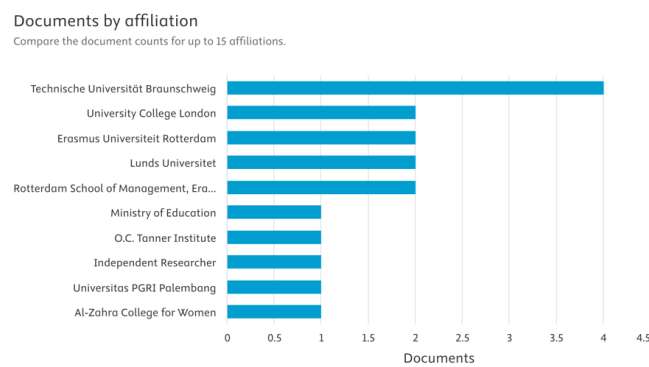


Figure 4. Documents by affiliation (top affiliations). Source: Scopus “Analyze search results” dashboard captured by authors.

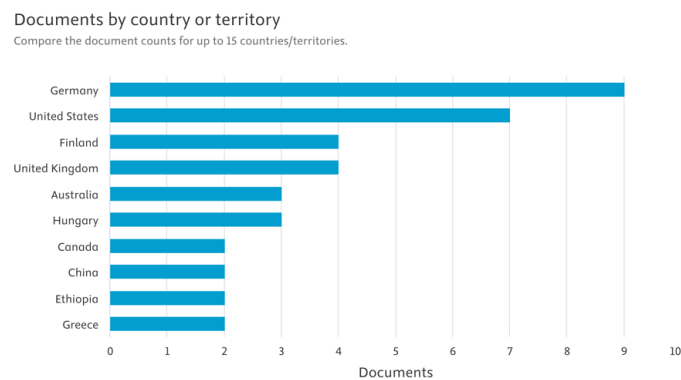


Figure 5. Documents by country/territory (top countries). Source: Scopus “Analyze search results” dashboard captured by authors.

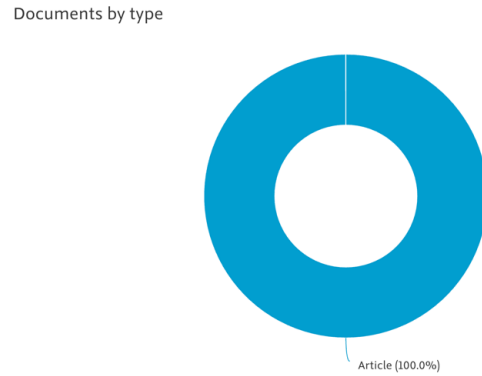


Figure 6. Documents by document type. Source: Scopus “Analyze search results” dashboard captured by authors.

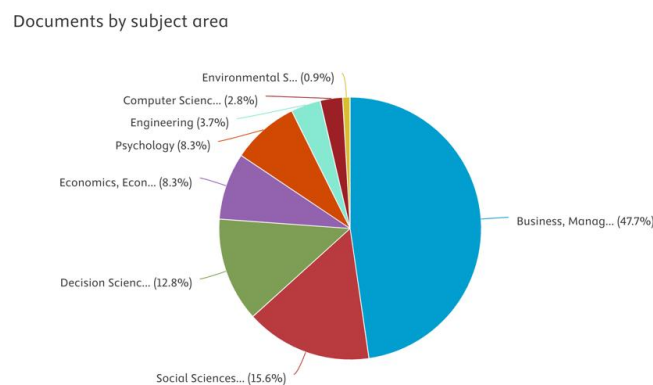


Figure 7. Documents by subject area (Scopus classification). Source: Scopus “Analyze search results” dashboard captured by authors.

