Competitive Strategy and Its Execution: A Conceptual Note

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores the ongoing debate between the relative importance of the quality of competitive strategy and the quality of the implementation of that strategy in the strategic management process. A conceptualization of decision-making and assessment criteria is presented, which incorporates and relates competitive advantage to the selection of preferred strategy-strategy implementation combinations. Implications for future research and applications are discussed.

Keywords: strategy execution, strategy implementation, competitive strategy, competitive advantage

INTRODUCTION

Strategic management / planning processes are generally represented as a three-stage sequential process of strategic analysis (the derivation of the organization's strategic direction and analysis of the organization's internal and external environments), followed by strategy formulation (where alternate business and corporate strategies are formulated, evaluated, and selected for implementation), followed by strategy implementation (where the actions necessary to implement the selected strategies are specified and undertaken) (see for example, Dess, McNamara, Eisner, & Lee, 2021). There may be variations on this sequence, such as feedback loops from strategy formulation back to strategic analysis to obtain additional environmental data to enable enhanced assessment of alternative strategies, and feedforward loops from strategy formulation to strategy implementation to make preliminary assessments of the implementability of a strategy as a criterion for strategy selection (Wasilewski, 2013). Nevertheless, the strategic management / planning processes generally follow the above-described sequence (Miller, 1998).

Faced with finite strategic resources (e.g., time, money, people), organizations often need to decide how to allocate these resources among the stages of the strategic management process. Such strategic resource allocation decisions often result in decisions of the degree of emphasis placed on the quality of strategy versus the quality of the strategy implementation. (In this paper, for purposes of simplicity, the idea of 'quality' refers to the containing of generally desirable attributes, which is further explored in subsequent sections of this paper.) The resultant debates have often been characterized as 'strategy vs execution' (Bughin, LaBerge, & Mellbye, 2017; Frigo, 2003), that is, whether to focus 'on the strategy to implement' versus 'on the implementation of the strategy' (Collis, 2019). (In this paper the terms implementation and execution may be used interchangeably.)

This conceptual paper begins with brief discussions of the conceptualizations of strategy followed by strategy implementation. Then the 'strategy versus execution' debate is discussed. Then the interrelationship of strategy and strategic implementation is related to the purpose of the strategic management process in terms of competitive advantage. Finally, a concluding discussion is presented.



STRATEGY

Working backward on the aforementioned three-stage sequential process of strategic management / planning, "the purpose of strategy implementation is to implement those strategies that promote and improve the short- and long-term viability and success of the organization, through sustained value creation (Fréry, 2006). These strategies stem from the strategy formulation stage, where alternate strategies are formulated, evaluated, and selected for implementation. As such, the strategy formulation stage addresses those 'strategic conditions / considerations' in the organization's internal and external environments which are of concern and consequential to sustained value creation. These 'strategic conditions / considerations' are the input to strategy formulation, and since that input is the output from strategic analysis, the purpose of strategic analysis is to provide an output that clearly identifies and describes the 'strategic conditions / considerations. 'Strategic conditions / considerations' are commonly referred to as 'strategic issues', and it is generally acknowledged that strategic analysis is to aid in understanding the strategic issues rather than to generate solutions (Grant, 2009). The strategic analysis stage may be deemed completed, and the strategy formulation stage commenced, when the strategic issues have been sufficiently identified and described for use in strategy formulation" (Wasilewski, 2011, p. 81). Thus, a strategy resulting from the strategy formulation stage is deemed to be of greater quality as it provides for a more effective and efficient addressing of the strategic issues.

STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

Regarding strategy implementation, "the 7S Framework (Waterman, Jr., 1982; Waterman, Jr., Peters, & Phillips, 1980a, 1980b) has been applied as a means to understand and enhance effectiveness of the strategy implementation stage (Bhatti, 2011). ... the simplicity, conceptual appeal, and versatility of the 7S model has resulted in its being a widely utilized / applied tool in many diverse studies from both diagnostic and prescriptive perspectives [see Wasilewski, 2013]. ..." The 7S model asserts that strategy implementation in an organization may be represented by seven distinct interrelated elements: strategy, structure, systems, staff, skills, style, shared values, with first three elements classified as the 'hard Ss', which are relatively easier to identify, quantify, and measure, and the latter four elements classified as the 'soft Ss', which are relatively more qualitative, subjective, and more difficult to identify and measure (Peters & Waterman, 1982):

Strategy. The positioning and actions taken by an enterprise, in response to or anticipation of changes in the external environment, intended to achieve competitive advantage.

Structure. The way in which tasks and people are specialized and divided, and authority is distributed; how activities and reporting relationships are grouped; the mechanisms by which activities in the organization are coordinated.

Systems. The formal and informal procedures used to manage the organization, including management control systems, budgeting and resource allocation system, and management information systems.

Staff. The people, their backgrounds and competencies; how the organization recruits, selects, trains, socializes, manages the careers, and promotes employees.

Skills. The distinctive competencies of the organization; what is does best along dimensions such as people, management practices, processes, systems, technology, and customer relationships.

Style/culture. The leadership style of managers - how they spend their time, and what they focus attention on, what questions they ask of employees, how they make decisions; also the organizational culture (the dominant values and beliefs, the norms, the conscious and unconscious symbolic acts taken by leaders (job titles, dress codes, executive dining rooms, corporate jets, informal meetings with employees)).

Shared Values. The core or fundamental set of values that are widely shared in the organization and serve as the guiding principles of what is important; vision, mission, and values statements that provide a broad sense of purpose for all employees. (Kaplan, 2005, p. 41).

The 7S model posits that effective strategy implementation requires two essential conditions to be achieved - that the strategy is supported by the other six Ss and that the Ss are closely in alignment with one another; that is, that there is 'strategic fit' among the Ss (Waterman, Jr., 1982). Thus, these two conditions suggest that (i) ceteris paribus, the greater the degree to which the Ss support the strategy, the greater the likelihood that the strategy will be effectively implemented, (ii) ceteris paribus, the greater the degree to which the Ss are aligned, the greater the likelihood that the



strategy will be effectively implemented. The foregoing has received empirical support in that effective strategy implementation (cf. strategy execution), through strong alignment (strategic fit) among the 7Ss, was found to be a key factor to attain organizational success (Cocks, 2009).

Additionally, the 7S model is systemic which posits that as the strategy changes, so to should the other six Ss change as needed to maintain support for the strategy and alignment among the seven Ss. Thus, organization adaptation (via the 7Ss) is important to the attaining and maintaining of effective strategy implementation and organizational success (Cocks, 2009; Feurer & Chaharbaghi, 1997, Waterman, 1982; Wasilewski, 2013, pp. 8-9).

STRATEGY AND STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

The foregoing discussions suggest that a successful, 'high-performing' organization needs to have both external alignment with its external environments (via a strategy) and internal alignment among its 7Ss (for effective strategy implementation) (Willcoxson, 2000).

Furthermore, the foregoing discussions also reveal that "in the 7S model, there is an underlying assumption, ... that is, the relationship that greater 7S alignment leads to more effective strategy implementation and which subsequently leads to greater organizational success assumes that the strategy is (for want of a better term) ['appropriate'] (i.e., strategically fits with the organization's external environment, is better than the strategy of the organization's competition, is changed / adapted as necessary / ... etc.). However, not all strategies selected for implementation are necessarily '[as appropriate as needed]' - an organization, for any number of reasons (e.g., agency theory - where strategic decision-makers may not necessarily place shareholders' interests above their own (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1987), etc. may not select for implementation the strategy that is '[as appropriate as needed]'. Thus, if the strategy selected for implementation is [less than 'as appropriate as needed'] and the 7Ss are aligned to a (for want of a better term) to a [high] degree (i.e., the six Ss other than strategy support the strategy, the 7Ss are strongly aligned, etc.), then according to the posits of the 7S model, the result is likely to be effective implementation of a [less than 'as appropriate as needed'] strategy, which is likely to lead to an organization being more so unsuccessful rather than successful" (Wasilewski, 2013, p. 9). Thus, for organizational success, it is deemed necessary that both the strategy and the strategy implementation be as high quality as can be.

