

STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THEORY/PRACTICE DISCONNECT IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

Public administration scholars and practitioners alike struggle to promote the effectiveness of government and its institutions in the current political and policy environments. Successful implementation of government strategic initiatives is a vehicle to improve responsiveness and results to the public. However, the disconnect between public administration scholars and practitioners threatens its utility. The case of strategic implementation demonstrates the scholar/practitioner divide and illustrates how such a gap can hamper government effectiveness, as shown by comparing the empirical prescriptions from a recent study on strategic implementation in US municipalities to the practical reality within the same sample. Public organizations utilized generic approaches to implementation where contingent ones are empirically prescribed. Further, the contingent application of implementation tools did not mirror those recommended in prior scholarly study. As a whole, this disconnect reduced implementation success by over 20 percent. The study recommends steps to increase the use of scholarly research in practice.

Keywords: Strategic management, implementation, contingency, practice

INTRODUCTION

Scholars spend their careers seeking to explain the relationships between observed phenomena. For those of us in applied fields, we attempt to figure out “what works” in our respective disciplines. But, how much time do we spend examining whether those who actually practice in these fields are employing what works? Without this critical link, the years spent developing theory and identifying solutions are nothing more than words on a page. This reality amplifies the need for public administration scholars to not only identify solutions to make government more effective, but to ensure that these solutions are promoted to and adopted by practitioners.

In public administration, the partnership between scholars and practitioners was critical to creating the discipline during the Progressive Era, as exemplified by the New York Bureau of Research (Bushouse et al., 2011). Today, public administration scholars continue to assert that a strong connection between scholars and practitioners is critical to theory development and improving government effectiveness—and ultimately to the field’s survival (Raadschelders & Lee, 2009; Stivers, 2000). However, Posner (2009, p. 20) speaks for a growing consensus within the discipline: “Research [currently] undertaken by academics is focused on publication in academic journals, not on the potential relevance to the problems facing public and private sector managers.” As a result, public managers rarely or never consult scholarly research for knowledge or to address public problems (Landry, Lamari, & Amara, 2003; Wang, Bunch, & Stream, 2013; Bushouse et al., 2011), and have decreased their participation in practitioner-friendly scholarly associations (Raadschelders & Lee, 2009). This disconnect between scholarly research and professional practice hinders government effectiveness as valuable prescriptions and solutions developed by the academy are not being considered as practical innovations to tangibly improve service delivery and reform.

One practice vital to promoting government effectiveness and prestige—the successful implementation of strategic initiatives (Boyne & Walker, 2010; Poister & Streib,

2005; Walker, 2013)—provides an opportunity to explore the connection between scholarly research and professional application. Scholarly research has largely endorsed contingent approaches to strategic implementation as most effective (Bryson, 2011; Walker, 2013); however, evidence exists to suggest that local government managers prefer to repeatedly use the same approach toward many implementation projects, frequently ending in failure (Mitchell, 2014). Is the oft-quoted and unattributed definition of insanity¹—when one repeatedly performs the same act and expects a different result—the reality for strategic implementation? Do local government managers repeatedly apply the same implementation practices for each initiative without a recognition that they do not work in all cases? Can they learn from scholarly findings? Examining strategic implementation illustrates an example of disconnect between the academy and practice, along with demonstrating the impact this gulf has upon government effectiveness.

This examination begins with an introduction to strategic implementation, emphasizing its emerging importance to both scholars and practitioners. The debate between generic and contingent approaches in strategic implementation receives particular attention, labelling recent research by Mitchell (2014) as emblematic of the scholarly consensus endorsing contingency. The Mitchell study includes both correlational and descriptive data regarding the implementation of 218 strategic initiatives by US municipalities—creating the unique opportunity to compare the scholarly findings regarding successful implementation practices to those employed in practice, from the same dataset. Ultimately, the present study finds that US municipalities consistently employ the same implementation practices from one strategic initiative to the next, and fail to employ implementation tools in the right context when acting contingently—resulting in an over 20% reduction in implementation effectiveness. Consequently, this comparison presents a case study that exemplifies a disconnect between scholars and practitioners and

¹ This infamous “definition” has been attributed to Ben Franklin, Albert Einstein, Mark Twain, novelist Rita Mae Brown, and Narcotics Anonymous literature, but its origin is unknown.

quantifies its negative impact upon one important aspect of government effectiveness.

STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION: AN EXAMPLE OF DISCONNECT

Public organizations are under intense pressure to perform. With constrained resources and heightened demand for more and better services, governments are consistently asked to do “more with less.” This pressure forces these institutions to make wise investments of precious resources or wither in the heat imposed by its constituents. In other words, public organizations must—now more than ever—be strategic about expending resources in order to prosper in a highly scrutinized environment. Over time, governments have increasingly understood their new strategic role and borrowed tools from the already-established field of private-sector strategic management as a response. Public management scholars have also followed suit—attempting to develop a theory of public strategic management.

