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OPENING THE BLACK BOX: HOW STRATEGY PRACTITIONERS DEVELOP THEIR PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

While strategic management has been the focus of much research since the 1960s, there have been comparatively few studies on strategy practitioners, the human actors responsible for the process. These actors are often reduced to a set of observable demographic variables such as education level, work tenure, or job description. Consequently there is limited knowledge regarding strategy practitioners and, in particular, little is known about how they develop their practices, the knowledge and skills they use when engaged in strategic management.

To address this gap in knowledge, this study, conducted within the strategy-as-practice (SAP) perspective, interviewed strategy practitioners identified by their peers as effective strategy practitioners. The responsive interviewing technique employed opened the so called 'black box', the subjective views of individuals, and allowed participants to reflect and, importantly, provide their meaning of what significantly influenced their strategic management practice development. Eighteen interviews were conducted and the analysis of the rich, deep data collected allowed an understanding of practice development from a practitioner's perspective to emerge.

The study revealed that this group of strategy practitioners see strategic management in holistic terms with a focus on organisational outcomes and not in a traditional, normative view which privileges the creation of a strategy. This contribution was not, however, a primary research outcome but participants view of strategic management impacted significantly on how they view themselves as strategy practitioners, the purpose of strategic management and, vitally, the practices they believe are needed to be effective. Within this context, the study shows that participants develop their practices idiosyncratically and learning from practice, notable literature and being involved with a broad range of people, were valued significantly in their practice development. It was through this meaning that participants were able to relate important aspects of their own development.

This study contributes an empirical study to the SAP perspective that goes well beyond simple demographics in understanding how strategy practitioners develop their practices. In regards to research, the selection of strategy practitioners without considering their historical development has been identified as an area that may be

problematic, especially for studies seeking to understand how strategy is practised. Business school education was not identified as a direct, meaningful contributor to participants' development. This observation raises the interesting, and unresolved, question of the actual relationship between business schools and practice. The participants' idiosyncratic career paths contributes to the viewpoints of authors who question whether the strategic management field should, or could, attain the status of a profession such as law or medicine.

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The reflections of doctoral students on their journey is likely to be eclectic. There will be those students, who I have come to view as fortunate, who had a straight forward path and can honestly say that they enjoyed the experience. On the other hand there will be students who had to battle hard and, seemingly against the odds, manage to emerge victorious without permanent damage. I fall into the latter camp. It would be remiss of me not to note that there is a third group of students, larger than generally considered, who do not complete the doctoral journey. Some of my student colleagues suffered this fate, unnecessarily, and a review of the systems and processes that govern doctoral research seems long overdue.

There were people within the university I must acknowledge for without their effort, care and support I would not have completed my studies successfully. James Lockhart, through his diligence, knowledge and humour made the latter part of my studies almost fun. I learnt as much, if not more, in my final year with James than I did in the previous three, a tribute to James' ability to mentor. Andrew Dickson, a colleague who was always available to help throughout the PhD whether it be as a pilot interview subject or just to let me talk through what was happening. Andrew is one of the few people I encountered that keep the university collegial spirit alive. The late Ralph Stablein, who was always happy to sit down over a coffee and provide thoughtful and helpful advice which often provided moments of enlightenment. Finally to the admin team within the Palmerston North School of Management, in particular Pauline and Brigit, who always answered every request and query I had with a smile.

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