STRATEGY VERSUS STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

In sum, the foregoing discussions about strategy and strategy implementation suggest that organizations promote the attainment of the highest quality of both stages of the strategic management process – strategy formulation and strategy implementation. However, as has been noted earlier, faced with the finite strategic resources, there emerges a strategic choice (i.e., decisions whether strategic resource allocation be to the quality of strategy versus to the quality of the strategy implementation). The finite strategic resources require, for example, choices be made as to which strategic issues are addressed, how, and to what degree (affecting the quality of the strategy), and choices be made of the nature and degree of strategic fit among the 7Ss (affecting the quality of the strategy implementation).

An initial review of the literature resulted in a general lack of empirical evidence for and definitive conclusion to this strategic choice, as exemplified by the following.

Some studies argue in favor of the quality of the strategy over the quality of the strategy implementation when seeking financial (e.g., revenue and profit) growth, especially when the strategy is disruptive, requiring fundamental changes to business models (Bughin et al., 2017). Other studies argue in favor of the quality of the strategy implementation over the quality of the strategy, generally around the idea that "the most brilliant strategy ever devised won't get you anywhere if you can't execute it" (Zagotta & Robinson, 2002). The foregoing seems to represent a 'one focus fits all' approach (i.e., strategy or strategy implementation) for which supportive empirical evidence seems lacking.



In contrast to these prior studies, still others argue that both a quality strategy and a quality strategy implementation are concurrently necessary in the strategic management process (Gaddis, 2018). Traditionally, strategy implementation has been viewed as a 'structural control' (e.g., Galbraith & Nathanson, 1979; Hofer, 1975) where organizations designed organization structures, systems, and control mechanisms to effectively implement the selected strategy (Weiser, Jarzabkowski, & Laamanen, 2020). It may be argued that attempts should be made to allocate the finite resources in such a way as to enable the qualities of both the strategy and the strategy implementation to improve together. Such concurrent or parallel processing recognizes that strategy and strategy implementation are interrelated processes (Frigo & Litman, 2001), and that the effective implementation of an effective strategy is most likely to occur when adaptation of both the strategy and its implementation are concurrently realized (Weiser et al., 2020).

Yet, the attainment of 'equality of quality' (however measured, for example, high quality strategy and high-quality strategy implementation) is unlikely to remove the choice dilemma, as (due to imperfect information and limitations to and uncertainty about the measurements of the quality (March & Simon, 1958; March, 1978; Feldman & March (1981))) there are degrees of the quality, as depicted in Figure 1. Both X and Y, in Figure 1, may be considered as being high quality strategy and high quality strategy implementation, with differing degrees of 'high quality', with both 'high quality' combinations of strategy and strategy implementation, but simply different combinations (i.e., X has a 'higher quality strategy' than Y, but a 'less high quality strategy implementation' than Y; also, Y has a 'higher quality strategy implementation' than X, but a 'less high quality strategy' than X.), and the choice stems from the question 'Which is preferred, X or Y?'.

Another possible reason for the lack of a definitive conclusion to this strategic choice is based on the lack of criteria for making the choice (i.e., which is preferred, X or Y?). That is, questions are raised as to what criteria could/should be applied to evaluate the alternative combinations for purposes of the trade-offs in the strategic resource allocation decisions to strategy versus strategy implementation (i.e., what criteria are to be applied to assess which strategy-strategy implementation combination is preferred, X or Y?).

Thus, there remains a choice and a dilemma, which results in the need to address the 'strategy versus execution' debate, the attention to which becomes increasingly important when the organization attempts to formulate and implement strategies in highly dynamic external environments (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt, 1988; Wasilewski & Motamedi, 2007). Furthermore, as it now stands, the positions taken on the strategy-execution debate seem primarily 'opinion based', with little empirical or theoretical support, and there seems a need for criteria for making the strategy and/or/versus strategy implementation decision.

