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Consensus in Strategy Workshops: An Exploratory Study

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DBA

2018

Consensus in Strategy Workshops: An Exploratory Study

Heiner Heck

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requirements of the University of
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of
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Business School

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Abstract

Strategy workshops are a commonly used practice in modern organisations to support strategic decision making or to define implementation measures. However, despite their widespread use in practice, academic research on strategy workshops has been very limited. There have been calls among scholars to generate a deeper understanding of workshop processes. To date no research has focused on the interpersonal dimensions of strategy workshops, their relevance and the practices that shape them. This is specifically significant for strategic consensus and its role in strategy workshops, which has been overlooked by studies, despite acknowledgements of its significance for the strategy process. It is therefore the objective of this study to determine the relevance of consensus in a strategy workshop, to develop an understanding how and through which context factors consensus is established and to derive guidelines towards establishing and using consensus in these workshops.

This qualitative study takes a Strategy-as-Practice perspective. Building upon the existing research gap, this study aims to identify and understand how consensus among participants develops in a strategy workshop and how this contributes to strategizing. The research focuses on the research questions: (a) how does consensus evolve in strategy workshops; (b) how is consensus experienced by participants; and (c) which factors influence consensus building in a strategy workshop. Through these research questions the study addresses the objectives of establishing the relevance of consensus for strategizing, how consensus building takes place in a strategy workshop context and which factors and practices can influence the formation of consensus and thus also of strategies.

The data collection consisted of two phases. It has been conducted inductively in a single company case study approach in a German company. The related data was gathered through observations of two strategy workshops and in 16 interviews with professional experts from the researched organisation.

From the findings it can be derived that consensus evolves non-linearly through iterative discussions by the workshop participants. Consensus building starts with a common agreement on the workshop goal and is then shaped by open interactions of the participants and guided by the facilitator. The study found that consensus is perceived as a critical pre-condition for the successful implementation of a strategy. Consensus creates commitment of stakeholders and establishes a momentum that is both used for decision making in a workshop as well as implementation in the aftermath. Further, consensus allows managers to use strategy workshops as sources of justification referenced during the implementation phase.

As influencing context factors, consensus requires a clear problem and context scope before or at the start of a workshop. The structuring by the facilitator and the participants' setup are critical for the process of consensus building.

This study contributes to existing theory in the field of Strategy-as-Practice by expanding the definition of consensus in two dimensions. These are an extension of the definition towards a time-related dimension of consensus concerning its formation, as well as proposing a differentiation between true and false consensus, which adds a new dimension to the concept of consensus in strategizing Further, this research provides qualitative evidence of context factors that influence consensus building, as well as bridging the gap between theory and practice.

This research contributes to practice by outlining the importance of workshop elements for consensus building in strategy workshops with a self-developed exploratory framework as guidance for practitioners. Further, it provides insights into the role of consensus for strategizing in strategy workshops.

Keywords: consensus building, strategic consensus, strategy workshops, Strategy-as-Practice

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List of Terms and Abbreviations

DBA	Doctor of Business Administration
e.g.	exempli gratia (for example)
et al.	et alii (and others)
S-A-P	Strategy-as-Practice
TMT	Top Management Team

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Business School Ethics Committee on 29.11.2018.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 80,156 words

Name: Heiner Heck

Signature:

Date:

December 14Th 2018

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context of the research project

This DBA thesis analyses the process and relevance of consensus building in the context of strategy formation in an organisation. This process is studied in the particular context of strategy workshops in a case study approach. The research focuses on the evolution of consensus during strategy workshops to understand how this takes place and why certain micro-routines and factors are contributing to consensus building and thus ultimately how this is supporting the outcome of a workshop and the definition and implementation of strategic measures. It aims not only to derive a contribution to theory from strategizing praxis and practice, but also to explore aspects that can be used as guidelines for practitioners when arranging a strategy workshop.

Strategy workshops as an instrument of strategizing are considered as important both by practitioners and academics (see e.g. Healey, Hodgkinson, Whittington, & Johnson, 2015; Hodgkinson, Johnson, Whittington, & Schwarz, 2005; Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, & Bourque, 2010). Indeed, according to several studies, meetings and workshops occupy the majority of working time of managers (Seidl & Guérard, 2015). However, despite their importance in organisational life and continuous references in talks, publications and business practice, it is relatively difficult to obtain applicable information of the underlying dynamics and levers of these strategizing elements from existing sources (for exceptions see e.g. Hodgkinson et al., 2005). As van Aaken, Koob, Rost and Seidl (2013) put it, over a long time workshops have been given little attention in management studies (p. 65). Healey et al. (2015, p. 2) even go as far as calling the existing academic publication frame on strategy workshops and comparable strategic routines “embryonic”.

In the same regard, consensus building among decision makers is considered to be relevant for successful meetings and decision making processes. Publications from practitioner journals e.g. highlight the opportunity of a strengthened organisation or strategy, that arise from alignments by the management team in offsides, summits or workshops (see e.g. Frisch & Greene, 2016). The relevance of this is underpinned by remarks regarding an even faster changing business environment.

In an increasingly complex and fast changing business environment, efficient and successful decision making processes that lead to necessary developments of an organisation are critical. The complex challenges from the business context require clear alignments of the management of an organisation. Hence, the identification of factors that support these efforts is of relevance to management practitioners in all types of organisations. This is particularly relevant as it is regularly reported both in theory and practice, that the transfer of workshop results into business practice can be difficult or that the results of a workshop may not seem to boost the organisational performance as desired (van Aaken et al., 2013).

1.2 Personal motivation for this research project

The rationale for the choice of the proposed research topic lies in the professional experience of the author as an inhouse management consultant for an international transport and logistics company in Germany. In this context, the author is regularly involved in the preparation and application of strategizing tools and strategy workshops and confronted with the need to support the development of consensus and sustainable strategic decisions in consulting projects.