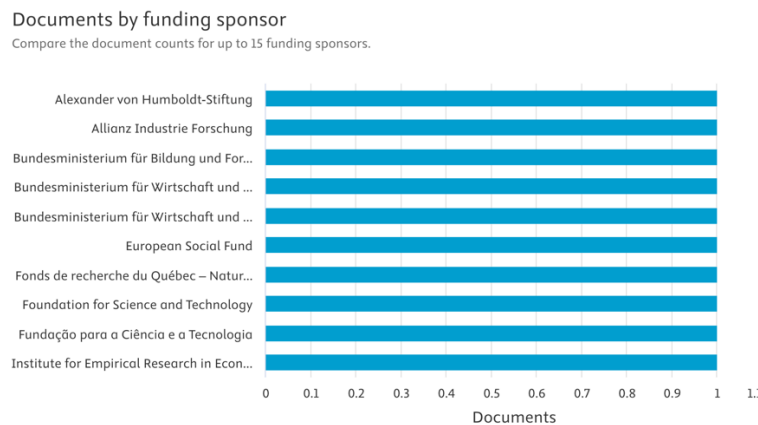


Figure 8. Documents by funding sponsor (top sponsors). Source: Scopus “Analyze search results” dashboard captured by authors.

These indicators describe publication and contributor patterns **within the final Scopus-refined corpus (n=52)** and should not be interpreted as population-level trends for the entire readiness for change literature.

These indicators describe publication and contributor patterns within the final Scopus-refined corpus (n = 52). They should not be interpreted as population-level trends for the entire readiness-for-change literature, because the corpus is limited by the selected database, subject area, keyword facet, publication stage, and open-access refinement.

Nevertheless, the descriptive results provide a useful baseline for understanding how recent management-oriented readiness-for-change research is distributed across time, authors, affiliations, countries, document types, subject classifications, and funding sponsors.

Table 3. Descriptive mapping summary (selected indicators)

Indicator	Observation (from Scopus dashboards/exports)	Interpretation for readiness-for-change research
Publications per year (2021–2026)	Uneven distribution with a peak in 2025 (Figure 2).	The topic shows recent growth and consolidation in the 2021–2026 window.
Most prolific authors	Kauffeld, S. (4 documents) and Norrman, A. (2 documents) appear as the top contributors (Figure 3).	Productivity is concentrated, suggesting a small set of active contributors.
Top affiliations	Technische Universität Braunschweig appears as a leading affiliation (Figure 4).	Institutional hubs may shape dominant perspectives and contexts in the corpus.
Top countries	Germany and the United States are leading contributor countries by affiliation counts (Figure 5).	Geographical concentration may affect context generalizability and boundary conditions.
Document type	All documents are journal articles (100%) due to eligibility criteria (Figure 6).	Peer-reviewed evidence supports synthesis, but excludes conference-frontier work.
Subject areas	Business, Management and Accounting dominates because of filtering, with additional classifications in social sciences and related fields (Figure 7).	Readiness is studied at the intersection of HRM/management and adjacent disciplines.

Science mapping results

1. Co-word (keyword co-occurrence) mapping

The network is organized into 30 algorithmic clusters (total link strength = 811, as displayed in the VOSviewer output), which primarily reflect granular keyword groupings under an inclusive threshold rather than finalized theoretical themes.

Figure 9 visualizes the keyword co-occurrence network generated in VOSviewer v1.6.20 (all keywords; full counting; minimum occurrence = 1). The resulting map contains 196 items; given the inclusive threshold, the raw output yields many small algorithmic clusters, so substantive interpretation is performed through the consolidated.

The large number of algorithmic clusters indicates that readiness-for-change research is conceptually dispersed rather than organized around a single dominant theoretical stream. However, the central position of change management and organizational change suggests that the corpus is anchored in core change-management concerns. Peripheral terms should not be over-interpreted as independent themes; rather, they indicate emerging or context-specific topics that require consolidation through theory-based interpretation. For this reason, the subsequent synthesis groups related

terms into six mechanism-oriented themes that are more suitable for HRM and organizational behavior theory building.