Figure 1. Alternative Choices in the Strategy - Strategy Implementation Grid

higher ← ← ← quality higher y quality ↑ Y ↑ ↑

Strategy Implementation

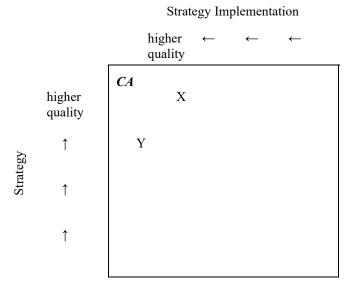


COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

To address the afore-posed debate, it is necessary to return to the fundamental purposes of strategy and strategy implementation. The objective of the strategic management / planning process is the attainment of competitive advantage for the organization (see, for example, Barney, 2011; Barney & Hesterly, 2012).

"As the words 'competitive advantage' imply, an organization that has a competitive advantage has an advantage over its competition (Porter, 1985). In a competitive (business) environment, an organization's long term financial success is positively associated with holding a competitive advantage relative to its competition (Porter, 1985; Miller & Dess, 1993). When organizations achieve (financial) performance that is superior to that of their competitors, they often conclude that they have attained a competitive advantage. Such a conclusion is consistent with research that has shown that organizations with a competitive advantage attained financial performance that was superior to those organizations that did not have a competitive advantage (Miller & Dess, 1993). As such, whether an organization has a competitive advantage may be discerned from its financial performance relative to its competitors. Thus, if an organization has a competitive advantage, it may be reasonable to conclude that it is likely that the organization has financial performance superior to its competitors. Similarly, if an organization has financial performance superior to its competitors, it may be reasonable to conclude that the organization has a competitive advantage." (Wasilewski, 2013). Thus, a successful organization, and specifically one with a competitive advantage, requires that the organization have both as 'high quality' a strategy as possible and as 'high quality' a strategy implementation as possible. In terms of the Strategy-Strategy Implementation Grid, this 'ideal' competitive advantage condition is depicted as 'CA' and is located in the 'ideal' location, which is the upper left-hand corner within the Strategy-Strategy Implementation Grid as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Competitive Advantage and Alternative Choices in the Strategy - Strategy Implementation Grid





STRATEGY AND EXECUTION AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Again, as raised earlier and as presented by Figure 2, the decision to be addressed is which strategy-strategy implementation combination to select: X or Y? X has a 'higher quality strategy' than Y, but a 'less high quality strategy implementation' than Y; also, Y has a 'higher quality strategy implementation' than X, but a 'less high quality strategy' than X. Two important points emerge from the foregoing discussions.

The first is that the criterion to making this decision is revealed by the point CA and its location. Since the purpose of the strategic management process, and thus of the strategy and its implementation, is to attain and sustain a competitive advantage, then, regardless of the current location of the strategy-strategy implementation combination, the objective is to move toward and reach CA. Simply, that strategy-strategy implementation combination, X or Y, which offers the most effective and efficient path (the 'preferred path') to reach the location of CA, is the preferred choice. Thus, the fundamental criterion for selecting among alternative strategy-strategic implementation combinations is not to focus on quality of the strategy and/or/versus the quality of the strategy implementation, but rather to focus on the effectiveness (is it doing the right thing) and the efficiency (is it doing the right thing well?) of the combined strategy-strategy implementation in moving toward CA. Necessarily, the foregoing requires that the movement toward CA incorporate as needed ongoing adjustments concurrently to both the strategy and the strategy implementation.