From personal experience the preparation of strategy workshops requires a significant amount of time and resources. Further, strategy workshops themselves bind relevant members of an organisation for a considerable amount of time, thereby imposing relevant costs on an organisation. These preconditions create a significant amount of pressure on workshop organisers and raise high expectations on the outcome of such a strategizing episode. This does not provide for an ideal atmosphere for strategizing. However, despite these preconditions and a broad interest in the topic, current literature is relatively ambiguous in its recommendations for workshop organisers regarding the assurance which steps are necessary to provide for a strategy workshop that can be successful. In this context, helpful insights and guidelines on a successful workshop preparation and conduction could assist workshop organisers in applying the required resources more efficiently. This would allow them to set focal points in the organisation and orchestration of a strategy workshop in an attempt to support the success of a workshop. Out of own experience of the researcher, there is a lack of guidance in this regard.

Therefore, the author of this research project has set out to provide some guidance to organisers of strategy workshops with a framework based on the findings of this study which can be applied to facilitate workshop preparations under certain preconditions.

1.3 Relevance and contribution of the research

This study is of relevance to practitioners and researchers as to date the studied topic has not yet been fully addressed by theory. Despite the recognition of its relevance, existing publications have so far mainly touched upon the surface of the actions that take place in a strategy workshop. Despite the widespread use of workshops in management practice (Hodgkinson et al., 2005), there is little academic research so far about their application in strategy formation (for examples see e.g. Duffy & O’Rourke, 2014; Healey et al., 2015; Paroutis, Franco, & Papadopoulos, 2015).

Ackermann & Eden (2011) have outlined the need of academia to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of group cognition. Even though the focus of this research is broader and less on the cognitive aspects of the recorded information, this research will nevertheless contribute to this aim by providing data on a “surrogate” to group cognition (Ackermann & Eden, 2011, p. 295). This research will add to existing efforts to develop a theoretic understanding of management practice in strategy by analysing consensus building in workshops.

To date, multiple studies and theoretic approaches to strategizing in organisations have been developed. Particularly the application and functioning of strategizing and intervention tools has become a focus point of recent research activities, as strategy tools represent a core and complex element of strategizing practice (G. Bowman, 2016; Cheng & Havenvid, 2017; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009; Wright, Paroutis, & Blettner, 2013). However, despite the wide coverage of strategic research, the impact of strategizing activities and tools on an organisation and the overall strategizing process are yet to be fully decoded (G. Bowman, 2016). Some authors have recently outlined, that the application and effectiveness of strategizing tools are not yet fully researched (Healey et al., 2015; Paroutis et al., 2015). Similarly, the academic grasp of the mechanisms and concepts that shape strategic consensus within a group is relatively limited and remains an open field for academic research (Kellermanns, Walter, Floyd, Lechner, & Shaw, 2011; Tarakci et al., 2014). The proposed research will aim to broaden existing academic knowledge in these areas and to address these gaps.

Strategic decision making as an outcome of strategizing has been found to develop out of non-linear and patchy processes (K. P. Hendry, Kiel, & Nicholson, 2010). On the same token, it appears that the formation of consensus and a correlated implementation performance are dependent on dynamics in its organisational environment (Kellermanns et al., 2011). How these dynamics can be influenced and shaped appears to be not yet fully uncovered by academic research. On a theory side this research follows the notion of Seidl and Whittington (2014) who postulated that future research on strategy practice should intensify the inclusion of context in micro-level research.

According to Hodgkinson and Healey (2008) and Tarakci et al (2014) “Companies invest significant resources in strategic interventions: however, the effectiveness of these interventions is seldom, if ever, assessed (2014, p. 1066). From an academic perspective the interactions in strategy workshop are not yet fully understood, let alone fully analysed (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018). It can even be stated that they were mostly ignored by academia (van Aaken et al., 2013). Therefore neither the academic nor practitioner perspective on strategy workshops is fully developed.

From a practical perspective, managers tend to rely on tools that are well established in organisations or considered as ‘appropriate’ without fully grasping if their application is well suited for the particular problem or the involved stakeholders (Roper & Hodari, 2015). However, by utilising on workshops and similar tools as a backbone of strategic decision making and by binding staff and management through the preparation and conduction of these workshops, organisations connect significant investments and resources with these tools (Healey et al., 2015). While strategizing routines are widely applied in organisations, a survey found that only 11% of its participants were content with the results of these routines (Mankins & Steele, 2006). As management practice relies increasingly on workshops and intervention tools, the need to optimise these approaches in order to enhance their effectiveness and quality is growing simultaneously.

On the other hand practitioners lack the guidance to prepare and organise strategic activities and events such as strategy workshops. It has also been pointed out, that a stronger integration between academic theory and practice is needed to advance the theory field of strategy research (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). The persisting existence of a divide between academia and practitioners has been recognised by several academics (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). This is for example ascribed to a lack of access to practitioners by academics (Wright et al., 2013), an aspect that should also hold true vice versa. Antonacopoulou & Balogun (2010) appeal for a stronger collaboration in this field to achieve a feedback loop between both entities that can advance practice and theory. From an academic perspective, there are calls for a stronger orientation on conduction of strategizing, while it is assumed that impactful strategy practice needs to be rooted more deeply in existing theory (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; P. Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006). The same holds true for the theme of consensus building, where Tarakci et al. (2014) similarly call for a more profound modelling of consensus that benefits both academics and practitioners.

By integrating practical experience and a practice based-research approach into an academic research project in the field of strategic management theory, this research addresses thereby an issue that is currently pending in academia (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; Tarakci et al., 2014).

1.4 Research objectives and research questions

This research project aims to align academic research with managerial practice. This is in line with the argument of several academics, that there is a need to overcome a lack of relevance of academia to management practice (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Whittington, Molloy, Mayer, & Smith, 2006).

As pointed out by Antonacopoulou and Balogun (2010), deriving influencing guidance to practice from academic research is complex and requires an integrated approach that reflects on knowledge and syntax of both clusters. Managers and business practitioners tend to rely on their own business experience and knowledge and thereby form their own logic of working and strategizing (Wright et al., 2013). This may often not correspond to the academic approach to strategizing (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; Wright et al., 2013). Despite these practical hurdles, it has also been pointed out, that findings from e.g. qualitative research can inform practitioners on how to advance their application of practices - in this case the preparation and realisation of a strategy workshop (Bartunek, 2012).