In general, *strategic management* in the public sector refers to the “all-encompassing process of developing and managing a strategic agenda” (Poister & Streib, 2005, p. 46). Strategic management is comprised of several components, all of which have bred their own subfields of study. The best known component—*strategic planning*—was also the first to be developed in both the private and public sectors (Poister & Streib, 1999). Strategic planning initiates the strategic management process by establishing organizational goals, objectives, and strategies to address threats and exploit opportunities (Bryson, 2011). However, it was recognized in both sectors that strategic planning was not enough; organizational structures and resources must also be tied to executing strategy (Mintzberg, 1994; Vinzant & Vinzant, 1996). Thus, the concept was broadened from planning to management—which incorporated the subsequent steps of resource acquisition, implementation, and evaluation (Poister & Streib, 1999). With this expansion, scholars have increasingly examined the role of *strategic implementation*, which is the

process of incorporating adopted strategies into existing organizational systems, processes, and decision-making mechanisms (Mitchell 2014).

The use of strategic planning and management has increased dramatically in the United States. By 2003, strategic planning was being utilized by a majority of local and state governments, in most nonprofit organizations, and within the national government (Bryson, 2003; Poister & Streib, 2005); with a portion of these organizations tying budgeting and performance systems to organizational strategy (Poister & Streib, 2005). Much of the scholarship in public strategic management has centered on the alignment of strategy content to environmental conditions and desired outcomes, ignoring what may be the most critical portion of the strategic process: implementation. Indeed, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) first brought great attention to the potential dysfunction of this process that scholars previously assumed just happened naturally as part of day-to-day operations. Mintzberg's (1994) classic critique of strategic planning extends Pressman and Wildavsky's claim from the policy realm to strategic management by exposing the disconnect between strategic planning and organizational processes. Walker (2013) goes further by stating that the alignment of strategic stance with the appropriate implementation approach is key to strategic success—even more so than strategy formulation. This is to say the strategic implementation matters and warrants specific exploration.

Generic vs. Contingent Approaches in Strategic Implementation

Since contingent approaches have long been endorsed over generic ones in strategic planning (Bryson, 2011) and more recently in strategic management through the Miles and Snow studies (Walker, 2013), a number of scholars have extended this line of research to strategic implementation. For clarity, a contingent approach calls for the development of a repertoire of tactics to be used according to the needs of a situation, while a generic approach prescribes one set of practices to be used in all situations (Lorange, 1978). Nutt published several studies (1989; 1995; 2001) on the subject, ultimately concluding that contingent

approaches are appropriate for public strategic implementation (Nutt & Wilson, 2010). Andrews, Boyne, Law, and Walker (2011) also conclude that recommendations for one universal implementation approach are inappropriate; with Andrews, Benyon, and Genc (2017) finding that public organizations which combine implementation approaches over time are better performers. While Alford and Hughes (2008) surmise that contingent, project-based approaches may not be ideal for the public sector because of paramount public values that trump efficiency concerns, they still endorse a contingent approach as the best way to optimize public problem solving. Hickson, Miller, and Wilson (2003) find a dual planned/adaptive approach to strategic implementation in public and private organizations is more effective than when either is solely employed. As Walker (2013, p. 9) states, “The effectiveness of strategies is dependent on their combination and the context in which they are implemented. They are a road map to success, not a prescribed route.”

Most notable to this study, Nutt (1989; 1995) finds that public managers are using implementation approaches contingently, but possess pre-existing managerial preferences that cloud their ability to select the “appropriate” approach for the situation, based on theoretical frameworks of strategic success. This body of scholarly research points to the need to match implementation approach to strategy and context; however, managers attempting to do so may be sabotaging these efforts by allowing their dominant managerial preferences to influence their choices. The paradox here is that public managers know inherently or have learned to adapt implementation approach based on context; but their managerial biases are causing them to select a less than optimal path. As it pertains to strategic implementation, the potential disconnect between scholarly research and professional practice therefore may not be a matter of generic vs. contingent approaches, but how to appropriately apply contingent approaches to a given situation.

Comparing Strategic Implementation Theory to Practice

Building upon this body of research, Mitchell (2014) developed and tested first-of-their-kind competing generic and

contingent models of strategic implementation by analyzing the use of various implementation tools applied to 218 strategic initiatives from a nationwide sample of US municipalities. As background, Mitchell utilized project management literature to define a number of success factors associated with implementation design (Kalali, Anvari, Pourezzat, & Dastjerdi, 2011; Li, Guohui, & Eppler, 2008; Miller, 1997; and Okumus, 2003)—including the *fiscal* and *non-fiscal assessability* of the initiative, the *chief administrator involvement* in the implementation, *performance management system integration*, and *workload of the implementation leader* associated with the strategic initiative. These are referred to as implementation tools in this study and are operationalized below.