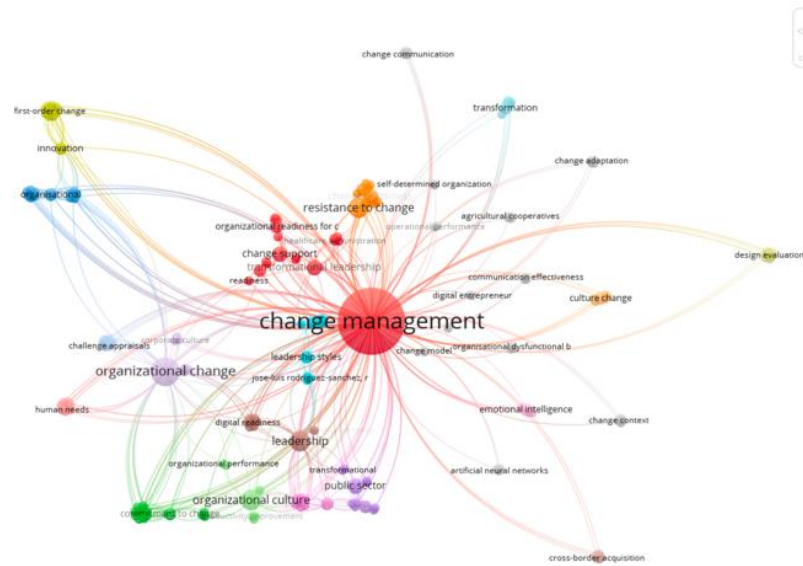


Figure 9. Keyword co-occurrence network (VOSviewer v1.6.20; all keywords; full counting; minimum occurrence=1). Source: authors' VOSviewer output.

2. Country-level bibliographic coupling network

Figure 10 reports the country-level bibliographic coupling network visualization produced in VOSviewer v1.6.20 (full counting). The map includes 33 country items grouped into 7 clusters, with 255 links (total link strength = 2,915, as displayed in the VOSviewer output), illustrating cross-country knowledge relatedness among countries represented in the corpus, based on bibliographic coupling.

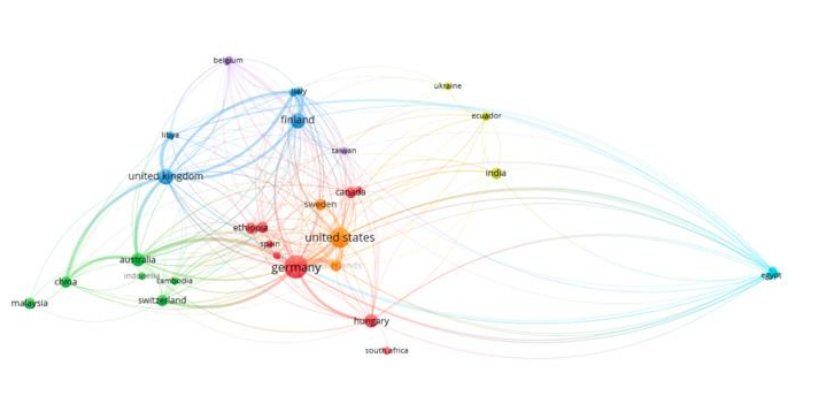


Figure 10. Country-level bibliographic coupling network (VOSviewer v1.6.20; full counting). Source: authors' VOSviewer output.

Mechanism-oriented thematic synthesis

To translate the bibliometric structures into theoretically meaningful insights, the study consolidates the VOSviewer co-word output into six mechanism-oriented themes. This consolidation was not based solely on the automatic cluster labels generated by VOSviewer. Instead, it combined three interpretive criteria: (1) recurrent keyword anchors in the co-word map, (2) conceptual proximity among terms, and (3) representative studies in the corpus that explicitly addressed the underlying mechanism.

The resulting themes therefore function as theory-building categories rather than raw bibliometric clusters. This approach is particularly appropriate for a small and conceptually diverse corpus, where overly literal interpretation of algorithmic clusters could produce fragmented or unstable conclusions.