In the context of this research, the term “strategy workshop” will be applied where a workshop is conducted with the aim to analyse or revise a current strategy or to define strategic goals or measures (Duffy & O’Rourke, 2014). Building upon the definition of van Aaken et al. (2013), workshops are regarded as strategy workshops if they focus on strategic content and last from a couple of hours – van Aaaken et al. even set a lower boundary of half a day – up to several days. Further, strategy workshops take place outside of the regular business context, such as in the context of strategic projects. The definition frame for strategy workshops which is referred to in this research is presented in more detail in chapter 2.3.

For the term consensus in the context of strategizing, this research project will refer to the definition introduced by Kellermann, Walter, Lechner and Floyd (2011) of consensus as “the shared understanding of (i.e., agreement on) a specific strategy-relevant content by a group of individuals that can be comprised of managers at the top, middle, and/or operating levels of the organization”(p. 127). This definition is elaborated further in chapter 2.2.

Guided by this idea, this research attempts to broaden academic knowledge of strategy workshops with the aim

- To establish the relevance of consensus in the context of strategy workshops

- To develop an understanding of how consensus building is taking place in strategy workshops
- To establish what context factors in the workshop setting influence the development of consensus
- To derive success factors for consensus building in strategy workshops
- To identify methods and steps that can help the evolution of consensus and thereby the formation of strategic decisions in the context of a workshop from the above mentioned elements.

Further these objectives are also applied in order to develop a guidance framework for practitioners, such as strategy consultants, strategy planners or managers. This framework is supposed to assist them in their practical strategy work, particularly in the preparation of strategy workshops, while at the same time consolidating the theory findings of this research.

Within the context of S-A-P theory and in line with these research objectives, this research project aims to answer the following questions:

1. How is consensus being experienced by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?
2. How does consensus evolve in strategy workshops?
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?

In the following graph in figure 1, it is shown how research context, research objectives, research questions and research contribution are linked.

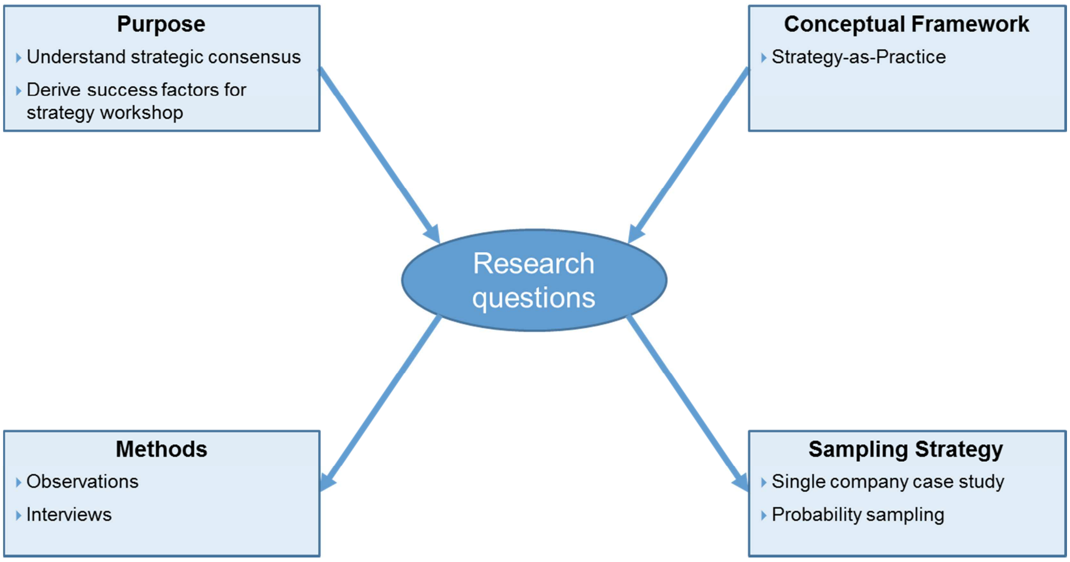

Purpose
Understand strategic consensus
Derive success factors for strategy workshop
Conceptual Framework
Strategy-as-Practice
Research questions
Methods
Observations
Interviews
Sampling Strategy
Single company case study
Probability sampling

Figure 1: Research framework of this study

1.5 Scope for this research

With the aim to broaden the practical understanding of the impact that small-scale routines have on the overall success of a workshop and in particular on the establishment of consensus, the author positions himself within the growing academic perspective of Strategy-as-Practice, in the following text referred to as S-A-P.

In the context of this project, several fields of academic knowledge were identified as contributing to the ontological frame of the research topic. These fields have been screened and reviewed to establish an insight into existing theory and academic positions. This frame of theory will be covered in those aspects that are determined as relevant and contributing to the proposed topic within the scope of strategy formation and the S-A-P approach and based on the following core components: strategy, workshops, consensus, and micro routines.

Further, this research does not comprise a longitudinal study. Therefore, it cannot be established what impact the observed consensus in the studied cases actually has for the implementation of the developed strategic measures. The data collected in this research stems from a German organisation.

1.6 Contribution of this research

This study contributes to practice and theory, bridging the gap between both entities and thereby fulfilling the requirements of a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration.

The contribution to practice addresses both the application of strategy workshops in the context of consensus building and the relevance of consensus for strategizing and particularly strategy implementation. In this regard, the role of emotionality is highlighted as a finding that has not been outlined previously in the examined guiding literature for practitioners. Further, it encompasses a guiding framework of the construct of consensus building in the context of a strategy workshop along the different organisation and application stages, as well as a guideline with guiding questions along the stages of a strategy workshop in order to operationalise the guiding framework. Framework and guiding questions are supposed to support consultants or strategists in the preparation and application of strategy workshops with the aim of directing the workshop towards consensus building.