Mitchell then incorporated the implementation tools into the generic and contingent models of strategic implementation—the tools serve as the independent variables for both models, while implementation success represents the dependent variable. The difference between the two models centers on the implementation approach. In the generic model, implementation approach is conceived as the consistent application of the same implementation tools upon most or all of its strategic initiatives based on “what works” in that particular organization. Therefore, the generic model operates as a funnel, where the defined implementation approach limits the type of strategies that can be employed by the organization, and therefore limits the types of environmental demands where an effective response can be made.

Conversely, a contingent model of public strategic implementation endorses multiple implementation approaches based on context. From this perspective, the type of strategic initiative drives the implementation approach—opposite of the generic model. Since one can define context in many ways, Mitchell turned to the strategic management literature to refine its description (Lippitt & MacKenzie, 1976; Nutt, 2001; Nutt & Wilson, 2010; Dietrich, 2006; Engwall, 2003; Howell, Windahl, & Seidel, 2010; Shenhar, Tishler, Dvir, Lipovetsky, & Lechler, 2002). Ultimately, Mitchell concluded that implementation context can be boiled down to low and high levels of *initiative priority* and *implementation complexity*. This creates a 2x2

strategic context typology, as shown in Figure 1. Therefore, in a contingent model, each of the boxes represent a separate context where it is theorized that a unique combination of implementation tools is more predictive of implementation success than others.

Figure 1
A typology of strategic context (reprinted from Mitchell, 2014)

Complexity	High	<i>Internal Innovation</i>	<i>Centerpiece</i>
	Low	<i>Routine</i>	<i>Responsive</i>
	Low <====Priority====> High		

In the Mitchell analysis, the overall generic model and its organizational consistency variable did not produce a significant relationship with an implementation success index.² The contingent model fared much better as it was statistically associated with strategic implementation success in three of the four contexts studied, all but the Internal Innovation context. For high-priority initiatives, the choice to integrate the outputs or outcomes of an implemented product into an operational performance management system was associated with implementation success. In the Responsive context, creating assessability by defining the implementation scope, timeline, and desired impact tended to lead to implementation success; but the direct involvement of the chief administrative officer (CAO) or a member of his or her staff in initiative implementation actually led to less success. The latter is also true in the Routine context. Fiscal assessability bucks the contingent trend as it is a statistically significant implementation tool in all four contexts. These findings are summarized in Figure 2.

² The implementation success index (ISI) is comprised of three factors: projection completion, budget adherence, and schedule adherence.

Figure 2
The effect of implementation tools upon implementation success (Mitchell, 2014)

Implementation Tool	CONTEXT			
	ROUTINE	RESPONSIVE	INTERNAL INNOVATION	CENTERPIECE
CAO Involvement	-	-		
PMS Integration		+		+
Fiscal Assessability	+	+	+	+
Non-Fiscal Assessability		+		
Leader Workload				

Shaded Cells indicate significant relationship with implementation success
 (+) = positive relationship, (-) = negative relationship

The Mitchell analysis largely conforms to the findings of 20 years of scholarly research regarding public strategic implementation; supporting the assertion that contingent implementation approaches possess a stronger relationship with implementation success than generic ones. Not only is it emblematic of the scholarship, this study also provides testable generic and contingent models and a single dataset that can generate empirical findings along with a description of managerial choices in practice. Due to this, the Mitchell study is uniquely positioned to provide a comparison of theory to practice—specifically, to determine whether managers in practice are acting in accordance with the scholarly consensus.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Mitchell and others have laid the groundwork for identifying success factors in public strategic implementation, but what are executives doing in practice? Are their applications of management tools and practices in line with Mitchell’s empirical findings of success factors? Or, as Nutt (1989; 1995) asserts, do executives have pre-existing management preferences that bias their judgment and lead to the application of less effective tools and practices? Specifically, the question to be addressed here is:

Q: *In practice, do public managers use contingent approaches to strategic implementation?*

Therefore, this research question directly tests for the presence of the scholar/practitioner disconnect. To answer it, this study compares Mitchell's empirical findings to strategic implementation in practice. First, an organizational consistency analysis addresses the broader question of whether public managers utilize generic or contingent approaches when implementing strategic initiatives. Second, the study determines whether contingent approaches are correctly selected by comparing aggregate usage of each implementation tool in each context to the empirical findings from the Mitchell analysis. If practice is aligned with scholarship, one would expect that public managers implement strategic plans contingently and utilize practices in line with scholarly findings, leading to the hypotheses:

- H₁: Public managers act contingently, based on project context, toward the implementation of organizational strategic initiatives.
- H₂: The contingent use of implementation tools and practices mirrors the empirical findings in Figure 2.