Table 4. Thematic/Cluster Matrix

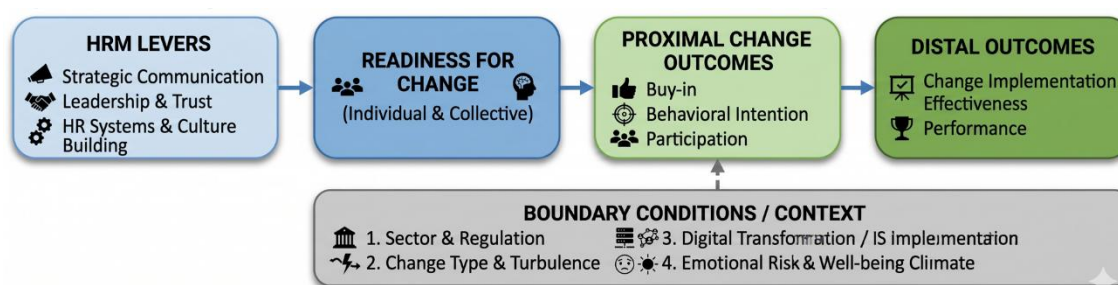
Theme	Core mechanism / subthemes	Representative studies (examples)	Key gaps
T1 Communication & sensemaking	Change-agent communication; meaning-making; “changing the conversation”.	Endrejat et al. (2021); Blackman et al. (2022).	Need causal evidence on which communication practices build readiness across change types; limited longitudinal designs.
T2 Leadership, trust & social exchange	Transformational leadership; leader-follower interaction; organizational trust; perceived support.	Güntner & Kauffeld (2021); Hamza et al. (2022).	Boundary conditions (culture/sector) and mediators (trust, justice) are not consistently tested; cross-level pathways underdeveloped.
T3 Culture, capability & change sustainability	Organizational culture as mediator; change capability; systems for sustaining change.	Abawari et al. (2024); Luciano-Alipio et al. (2026); Vanhengel et al. (2026).	Operational definitions of “capability” vary; measurement validation across contexts is limited.
T4 Intervention design & implementation paradox	Change management interventions; measurement systems; leadership passivity; implementation gaps.	Hagl et al. (2024); Norrman & Näslund (2026).	Need comparative designs evaluating intervention components and implementation fidelity; few field experiments.
T5 Technology-enabled change contexts	Managerial readiness for digital transformation; readiness and behavioral intention in IS/HRIS implementation.	Chen et al. (2024); Turner & Whittaker (2024); Vilma & Booshnam (2025).	Integration between IT adoption theories and HRM readiness mechanisms remains fragmented; platform-level readiness is understudied.
T6 Employee well-being, emotions & retention risks	Emotional stages during change; emotional intelligence; turnover intention; psychosocial strain.	Castillo (2022); Khraim (2023); van Niekerk (2023).	Need integrative models connecting readiness and well-being outcomes; underuse of multi-wave and within-person designs.

HRM-grounded conceptual model

Synthesizing Themes T1–T6, we propose a conceptual model in which HRM levers (communication, leadership, HR systems, and culture) shape readiness-for-change at

multiple levels: individual readiness beliefs and collective change capability. Readiness then influences proximal change outcomes (e.g., buy-in, behavioral intention, participation) and distal outcomes (e.g., change implementation effectiveness and performance). The model also specifies boundary conditions highlighted in the corpus – such as sector regulation, digital transformation intensity, and employee emotional risk – that may strengthen or weaken these relationships and should be tested explicitly in future empirical research.

The model conceptualizes readiness for change as both a psychological state and an organizational capability. At the individual level, readiness reflects employees' beliefs that change is necessary, legitimate, beneficial, and feasible. At the collective level, readiness reflects the organization's capability to coordinate resources, routines, leadership actions, communication systems, and cultural norms in support of change implementation. HRM levers such as strategic communication, leadership development, employee involvement, training, perceived support, and culture-building practices are therefore positioned as readiness-building mechanisms. These mechanisms shape proximal outcomes, including buy-in, behavioral intention, participation, and reduced resistance, which in turn support distal outcomes such as implementation effectiveness and organizational performance. The model also recognizes that these relationships are contingent on sectoral regulation, change type, digital transformation intensity, and employee emotional risk.



Source: authors' synthesis from bibliometric mapping and thematic consolidation.

Figure 11. HRM-grounded conceptual model of readiness for change. Source: authors' synthesis from bibliometric mapping and thematic consolidation.

Discussion

Answers to research questions

RQ1 (descriptive structure). The corpus retrieved from Scopus and refined to 52 open-access journal articles indicates recent growth and concentration among a limited number of authors, affiliations, and countries (Figures 2–5). This suggests an active but still consolidating field within the management/HRM domain.