Theory is extended by this research in three dimensions. These include firstly an expansion of the concept of consensus regarding a processual component and regarding an emotional dimension. Thereby, this study finds that consensus is not solely a singular incident, but rather evolves over time and can also take on iterations in this establishment process. In the same regard, this study acknowledges that different forms of consensus can be differentiated according to the level of commitment by the consenting parties. Further, an established consensus does not only contribute to decision making and agreement, but also helps to motivate and to generate an emotional bond among participants.

Secondly this study establishes a comprehensive frame of context factors that impact consensus building. Based on this study, relevant factors can be recognised and reviewed in the context of consensus building beforehand and during a workshop. These factors were all found to contribute either directly to the establishment of consensus, or by providing the basis upon which consensus can be build. As will be outlined further in the following chapters, this study also addresses a research gap in S-A-P research by adopting a micro-practice view when addressing the role of context factors and interactions in a strategy workshop in general and in particular reference to consensus building.

Finally, this study applies a practitioner oriented sentiment into its approach and addresses the proposition by different researchers to bridge the gap between academic theory and professional practice.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

This dissertation is divided into 6 chapters, including the introduction. The following literature review in chapter 2 will inform the reader about the context and content of existing theories that provide the academic frame to the proposed research questions.

Based on this review of existing academic theory, the methodology chapter 3 outlines the philosophical stance of this research, as well as providing guidance regarding the approach and the used toolset that were applied in this research. After a presentation of the considerations of this research regarding research ethics, the stages of the data collection and the data analytics approach of this study are described. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the research limitations.

The findings section in chapter 4 will then review the analysed data and outline the structured results that were achieved from the data collection. They will be assessed from several perspectives and compared in the context of their gathering and within the boundaries of the research framework. In the discussions chapter (chapter 5), the findings will be analysed in their relation to the three research questions and the results will be discussed in the context of existing academic theory as described in the literature review. From the discussion implications for practice will be derived and explained in their respective context. The conclusion will address the outlined findings of this research and evaluate their impact on the proposed research questions and the theoretic framework in which this research took place. Further, it will address practical guidelines that can be derived from this research in order to frame the contribution to practice that has been aimed for by this research project and the theory contribution from the data. The dissertation will conclude with remarks on shortcomings and fields for further research that were highlighted by this study in chapter 6.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In order to address the stated research questions at a later stage in the context of existing academic theory, the following chapter reviews existing literature from those streams of theory that inform the context of this research study. The focus of this literature review is on academic publications and models that provide the ontological context for this research. Literature and theories which provide epistemological guidance will be addressed within the methodology chapter.

The literature review has four focal points: the theory framework of strategy and Strategy-As-Practice, the theory models of consensus in the context of strategy and strategy workshops, strategy workshops themselves and the micro-perspective of interactions in these workshops, and the theoretic view on the outcome of strategizing.

2.1 Strategy

Strategy and strategy-related theory is an important element of management and organisational science. Traditionally, strategy has been regarded as an integral element of organisations (Whittington, 2006). Originating as a term in military theory, it has been expanded as a concept that is applied by academia to all types of organisations (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). As Carter and Whittle (2018, p. 2) describe the situation of strategy research: “Contributions from economics, history, military warfare, international relations, organization theory, public administration, social movement studies and strategy-as-practice make for a diverse archipelago of strategic thought.”

2.1.1 Definition of strategy

Since the 1970’s strategy has been and is being widely studied and analysed from different perspectives (Johnson et al., 2007). Nevertheless, no overarching definition or model for strategy has evolved to date (Duffy & O’Rourke, 2014; Steensen, 2014; Whittington, 2000). Mintzberg (1987) made an attempt in this regard by highlighting the ambiguity in the definition of strategy already in the 1980’s by contrasting five roles that strategy may exhibit in a managerial context:

- Plan,
- Ploy,
- Pattern,
- Position,
- Perspective.

The aim of strategizing in an organisation can be viewed from each of these positions respectively. Nevertheless, according to Mintzberg (1978), to gain a deeper understanding of strategy all of the roles have to be observed. Lechner & Müller-Stewens (2000), however, criticised this structure proposal as unsystematic. Likewise, Steensen (2014) points out, that not all five roles are always present in an organisation. Additionally, he also criticises, that Mintzberg's model does not elaborate on the interaction of the five roles. Further attempts to define strategy have been made by several authors. An overview of these definitions is presented in Table 1.

Author and year	Definition of strategy
Hax and Majluf (1988)	Strategy can be defined by the presence of 7 factors: • A comprehensive and consistent decision structure, • a framework of long-term goals that align the organization's agenda and resource allocation, • an outline of the business activities in which an organization operates and its differentiation from non-core activities, • an organizing framework for an organization, • an impact on the organization's competitive advantages and an agenda to compete successfully within the market environment, • an integrative function for all hierarchy levels in an organization, and a definition of the value which an organization creates for its different stakeholder groups (Hax & Majluf, 1988).
Carter et al (2008)	Instrument to "lead an organisation through changes and shifts to secure its future growth and sustainable success" (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008, p. 83)
(Johnson, Whittington, & Scholes, 2011)	"the long-term direction of an organisation" (p.3)
Mintzberg (1979)	"a pattern in a stream of decisions" (1979b, p. 3)
Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003)	"Strategy is ultimately about what is done and what is not done" (Balogun, Huff, & Johnson, 2003, p. 199)
Van de Veen (1992)	"Decisions about the firm's alignment with its environment" (Van de Ven, 1992, p. 170)

Table 1: Overview of definitions of the term strategy

These propositions that strategy incorporates several distinct elements and can only be defined comprehensively are still considered as valid today (Johnson et al., 2011).