METHODOLOGY

Sample Selection and Size

The study sample consists of the municipalities that received the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) Distinguished Budget Presentation Award in 2009. These award winners can serve as a proxy for the larger population as any municipality is welcome to apply for the award. In addition, a focus upon this group of municipalities substantially increases the ease and efficiency of data collection as the award requires a statement of organization-wide strategic goals and strategies in budget documents (GFOA, 2005). This choice has implications for generalization, as it is accepted the GFOA award winners are typically better performing governments overall. However, this study explores how particular initiative variables affect implementation efficiency, in both generic and contingent

models. Whether the sample contains high or low-performing municipalities or a representative mix, there is no reason found in logic or literature to believe that the relationship between implementation practices and efficiency is altered by organizational quality, which should minimize any sample bias concerns.

Regarding sample size, 757 municipalities received the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award in 2009. Respecting both time constraints and statistical generalization needs, 200 of the award winners were randomly selected to serve as the initial sample for the study. The sample was then filtered to only include those 44 organizations that met the following criteria: 1) a strategic plan was in effect for Fiscal Year 2010; 2) strategic initiatives were defined for Fiscal Year 2010; 3) these initiatives were finite (possessing a defined beginning and end); and 4) status information was available for these initiatives in Fiscal Years 2011, 2012, and 2013. For each qualifying municipality, five initiatives are selected randomly from those included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 organizational strategic plan to provide a variety and mix of initiatives. This date has been selected to create a retrospective analysis of the strategic goals—allowing for sufficient time to elapse for initiative implementation, as well as potential completion and evaluation. Data are collected from a content analysis of budget documents, strategic plans, and other municipal webpages as specified below. Due to difficulty in obtaining data, only four initiatives are used for each of two municipalities, resulting in an initiative sample size of 218.

Operationalizing the Implementation Tools

Implementation tools were identified previously from the strategic management and project management literatures as potential determinants of strategic implementation success. However, the tools still need to be operationalized in order to transform them into descriptive variables. This section discusses how each variable will be measured, starting with the context factors of priority and complexity that are used to create the four types of context shown in Figure 1, then followed with descriptions of the five implementation tools under study. The operationalization of these variables mirror the measurement

strategies used in the Mitchell study for the sake of consistency. A summary of the operationalization and data collection strategies is provided in Figure 3.

Project priority is determined by whether the strategic initiative is mentioned in the executive budget message, which is utilized, in part, to communicate policy priorities for the given fiscal year (Gosling, 1991; Zavattaro, 2013). More practically for this study, all of the municipalities included in the sample are recipients of the GFOA Distinguished Budget Award, which requires them to include a statement of priorities in the budget message (GFOA, 2013). If the strategic initiative is listed in the FY 2010 budget message, then it is coded as 1 for this variable; if not, it is coded as 0.

Complexity is defined here as, at the outset of implementation, the degree of difficulty associated with the implementation task compared to other initiatives. Mitchell defined four levels of implementation complexity, adapting the Cooke-Davies et al. (2009) typology to the public sector.³ Within a 2x2 typology based on high and low levels of innovation and process improvement, the most simple of implementation efforts requires little process reform or innovation, labeled as “routine”. Those requiring high process improvement but little innovation are referred to as “process re-engineering of existing service”. Next, those with little process improvement by high innovation are labeled as a “new service”. Finally, a “transformation of a service” constitutes those initiatives that require high process improvement and innovation. The researcher examined the scope of each initiative to make determinations of innovation and process improvement levels. In this study, strategic initiatives with “routine” implementation complexity are coded as 0, those that are more complex are coded as 1.

³ See Mitchell (2014) for a more thorough description of the implementation complexity concept and its operationalization.

Figure 3
Measurement of independent variables

Variable	Description	Collection Method	Values
Project Priority	Initiative is identified as a priority for the given fiscal year	Mention in the Mayor or CAO's FY 2010 budget message	0 = Not mentioned 1 = Mentioned
Implementation Complexity	Degree of difficulty in implementing the initiative	Researcher evaluation based on Mitchell (2014) measurement strategy	0 = Routine (little process reform or innovation) 1 = Complex (process re-engineering, new service delivery, or transformed service delivery)
Fiscal Assessability	A FY 2010 budget allocation exists for the strategic initiative	Budget document	0 = No budget allocation exists 1 = Budget allocation exists
Non-Fiscal Assessability	Success of initiative can be assessed in terms of completion, time, and impact	Strategic plans, budget documents, municipal webpages	Additive scale of present elements ranging from 0-3.
Leader Workload	The number of strategic initiatives assigned to project leadership in a given fiscal year	Strategic plans, budget documents, municipal webpages	Count of initiatives assigned, averaged if more than one leader identified.
Chief Administrator Involvement	The CAO or a member of his or her staff is assigned to help lead implementation of initiative	Strategic plans, budget documents, municipal webpages	0 = No member of CAO staff assigned as a lead for initiative 1 = Member of CAO staff assigned as a lead for initiative
Integration into Performance Management System (PMS)	The output or outcome of the implemented initiative will be included in the ongoing PMS	Strategic plans, budget documents, municipal webpages	0 = Initiative output not included in PMS 1 = Initiative output included in PMS