RQ2 (thematic clusters). Co-word mapping places change management and organizational change as central hubs connecting mechanism-oriented themes around communication and sensemaking (T1), leadership and trust (T2), culture and capability (T3), intervention design (T4), technology-enabled change contexts (T5), and employee well-being dynamics (T6) (Figure 9; Table 4).

RQ3 (conceptual synthesis). The integration of the six mechanism-oriented themes suggests that readiness for change should be treated as a multi-level HRM mechanism rather than a single attitudinal construct. Communication and sensemaking explain how employees interpret the meaning and necessity of change. Leadership and trust explain

why employees may accept or reject change initiatives based on perceived credibility, fairness, and support. Culture and change capability explain how readiness is embedded in organizational routines and norms. Intervention design highlights the importance of implementation fidelity, while technology-enabled change contexts show that readiness increasingly intersects with digital adoption and information systems implementation. Finally, employee well-being and emotional risk indicate that readiness may erode when change produces strain, uncertainty, or turnover intentions. Together, these themes support a conceptual model in which HRM levers shape readiness, readiness shapes proximal change outcomes, and proximal outcomes influence implementation effectiveness and performance under context-specific boundary conditions.

Theoretical implications

The synthesis reinforces the need to distinguish readiness as (i) individual beliefs about change and (ii) collective/organizational capability to implement change, as studies vary in level-of-analysis and proximate constructs. Advancing theory requires explicit cross-level mechanisms and boundary conditions, consistent with calls to move beyond binary “ready vs resistant” framings.

This review offers three theoretical contributions. First, it clarifies that readiness for change should not be reduced to a static employee attitude. The mapped literature suggests that readiness is better understood as a dynamic and multi-level construct involving individual beliefs, relational processes, and organizational capability. Second, the review connects readiness-for-change research with HRM mechanisms, particularly communication, leadership, trust, culture, and employee support. This strengthens the theoretical bridge between change management and strategic HRM. Third, the review identifies boundary conditions that are often underdeveloped in readiness research, including sectoral regulation, digital transformation intensity, change type, and employee well-being risk. These contributions provide a more integrated foundation for future cross-level and context-sensitive readiness research.

Practical implications for HRM and change leaders

The evidence suggests that readiness-building is actionable through communication practices that support sensemaking (T1), leadership behaviors that cultivate trust (T2), and culture/capability investments that sustain change (T3). In technology-enabled change, HR leaders should align readiness interventions with user adoption processes and training, while monitoring employee well-being risks and retention signals (T5–T6).

For practitioners, the findings suggest that readiness for change should be deliberately managed before, during, and after change implementation. Before implementation, HR leaders should assess whether employees understand the rationale for change, perceive the change as legitimate, and believe that they have the capability and support to enact it. During implementation, leaders should prioritize transparent communication, employee voice, trust-building behaviors, and training support. After implementation, organizations should monitor whether new routines are sustained, whether employees remain engaged, and whether change-related stress or turnover intention increases. In this sense, readiness-building is not a one-time communication activity but an ongoing HRM process that connects people management, leadership behavior, organizational culture, and performance outcomes.

Methodological implications

A recurring limitation is the reliance on cross-sectional designs and construct-labeling without mechanism specification. Future studies should prioritize multi-wave and

multi-level designs, improve measurement validation across contexts, and explicitly model intervention fidelity and boundary conditions.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates how bibliometric mapping can be combined with thematic synthesis to move from descriptive science mapping toward theory-oriented interpretation. The bibliometric component identifies structural patterns in the corpus, while the thematic synthesis translates those patterns into explanatory mechanisms. However, the review also shows that small-corpus bibliometric studies require careful interpretation. Low keyword occurrence thresholds can preserve emerging terms but also increase noise. Therefore, future studies should report keyword cleaning procedures, threshold sensitivity checks, and the rationale for consolidating algorithmic clusters into theoretical themes.

Future research agenda

Table 5 translates the identified gaps into specific, testable research opportunities.