As can be seen in table 1, most definitions see strategy as a goal-directed system (see e.g. Paula Jarzabkowski, 2005), which incorporates both objectives and the decisions and actions that aim at reaching these objectives (Steensen, 2014). More recent research has expanded these existing theoretical models by adding a social- and practice-oriented scope. This is also reflected in more recent attempts to define strategy. Jarzabkowski et al (2007, p. 7) define strategy as a “a situated, socially accomplished activity […]” that “comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity”. These decisions and actions shape the performance of an organisation over time. Therefore, strategy can also be defined as “the long-term direction of an organization”(Johnson et al., 2011, p. 4). In its pure essence, strategy “[…] is ultimately about what is done and what is not done” (Balogun, Huff, & Johnson, 2003, p. 199). In more recent research the social aspect of strategy has gained importance due to a shift in the theory streams (Carter & Whittle, 2018). Thereby, strategy is seen from the perspective as an activity that is done by a group of individuals in organisations as living constructs. This emphasises also the transactional and communicative perspective of strategy formation which are incorporated as patterns by strategy practice (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014)

2.1.2 Theoretic approaches to strategy and strategizing

The view on strategy is not only very diverse with regards to its definition, but also with regards to what is considered as relevant as a research focus (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). Academic research efforts can be divided into three focus areas: strategy context, strategy content and strategy process (Johnson et al., 2011) as presented in figure 2.

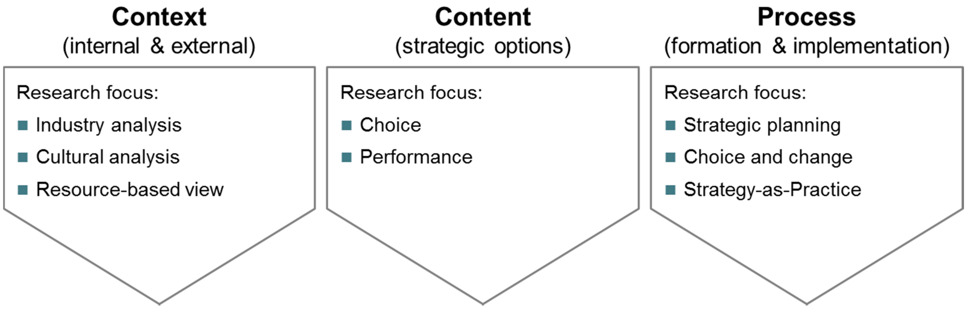

Context
(internal & external)
Research focus:
■ Industry analysis
■ Cultural analysis
■ Resource-based view
Content
(strategic options)
Research focus:
■ Choice
■ Performance
Process
(formation & implementation)
Research focus:
■ Strategic planning
■ Choice and change
■ Strategy-as-Practice

Figure 2: Focus areas of strategy research (Johnson et al., 2011, p. 11)

Among those three focus areas, two have become most prominent since the 1990’s: strategy content research and strategy process research. The initial distinction between strategy content and strategy process research has been made by Chakravarthy and Doz (Burgelman et al., 2018). In line with their positioning, research on actual strategizing activities in an organisation focuses either on the content of strategy, or on the process of strategizing (Johnson et al., 2007; Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000; Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005).

2.1.2.1 Strategy content research

Strategy content research addresses the impact that a strategy has on an organisation and its performance. It focuses on the strategic positions along which an organisation orientates itself and the competitive advantage stemming from this positioning (Chakravarthy & Doz, 1992). The focus is thereby rather on the organisation and its environment then on the interactions that lead to the establishment of a strategy (Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000). This follows the notion of traditional strategy research, which has viewed strategizing as a structured and formalised process of analyses and decisions (G. Bowman, 2016). The focus of this research is hereby on the question of “what strategic decisions are taken”(Chia & MacKay, 2007, p. 220).

With regards to the procedural aspects of strategizing, this stream’s view is limited to the stages formulation, implementation and control (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018). Rather, strategy content research views strategy as a strictly structured process to which resources are allocated according to feasible decisions (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008). In line with this rigid structure, different forms of strategy are differentiated by its scope and aims of the strategy, while a strict logical path to the strategic decision is implied (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005).

However, more recent research has criticized the tendency that strategy is considered as a product of a structured ad-hoc decision and has extended its focus on the actors and activities that impact the processual aspects of strategizing (Johnson et al., 2007; Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). As a review of strategy publications shows, several issues that arise in strategy content research can in fact be answered by differences in the interactions of stakeholders (Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000). Thereby strategy process research informs strategy content research. Different researchers such as Mintzberg started to regard strategy content as a dynamic element and tried to understand this phenomenon with the help of its surrounding interactions (Burgelman et al., 2018). This led over the last two decades to a growing attention on the process side of strategizing.

2.1.2.2 Strategy process research

The second main school of strategy theory focuses on the process of strategizing. Strategy process research is “concerned with how strategic decisions are shaped and implemented” (Burgelman et al., 2018, p. 532). It addresses specifically the social interactions and activities that take place during strategizing and their impact on the strategic outcome (G. Bowman, 2016). Strategy process research sees strategizing and its outcomes as “contextual and dynamic” (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018, p. 74). Thereby, the research focus was also shifted from the organisational level that was most common previous to the 1990’s to the managerial and operational level within an organisation (Burgelman et al., 2018).

Essentially, strategic process research focuses mostly on organisational goals, the activities to define these goals, and the activities to convert these goals into managerial actions within the organisation. Further, strategy process research also addresses, how strategies and strategy formation procedures can evolve over time (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). Various researchers have also included the scope of language, as well as interpersonal interactions into the theory frame of strategy (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015; Eden, 1992; J. Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Steensen, 2014).

In a review of academic publications relating to strategic planning Wolf and Floyd (2017) have consolidated the different focal points of this research field into one framework, which is shown in figure 3.