Fiscal Assessability is the first of the implementation tools examined in this study, representing whether a FY 2010 budget has been designated for the initiative. Due to their temporary and cross-functional nature, strategic initiatives require special budgetary attention to ensure resources flow to the project (Kaplan & Norton, 2005). Public organizations may earmark or allocate funds for some strategic initiatives; while asking departments to fund others with resources allocated for general or other purposes. A separate budgetary allocation provides an opportunity for the organization to assess its fiscal performance during implementation. Therefore, a defined budget is a vital element of successful implementation (Roberts, 2011). If there is an allocation for the implementation of the strategic

initiative in the FY 2010 budget, it is coded as 1. If not, the variable is coded as 0.

Non-Fiscal Assessability represents the ability to measure a successful initiative implementation beyond fiscal terms, traditionally judged in terms of 1) completion, 2) on-time implementation, and 3) within-budget implementation (Atkinson, 1999; Baccarini, 1999). In addition, both public and private management scholars have recently argued that measurement of post-implementation strategic objective achievement should be included in initiative assessability (Atkinson, 1999; Baccarini, 1999; Poister & Streib, 2005). Assessability then becomes a function of four factors: 1) completion, 2) time, 3) cost, and 4) strategic impact. Assessability should not be confused with the actual results, as those values would constitute outputs of implementation. Here, the focus is on inputs, and the literature indicates that mere act of planned measurement can have an independent effect on implementation success. Since fiscal assessability has been separated out above, the remaining three assessability factors can be valued by an additive scale of 0-3.

Leader Workload represents the number of strategic initiatives assigned at a given time to the initiative's implementation leader. As the number of strategic initiatives assigned to a project leader increases, the increased and potentially conflicting workload can affect the time and energy devoted to an individual initiative, limiting overall effectiveness (Kuprenas, Jung, Fakhouri, & Jreij, 2000). The variable is operationalized by determining which department heads are the assigned leaders for the particular initiative. Then, for each leader, the number of assigned initiatives for the fiscal year is counted. Workload is then indicated by this value, or an average of these values if more than one leader is assigned to the initiative under study.

Chief Administrator Involvement is a dichotomous variable determined by whether the CAO (regardless of whether this is a professional city manager or not) or an assistant/deputy CAO is identified as an initiative leader. This is done in the same manner as the Leader Workload variable—budgets, strategic plans, and websites were reviewed to determine who was

assigned as the initiative leader. Several authors state that the direct involvement of top managers plays a critical role in strategic implementation efficiency (Bergen, 1982; Kemp, Funk, & Eadie, 1993; Smith & Kafron, 1996). However, Li et al. (2008) show that empirical studies have generally shown conflicting results for this variable—but nonetheless highlight its influence upon implementation success. It is also important to note that CAOs are involved to some degree in most, if not all, strategic implementation efforts due to their supervisory role; but many delegate the primary implementation responsibilities to other senior executives. Yet, the focus of the literature and past research zeroes in on the effect of CAOs providing direct oversight of an initiative's implementation, not indirect monitoring. Therefore, if the CAO or a deputy/assistant is identified as the initiative implementation leader, the variable is coded as 1, if not it is coded as 0.

Integration into a Performance Management System (PMS) is a dichotomous variable that reflects whether the output or immediate outcome of a strategic initiative will be measured following implementation. In both public and private organizations, post-implementation strategic initiative impacts are important to gauge so that strategic effectiveness can be determined (Okumus, 2003; Poister & Streib, 2005). In this case, if there is evidence that the output or outcome of the implemented initiative will be incorporated into an existing PMS, the variable is coded as 1. If no evidence exists, then it is coded as 0.

Constructing the Organization Consistency Analysis

Hypotheses 1 requires a variable that captures how consistently the studied organizations apply the same implementation approach to their strategic initiatives. To represent this, Mitchell measures the application of the implementation tools to the various strategic initiatives in each organization. For each organization, there are five implementation tools that can be measured for five different strategic initiatives (or four, in two cases). Conceptually, an organization that is 100% consistent with its implementation applies the same tools to each and every strategic initiative.