Table 5. Research agenda matrix

Gap	Research question	Suggested method	Expected contribution
Cross-level integration remains limited	How do HRM practices (AMO) translate into collective readiness via individual readiness and team climate?	Multilevel longitudinal study (employees nested in units) with mediation tests.	Clarifies micro meso pathways and prevents level-of-analysis fallacies.
Readiness treated as static state	How does readiness evolve across change phases, and what triggers transitions from resistance → readiness → engagement?	Experience-sampling / three-wave panel with latent transition analysis.	Builds dynamic readiness theory with phase-specific mechanisms.
Mechanisms in communication under-specified	Which communication dimensions (content, frequency, voice, transparency) most strongly build readiness under uncertainty?	Field experiment or quasi-experiment comparing communication packages.	Establishes causal effects and practical communication playbooks.
Trust is often assumed, not measured as process	When does trust mediate leadership → readiness, and when does it fail (e.g., low justice, low support)?	Multi-source survey + moderated mediation; include justice/POS measures.	Specifies boundary conditions for social exchange mechanisms.
Culture-capability constructs vary	Which components of organizational change capability are necessary and sufficient for sustained readiness?	fsQCA or configurational analysis across organizations.	Identifies capability configurations rather than single predictors.

Intervention paradox and fidelity rarely modeled	How does implementation fidelity moderate the impact of change interventions on readiness and outcomes?	Process evaluation + mixed-methods intervention study.	Links “what is implemented” to readiness outcomes.
Technology-enabled readiness fragmented	How do IS adoption variables (e.g., perceived usefulness) interact with HRM readiness mechanisms in HRIS rollouts?	Hybrid model: SEM integrating adoption and readiness constructs.	Bridges HRM and IS literatures into a unified explanatory model.
Sector/regulatory contexts under-theorized	How do institutional constraints shape readiness mechanisms in regulated vs non-regulated sectors?	Comparative case studies across sectors + qualitative comparative analysis.	Defines institutional boundary conditions for readiness theory.
Well-being and readiness often studied separately	Does readiness buffer emotional strain and turnover intentions during change, or does strain erode readiness over time?	Cross-lagged panel models; within-person change analysis.	Integrates well-being and readiness into a reciprocal model.
Measurement and comparability issues	Are readiness measures invariant across cultures and sectors (public/private; global regions)?	Measurement invariance testing (multi-group CFA) using multi-country data.	Improves validity and enables cumulative meta-analytic work.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Using a Scopus-based bibliometric science-mapping design, this review consolidates readiness-for-change research in the management/HRM domain from 2021-2026. The descriptive profile indicates a rapidly developing but concentrated evidence base. Co-word mapping positions change management as the thematic hub connecting communication, leadership/trust, culture/capability, intervention design, technology-enabled change contexts, and employee well-being themes. The proposed conceptual model and research agenda aim to improve theoretical precision and methodological rigor in future readiness scholarship.

Limitations and further research

This review has several limitations. First, the analysis relies exclusively on Scopus. Although Scopus provides structured metadata suitable for bibliometric mapping, relevant studies indexed in Web of Science, Dimensions, Google Scholar, or discipline-specific databases may have been excluded. Second, the corpus was restricted to Business, Management and Accounting, final-stage journal articles, the Scopus “Change Management” keyword facet, and open-access records. These refinements strengthened topical focus and enabled follow-up interpretation, but they also narrowed the evidence

base and may have excluded relevant closed-access or cross-disciplinary studies. Third, the use of open-access availability as an inclusion criterion should be interpreted as a practical access decision rather than as an indicator of article quality. Fourth, science-mapping results are sensitive to VOSviewer parameter settings, keyword normalization, and threshold choices. The minimum keyword occurrence threshold of 1 preserved emerging terms but increased the possibility of noisy and fragmented clusters. Fifth, because the data were retrieved on 3 May 2026, the 2026 publication count represents only records indexed up to that date and should not be interpreted as a full-year trend. Future research should replicate the analysis using multiple databases, compare alternative keyword thresholds, document thesaurus-based keyword cleaning, include closed-access records where possible, and combine bibliometric mapping with full-text qualitative coding or meta-analytic techniques to strengthen causal and theoretical claims.

Data availability statement

The bibliographic metadata used in this study were retrieved from Scopus on 3 May 2026. Due to database licensing restrictions, the full Scopus export files cannot be publicly redistributed. However, the search string, refinement sequence, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and VOSviewer parameter settings are reported in the article and appendices to support transparency and reproducibility. Additional documentation may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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