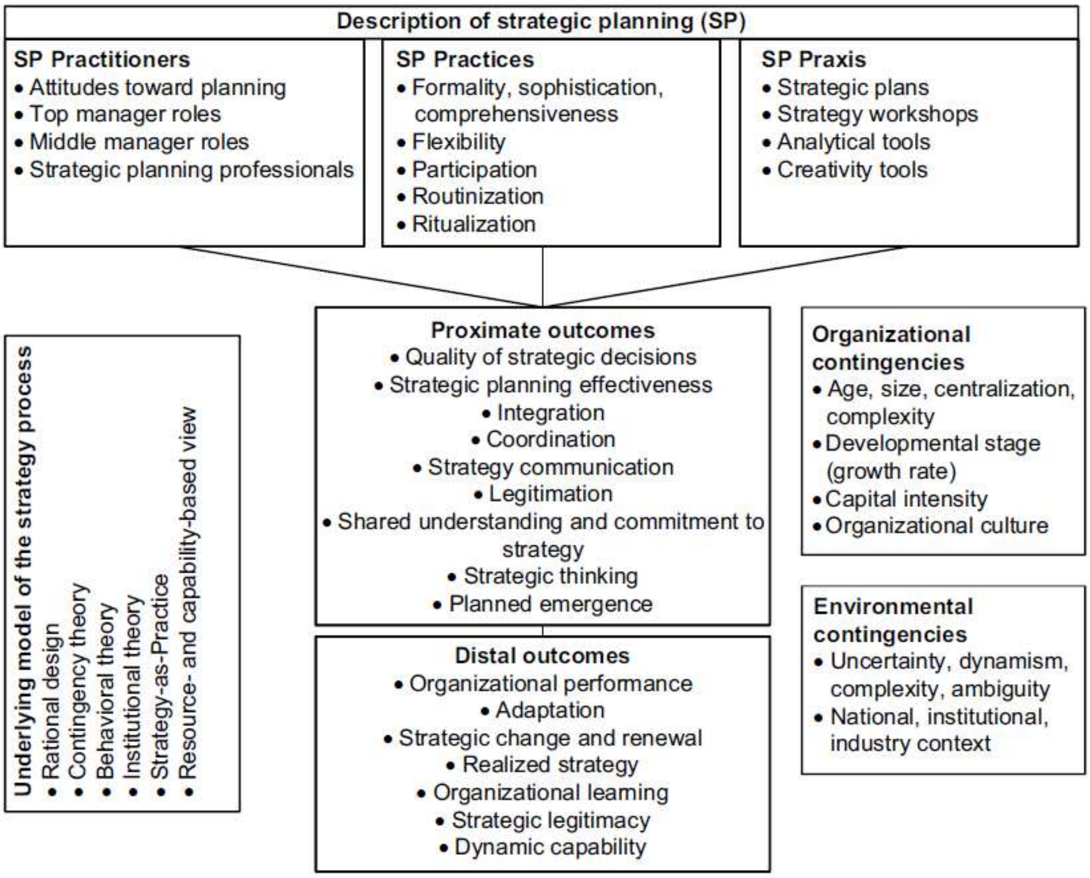

Description of strategic planning (SP)
SP Practitioners
• Attitudes toward planning
• Top manager roles
• Middle manager roles
• Strategic planning professionals
SP Practices
• Formality, sophistication, comprehensiveness
• Flexibility
• Participation
• Routinization
• Ritualization
SP Praxis
• Strategic plans
• Strategy workshops
• Analytical tools
• Creativity tools
Underlying model of the strategy process
• Rational design
• Contingency theory
• Behavioral theory
• Institutional theory
• Strategy-as-Practice
• Resource- and capability-based view
Proximate outcomes
• Quality of strategic decisions
• Strategic planning effectiveness
• Integration
• Coordination
• Strategy communication
• Legitimation
• Shared understanding and commitment to strategy
• Strategic thinking
• Planned emergence
Distal outcomes
• Organizational performance
• Adaptation
• Strategic change and renewal
• Realized strategy
• Organizational learning
• Strategic legitimacy
• Dynamic capability
Organizational contingencies
• Age, size, centralization, complexity
• Developmental stage (growth rate)
• Capital intensity
• Organizational culture
Environmental contingencies
• Uncertainty, dynamism, complexity, ambiguity
• National, institutional, industry context

Figure 3: Map of the theory elements of strategy formation (Wolf & Floyd, 2017, p. 1759)

As can be seen, the existing scope encompasses context factors as well as the underlying process and its drivers, as well as the involved practitioners. The framework further differentiates between proximate outcomes, which represent results that occur during or right at the end of the strategizing process, as well as more distant results that encompass outcomes that can be measured over time.

Within strategy process research, several streams of research have emerged which focus on different elements of the strategy process. These streams define strategy either distinctively as a planned outcome of a structured strategizing process, i.e. a planning task, or as something that emerges out of practice (Johnson et al., 2007; Neugebauer, Figge, & Hahn, 2015). Further attempts have been made by researchers to integrate these distinctive approaches into one construct (Andersen, 2004; Burgelman et al., 2018).

According to theories that are part of the planned outcome stream of theory, strategic decisions are largely defined through formalised structures. The strategy process develops hereby in two stages. The outcomes of the first stage are decisions, which are then to be realised in the organisational context in stage 2. In the first stage, the strategy is formulated, while in the second stage a formulated strategy is implemented

(Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000). This approach develops a normative view of strategy formation (Wolf & Floyd, 2017).

However, based on the outcome of several case studies by different authors, Sminia (2009) argues, that in reality rationality, carefully planned adjustments and a linear process do rarely correspond with strategic management in organisations. Studies in the last two decades have increasingly acknowledged that strategies are the outcome of complex and organisation-wide processes (Johnson et al., 2007; Schaefer & Guenther, 2016; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2008). Thereby, several authors have expressed scepticism whether a separation of strategy content and strategizing process is feasible (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). It has been argued that it is of relevance for understanding the strategic advantages and the position of an organisation from the perspective of the process through which those outcomes were shaped (Burgelman et al., 2018). Indeed, the term 'strategy formation' links the strategy process and the realized outcome (Sminia, 2009). Accordingly Burgelman et al. (2018) suggest that even strategy process researchers should also focus on the underlying content, as both inform the studying of each other.