Conversely, an organization that has 0% consistency demonstrates no discernable pattern to its use of implementation tools.

To determine the organizational consistency percentage, one must first evaluate the level of consistent use for each implementation tool. To illustrate, Figure 4 depicts two prototypical organizations, one perfectly consistent and the other perfectly inconsistent. The implementation tools form the columns with the strategic initiatives occupying the rows. The examples demonstrate that a consistency percentage for an implementation tool can be determined by calculating the modal relative frequency—with dichotomous variables, the highest modal frequency (most consistent) is always 100% while the lowest (least consistent) is either 50% when evaluating four strategic initiatives, or 60% with five initiatives. Since the lower end of the consistency range can vary with the number of initiatives, the modal relative frequency is standardized here into a percentile of the possible consistency values. After the consistency value for each implementation tool is calculated, the tool consistency scores can then be averaged in order to reach an overall organizational consistency score.

Since dichotomous variables are required for this construct of organizational consistency, two implementation tools must be converted to a binary scale. First, the 0-3 additive scale created for non-fiscal assessability is converted to where scale values of 0-1 are coded as low non-fiscal assessability or 0, and scale values of 2-3 are coded as high non-fiscal assessability or 1. Second, the workload value must now be divided between high workload (coded as 1) and low workload (coded as 0). Previous research has found that public organizations assign approximately eight strategic initiatives on average to senior staff (Kuprenas et al., 2000; Mitchell, 2014). Thus, workload values of 8 or less are considered low and coded as 0, while those above 8 are considered high and coded as 1.

Figure 4
Examples of organizational consistency score calculations

EX. 1 - An organization with no consistent pattern in its use of implementation tools.

		Implementation Tools				
		1	2	3	4	5
Initiatives	1	1	0	0	1	1
	2	0	0	1	0	0
	3	1	1	1	0	0
	4	0	1	0	0	0
	5	1	1	1	1	1
Modal Relative Freq.		60%	60%	60%	60%	60%
Percentile		0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Organizational Consistency Score: 0.0 least consistent, most variation among initiatives

EX. 2 - An organization that always uses implementation tools consistently.

		Implementation Tools				
		1	2	3	4	5
Initiatives	1	1	0	1	0	1
	2	1	0	1	0	1
	3	1	0	1	0	1
	4	1	0	1	0	1
	5	1	0	1	0	1
Modal Relative Freq.		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Percentile		1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0

Organizational Consistency Score: 1.0 most consistent, least variation among initiatives

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

With the research design in place and variables constructed, one can now turn to testing the hypotheses. This section will examine organizational consistency and implementation tool use in practice, from both generic and contingent perspectives.

Organizational Consistency in Practice

The purpose of the initial analysis is to determine whether organizations are consistent in their application of strategic implementation tools, to a statistically significant degree—thus evaluating H_1 .

At first glance, the descriptive statistics for organizational consistency appear to not support the hypothesis that municipal governments are contingent in their application of strategic implementation approaches. The mean value of 0.674 for organizational consistency (see Table 1 for all results from the organizational consistency analysis) is near the upper third of possible values, seemingly indicating a relative difference from the range midpoint of 0.5. Since the organizational scale is standardized and automatically excludes at least half of possible proportionate values (recall that consistency by definition cannot fall below 50%), the mean value of organizational consistency actually indicates that organizations consistently apply these implementation tools to at least 83% of the strategic initiatives, on average. In addition, 37 of 42 organizational consistency scores are greater than or equal to the test value of 0.5. Based on this cursory review, the data appear to negate H_1 , but a t -test can confirm this finding.

Table 1:
Organizational Consistency Analysis

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS	VALUE
Mean (std. err)	.674 (.030)
Median	.600
Standard Deviation	.038
Minimum	.300
Maximum	1.000

ONE SAMPLE T-TEST (test value = .5)		
t = 5.810	Sig. = .0001	d.f.=41

The *t*-test is a one-sample test comparing the sample's mean value to a test value of 0.5, with a significance level of 0.05. Based on these assumptions, the test indicates that the sample municipalities are indeed overwhelmingly more consistent in their strategic implementation than the test value, with a *t*-value of 5.810 that is beyond the 0.001 significance level. This finding provides strong evidence against H_1 , which asserts that municipalities are contingent in their approach to strategic implementation. The study responds to the first research question exploring whether public managers utilize contingent approaches in strategic implementation with a resounding "no". The municipalities in this study are overwhelming consistent, or generic, in strategic implementation approach.

Contingent Strategic Management in Practice

In this analysis, contingent implementation approaches are examined to determine if the implementation tools identified in the Mitchell regression analyses are more often employed by public organizations, testing H_2 . In other words, research has shown that some implementation tools work better in particular contexts, but have managers recognized this and responded by utilizing these tools more in their optimum contexts? To answer the question, a *t*-test is performed for each implementation tool across the four contextual models. If there is a statistically significant positive difference between the use of the identified implementation tool in the appropriate context versus other contexts, then this will provide support for H_2 .