The second point is how to assess whether the movement is being made toward CA is via the preferred path. From the foregoing discussions, this assessment is made concurrently of the quality of the strategy and of the quality of the strategy implementation. Regarding strategy, it was noted that a strategy is deemed to be of greater quality as it provides for a more effective and efficient addressing of the strategic issues. Thus, it is crucial to establish the nature of the strategic issues to be addressed and how it is necessary to do so through the formulated strategy. Changes in the nature and degree to which the strategy effectively and efficiently addresses the strategic issues reflects changes in the quality of the strategy (and hence, the direction and magnitude of movement in the Strategy - Strategy Implementation Grid). Regarding strategy implementation, it was earlier noted that strategy implementation is deemed to be of higher quality as (i) the strategy is supported by the other six Ss and (ii) that the Ss are closely in alignment with one another; that is, that there is 'strategic fit' among the Ss (Waterman, Jr., 1982). Thus, the key to assessing the quality of the strategy implementation is to assess the degree of the 'strategic fit' among the Ss. And, changes in the nature and degree to which the 'Ss strategically fit' reflects changes in the quality of the strategy (and hence, the direction and magnitude of movement in the Strategy - Strategy Implementation Grid). Importantly, it was also above-noted that the 7S model is systemic, such that as the strategy changes, so to should the other six Ss change as needed to maintain support for the strategy and alignment among the seven Ss. Thus, the strategy and strategy implementation assessments described here should be done concurrently to arrive at a combined magnitude and direction change in the Strategy - Strategy Implementation Grid.

It should be noted that, in assessing the potential effectiveness and efficiency of the 'preferred path', and of the movement along the path, it is important to recognize and incorporate such considerations as: nature of and availability of strategic resources, short-term and long-term perspectives, etc. And, as the external and internal organizational environments are dynamic, the 'current' location of the strategy-strategy implementation may shift and need to be reassessed on an ongoing basis for its effectiveness and efficiency in movement towards CA.

DISCUSSION

The 'strategy versus execution' debate was discussed in terms of the quality of, relationship between, and alternative combinations of, these two stages of the strategic management process. Two explicit contributions emerge from this paper in terms of concepts proposed for addressing this debate. Firstly, the concept of 'competitive advantage' was incorporated into the debate as a potentially useful criterion for comparing alternative strategy-strategic management combinations. It was argued that rather than focus on the individual or relative quality of the strategy versus the strategy implementation (as has been predominant in the past), that the alternative strategy-strategy implementation combination offering the most efficient and effective path to competitive advantage be selected. That is, the selection



of alternative strategy-strategy implementation combination be related to and based on its purpose, rather than on the relative comparison of the two components as one versus the other (strategy versus strategy implementation). Secondly, conceptual means for assessing the direction and magnitude of movement of an alternative strategy-strategy implementation combination towards competitive advantage was offered (i.e., the effectiveness and efficiency of the strategy in addressing the strategic issues, and the strategic fit among the 7Ss).

The ideas presented in this paper are intended to generate ideas for future theoretical and empirical research on how to improve the strategic management process and decisions from alternative qualities of strategy-strategy implementation combinations. For example, such questions arise as: how to incorporate the aforementioned process feedforward and feedback into the strategy-strategy implementation debate? how would the relative degree environmental dynamism affect the strategy-strategy implementation ideas proposed in this paper? are there diminishing returns to movement toward CA in the Strategy - Strategy Implementation Grid? how is the concurrent adjustment of strategy and strategy implementation to be conducted? how are changes in the relative positions of the alternate strategy-strategy implementation combinations to be determined from changes in the internal and external organizational environments? and so forth.

Future research could incorporate (external and internal) environmental uncertainty to extend the ideas presented in this paper. "Under conditions of increased uncertainty (i.e., increased dynamism and/or complexity) and risk, multiple types of strategies may materialize. In such environments, achieving alignment between the organization's internal and the external environments is a more strategically complicated and difficult endeavor. Developing and maintaining competitive advantage and accessing strategic resources are less predictable and more challenging. The alignment processes undergo frequent change and adjustments. There is change within change and the intended strategies frequently have shorter life spans and are subject to being altered. In such an environment emergent strategy may gain prevalence and acceptance (e.g., Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998). These factors suggest that the strategic planning process should reflect the level of dynamism in the external environment (e.g., Bourgeois, III, 1980) and the types of strategies [and strategy implementations] best suited for crafting a balance between external and internal dynamics and the firm" (Wasilewski & Motamedi, 2007, p. 30).

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