The role of middle and lower management as well as staff in an organisation in the decision making receives likewise little attention in traditional process research. Early strategy process theory regards the decisions making largely as a top management duty (Andersen, 2004; Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000). More current research has disputed this approach e.g. with the remark that it does not reflect the complex structures of interpersonal relations and organisational politics and the actual role which management boards play in strategic decision making (Andersen, 2004; Concannon & Nordberg, 2018; Johnson et al., 2007). Nowadays it is acknowledged, that through adopting and translating strategic decisions, middle management plays an important role in the strategy process (Johnson et al., 2011). The strategic planning process is regarded as a source of integration and interaction among members of the organisation, particularly the management. Further this process inspires decision making in the organisational structures (Andersen, 2004; Paula Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009). Mintzberg & Westley (2001) propose that decision making follows an iterative mix of analysis, ideas and action. These are applied to derive a clear vision of the context and the options available. This contextualisation is also termed as "sensemaking" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensemaking is regarded as a prerequisite in order to define and evaluate choices which then lead to an ultimate strategic decision (Eden, 1992; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This supports a notion that strategy is not a product of a straightforward process, but rather an outcome that evolves through interaction.

This evolution is an idea that is commonly associated with the second traditional stream in strategy process research. This research stream has been described by Johnson et al (2011) as ‘choice and change’. It is most commonly associated with the emergent model of strategizing. This model has initially been introduced by Mintzberg (Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000). In its essence, the emergent strategy model sees strategy as a development process that reflects and incorporates changing intentions and context factors. Mintzberg (1978) highlighted the operational perspective of strategy and put the focus on the process of strategy formation itself with the content as an outcome. This includes the aspect that actions and perceptions can unintendedly change during the strategizing process in contrast to the initial planning of strategy. For example, he regarded strategy as the ultimate outcome of a chain of decisions which add up to a coherent frame. Further, this view also implies that an organization is learning what strategic approaches work in practice.

While many scholars have built upon Mintzberg’s concept (Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000), Ansoff (1991) critiqued the emerging strategy model of Mintzberg as being inconsistent and only applicable to poorly performing firms in declining markets.

However, research has also shown, that there is no exclusive approach to strategizing, as “neither the planned nor the emergent approach appears to be universally effective […]” (Slevin & Covin, 1997, p. 202). Mintzberg’s model and comparable approaches also do not take into account, that more than one strategic initiative could be present in an organisation (Johnson, Whittington, & Melin, 2003; Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000; Steensen, 2014). This is particularly critical in case of larger organisations that cover several markets or segments (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005).

This divide has been bridged by more recent research, as several publications have demonstrated the usefulness of eliminating a one-sided bias on either process or content (Burgelman et al., 2018). Indeed, a research stream has evolved, that proposes that both streams act together in the process of strategy formation (Andersen, 2004). Andersen found that both decentralised emergent strategizing and centralised planned strategizing, act as comprehensive drivers of corporate development particularly in highly international companies. His findings confirmed the proposal of previous studies that strategizing is derived both from standard processes, as well as emerging strategic initiatives (Andersen, 2004; Mintzberg, 1979a; Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). Mintzberg himself has also postulated that strategy is actually an amalgamation of intended and emergent strategies (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005).

However, despite a broad acceptance and focus on strategy process research in academia, Whittington commented the need of getting closer to practice and practitioner in the research process instead of focusing on organisations as a whole (Whittington, 1996). Likewise Hendry and Seidl (2003) comment on the lack of routinisation and routine elements in strategy process research which requires an advancing into strategy practice. Similarly several publications communicate the notion that traditional strategy process research is too detached from actual practitioners and does not contribute to an increase in understanding of micro-level interactions that shape strategies (Balogun et al., 2003; J. Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Johnson et al., 2003). While a more diverse view on strategizing has evolved in the strategy process research field, the lack of a praxis-focus in academic theory has been voiced by practitioners at the same time. This reproach has also been echoed in academia itself (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005; Whittington, 2000).

2.1.2.3 The role of practice in strategy research

The idea of a practice turn in strategy research was initially postulated by Whittington (1996) based on a review of existing academic perspectives on strategy. According to academics, practice enriches strategy formation (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007). His proposal of a practice turn was relatively simply, as he outlined that strategy is an activity, or in his own words: “strategy is something people do” (Whittington, 2006, p. 613).

In line with a shift towards practice in social theory, several scholars have criticised the divide between management practice and strategy theory and the lack of impact on one another (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; Burgelman et al., 2018). Despite the wide range of definitions and theoretic constructs that exist in academia, strategy is not an abstract object that a company inhibits, but “something that people do. Strategy is an activity” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 3). Chia and MacKay (2007) criticise that the impact of the individual strategist is not reflected and unclear. Bowman (2016) likewise argues, in this regard, that little is understood how e.g. strategizing tools impact the strategy process and its outcome. This is in line with van der Veen (1992) who considered the sequence of developments and changes between input and output of the strategy process as the least understood aspect of the strategy process.

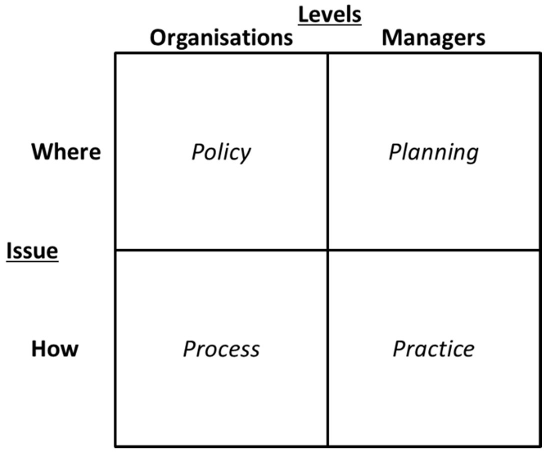


Figure 4: Academic perspectives on strategy (own reproduction based on Whittington (1996))

In a recent evolution from studying the sociological effects within strategy formation, academics have started to examine the micro-sociological elements of behaviour and perception to gain a better understanding of the strategy process (Johnson et al., 2011).