Before performing the *t*-tests, the analysis can be initially depicted by constructing and reviewing a contingency table with the four specific contexts (see Table 2) as the columns; along with the contextual employment of the implementation tools in the rows. In each cell, the percentage reflects the relative frequency the implementation tool was employed in that context. For example, in the upper left cell, the CAO or an assistant/deputy was directly involved in 25% of routine initiatives.

To compare this table of implementation tool employment to the contextual success factors for strategic implementation identified in the Mitchell study, cells in Table 2

are shaded to the indicated significant relationships from the prior empirical study (refer back to Figure 4). If H_2 is to be supported by this study, the relative frequencies in the table for the bolded cells should be significantly different from the unbolded cells in the same row—but a cursory review of the table show this to not be the case.

In fact, it appears to be the opposite for PMS Integration, which is utilized least in the context where it has been identified as a significant driver of success. In the case of Fiscal Assessability, the percentages should be nearly the same across the contextual columns, as it is associated with success in all contexts, but that also is not the case. CAO Involvement should be lower in the two low-complexity contexts, but they are the middle values in practice. Finally, the Non-Fiscal Assessability is used least in practice where it should be used most, according to the empirical findings.

Table 2:
Implementation Tool Utilization by Context (%)*

Implementation Tool	CONTEXT			
	ROUTINE	RESPONSIVE	INTERNAL INNOVATION	CENTERPIECE
CAO Involvement	25**	30**	14	48
PMS Integration	41	30	35	10
Fiscal Assessability	25	50	32	30
Non-Fiscal Assessability	75	75	75	85

* Shaded Cells indicate prior significant relationship with implementation success identified by Mitchell (2014). To support H_2 , percentages in shaded context should be significantly different than in other non-shaded contexts.

**Indicates negative relationship identified, all other shaded cells are identified positive relationships

--The Leader Workload variable was excluded since it did not have any significant relationships with implementation success (see Figure 2).

The t-tests confirm the conclusions drawn from the contingency table. There are no instances to support H_2 —in every case, there is no evidence to back the claim that identified contingent success factors are utilized more often in those specific contexts (see Table 3). In fact, in one case, one contingent success factor (PMS Integration in a high-complexity, high-priority context) is utilized significantly *less* than in other

contexts. There is no statistical difference between uses across contexts for the Non-Fiscal Assessability and CAO Involvement variables. In the one area where we would expect equal employment since the variable is significant in all contexts, the Fiscal Assessability is actually statistically more likely to be employed in only one particular context—Responsive situations. Overall, these findings provide no support for H₂, meaning that public organizations are not employing implementation tools in the contexts recommended by past empirical research.

Table 3:
Contextual Differences in Implementation Tool Utilization (t-tests)

Implementation Tool	CONTEXT			
	ROUTINE	RESPONSIVE	INTERNAL INNOVATION	CENTERPIECE
CAO Involvement	.041 (.658)	.002 (.069)		
PMS Integration		.006 (.087)		-.240*** (.061)
Fiscal Assessability	-.092 (.072)	.182** (.081)	.058 (.074)	-.005 (.073)
Non-Fiscal Assessability		-.021 (.071)		

Notes: Statistical significance indicated using * ($p < .10$), ** ($p < .05$), *** ($p < .01$). Standard errors in parentheses. The Leader Workload variable was excluded since it did not have any significant relationships with implementation success (see Figure 2).

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Based on these findings, there appears to be a substantial disconnect between what works in theory for strategic implementation and what is utilized in practice. The analyses demonstrate that public organizations are extremely consistent in their implementation approaches (failing to support H₁). They may not be adopting industry best-practices, but they do have a perception of what factors are important for implementation and they consistently apply them. Unfortunately, the analyses also show that public organizations are not utilizing the appropriate implementation tools for a particular context (failing to support H₂). Where a tool is demonstrated to be contextually appropriate, it is not used more often in practice than the other contexts—in fact, in one case it is employed the least. Additionally, the use of

Fiscal Assessability has been demonstrated to be a significant success factor in all contexts, but it is not employed equally in practice in these distinctive situations. These findings all demonstrate that the tools empirically associated with implementation success in particular contexts are not being applied effectively by public organizations in practice.

Collectively, these findings paint a troubling picture of strategic implementation in local governments. These public organizations overwhelmingly use the same approaches to implementing strategic initiatives, while contingent approaches have been empirically preferred in numerous scholarly studies—creating a divide that takes its toll on government effectiveness. Table 4 details the substantive impact of the disconnect between scholarship and practice regarding strategic implementation. Only 62.5% of strategic initiatives in the Mitchell study were successfully implemented when the approach did not conform to empirical findings. Conversely, those that did align with the research prescriptions were successfully implemented 80.8% of the time. In addition, the conforming implementation efforts were completed 18% quicker than the other initiatives. In total, implementation success index values were 23% higher for initiatives where the implementation approach conformed to empirical research prescriptions. These trends were generally consistent across all four contexts as well.

By definition, strategic initiatives are among the most meaningful promises that governments make to their citizens. They embody the effectiveness of government through the promise of responsiveness and progress. Is it surprising that citizens lose faith in government when public organizations break almost as many of these vital commitments as they honor? To combat this, many public executives scour their professional networks, trade magazines, and the manager hiring pools to identify practices and people to improve organizational implementation and effectiveness. However, this same vigilance does not appear to extend to scholarly publications—where simple methods have been published that can improve implementation outcomes by over 20%.

Table 4:
Impact of Using Contextual Implementation Tools upon Project Completion, Cost, Time, and ISI

Context	Use of Contextual Tools	Complete %	Cost Overrun %	Time Overrun %	ISI	n
ROUTINE	No	60.0	17.2	36.9	0.50	48
	Yes	87.0	18.5	3.8	0.80	15
	Δ	27.0	1.3	(33.1)	0.30	63
RESPONSIVE	No	78.0	6.7	31.8	0.63	41
	Yes	100.0	0.0	0.0	1.00	5
	Δ	22.0	(6.7)	(31.8)	0.37	46
INTERNAL INNOVATION	No	53.0	4.3	28.3	0.45	43
	Yes	70.0	0.0	9.3	0.67	20
	Δ	17.0	(4.3)	(19.0)	0.21	63
CENTERPIECE	No	59.0	8.0	27.8	0.49	29
	Yes	83.0	20.0	38.2	0.72	12
	Δ	24.0	12.0	10.4	0.23	41
OVERALL	No	62.5	9.4	31.7	0.52	161
	Yes	80.8	10.0	13.5	0.75	52
	Δ	18.3	0.5	(18.2)	0.23	213

Thus, strategic implementation exemplifies the broader disconnect between public administration scholars and practitioners, and is illustrative of the negative impact this gap can have upon public outcomes. Beyond tangible impacts, the gulf between the academy and practice takes its toll on theoretical development, ultimately threatening the survival of the field. Today, public administrators are under assault by an unusually large confluence of events and trends chipping away at the institution of professional administration in government—including partisan polarization, a desire for centralized political accountability, and loss of faith in government. Professional public administration used to be the answer to the challenges that faced government, now it is increasingly seen as part of the problem. There are few times since the field's advent where there has been a greater need for the public administration scholars to help tackle today's daunting practical issues; however, many practitioners are not even turning to the academy

for answers because they either have not been introduced to its research, or worse, do not see any value in it.

It is the public that suffers from a disconnect between public administration scholars and practitioners, as government effectiveness is slowed by the inefficient generation and implementation of field-specific knowledge and theory generated by this cold partnership. What can be done to thaw relations? Ultimately, Posner (2009) is correct that research incentives should be altered to stimulate interaction with the practice and promote publication of research in practitioner-friendly media. The academy and its individual scholars should make a concerted effort to address the most relevant and pressing of research needs in the field. Scholarly journals and associations, working with their professional partners, can identify “big questions” in their areas of specialty and focus their scarce journal pages and conference presentation slots toward research addressing them. In addition, promotion and tenure guidelines in public administration academic programs should be adapted to recognize community engagement and the successful adoption of scholarly research into practice. Next, scholarly journals and academic programs should also recognize that cutting-edge, relevant research requires the time-consuming creation/procurement of new and unique datasets in partnership with practitioners, instead of a tendency to reward those who use can publish early and often by leveraging existing datasets regarding research questions that may not match the needs of the practice. Finally, scholars should strive to be mixed-mode and multi-media in the dissemination of their research findings and practical prescriptions. For instance, the findings of this study have already been promoted at two ICMA conferences, a Florida League of Cities conference, and in *Public Management* magazine prior to publication in any scholarly journal. Partnerships between scholarly journals and professional associations can formalize this by institutionalizing processes to convert pertinent scholarly articles into concise, digestible material for practitioners in newsletters, trade magazine, and other popular forms of professional media.

Ultimately, the connection between scholars and practitioners must be a partnership, not just a relationship. Both

groups rely heavily on the other for their respective legitimacy, and both are under assault from external forces. The area of strategic implementation is just one instance where the lack of an effective partnership between the academy and practice is harming government effectiveness, which is dulling the luster of both institutions. The field of public administration must look back to its founding in order to move forward toward satisfying the public demands of government.

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