In the view of Whittington, the question of effective strategic practice had not been covered sufficiently in existing academic thought. Therefore, he proposed an expansion in research from organizational and context level towards the acting individual in strategizing (Whittington, 1996). This notion is later supported by Carter, Clegg and Kornberger (2008) and has been confirmed by recent research activities that associate themselves with the Strategy as Practice stream of theory.

2.1.3 Strategy as Practice

2.1.3.1 Introduction to the research field

Strategy as Practice, in this text referred to as S-A-P, is a research perspective on strategizing and organizational strategy that has emerged over the last two decades. In comparison to the previously described perspectives in strategy research, S-A-P is a relatively young stream (Wolf & Floyd, 2017). It is embedded in the theories of organisational practice and follows the strategy process perspective (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Thereby, S-A-P positions itself in a constructivist perspective on strategy (Aggerholm & Asmuß, 2016). It attempts to turn the focus from a rather economical to an increasingly social view on strategy formation (Carter & Whittle, 2018). S-A-P focuses on the actions of people involved in strategy development (Whittington, 2006). This theory field sees strategy as “a situated, socially accomplished flow of organizational activity” (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p. 11) that involves people from all organisational levels. Strategy is regarded as a central element of interaction in organisations (Seidl & Guérard, 2015). Therefore it also regards strategy formation as a situated development which is constantly shaped by its practitioners and the environment (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). S-A-P aims to understand how the social practices, that cause these adjustments, influence and form strategizing (P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007). This allows for a more detailed view on strategizing practices and practitioners, than traditional process research (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018). Indeed S-A-P aims at understanding the experiences and challenges that strategy practitioners face (P. Jarzabkowski, 2005). A practice perspective may therefore also help to understand the findings that can be derived from a process-based analysis (G. Bowman, 2016). The thought leaders in the field of S-A-P argue that it is essential to understand the impact of underlying practices in order to understand the outcome of strategizing activities (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008).

According to Burgelman et al. (2018), the practice turn has extended the academic view on strategy practice both to a micro-, as well as a macro level. On a micro-level perspective, S-A-P research analyses the micro-routines that take place within strategy processes, while on a macro-level it aims at generalisability of practice elements and practitioner groups.

From a practice perspective, as can be seen in table 2, strategizing is connected with different kinds of activities that take place on a regular basis within organisations. Among these are for example strategy reviews, strategy workshops, tools and strategic planning procedures (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014; G. Bowman, 2016; P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). It emphasises the tacit knowledge of how strategizing is conducted, rather than an explicit understanding of strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005).

Strategy perspective	Ontology	Philosophical commitment	Locus of engagement	Examples
Processual	Processes are subordinate to actors	Processes are important, but ultimately reducible to things/actions	Micro-macro activities of individuals and organisations	Time, agency, structure, context, operations
Post-processual / S-A-P	Actors and processes are subordinate to practices	Actions and things are instantiations of practice-complexes	Field of practices	Social practices, knowledge, intimation, power as collective entities.

Table 2: The differentiation between strategy process research and S-A-P(Chia & MacKay, 2007)

2.1.3.2 Core Concepts and Ideas

S-A-P focuses on the strategizing practices, which incorporates the activities that strategists in organisation engage in during the conduction of strategy processes (Hendry et al., 2010). By analysing what strategists do and through which activities they strategize, S-A-P aims to expand strategy knowledge from a sole macro-level. Instead, it tries to analyse the micro-practices in which practitioners engage on a day-to-day basis along the strategizing processes. This implies a very detailed view on all types of strategizing routines from organisational standard procedures to individual reports, presentations or even analysis tools that are applied within a strategizing process (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008; Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015). Thus, certain intersections between S-A-P and traditional strategy process research can be observed. Nonetheless, in comparison to strategy process research, S-A-P focuses on the micro-level of these processes as it aims to uncover the details of the related interactions. This implies also that S-A-P attempts to overcome critique points of strategy process research, such as a lack of detail regarding the techniques and a lack of rigour regarding the impact of strategizing processes (Burgelman et al., 2018).

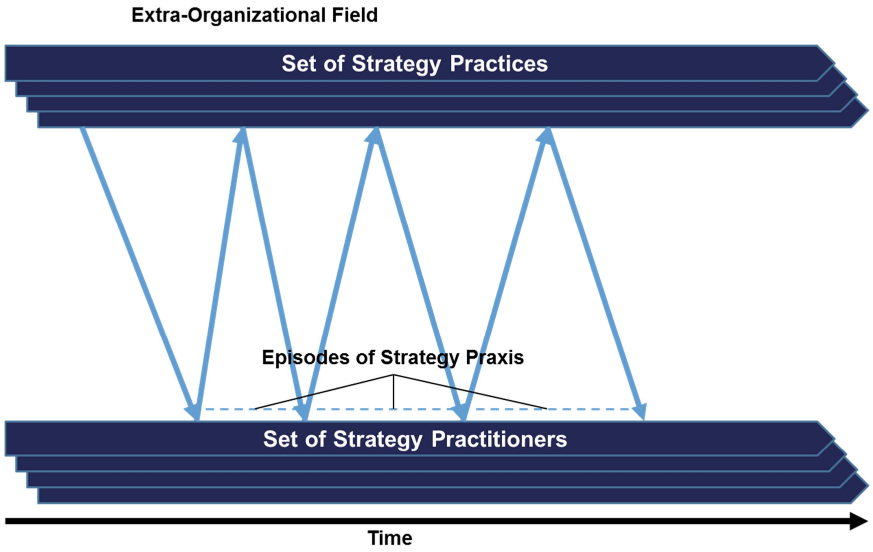

Extra-Organizational Field
Set of Strategy Practices
Episodes of Strategy Praxis
Set of Strategy Practitioners
Time

Figure 5: The interplay between practices, practitioners and praxis (based on Whittington, 2006, p. 621)

In particular, S-A-P reviews the interplay of “concepts of practices, practitioners and praxis” (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 90), as depicted in figure 5. According to academics, practice enriches strategy formation (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007). These three concepts are regarded as being complementary (Belmondo & Sargis Roussel, 2014).

2.1.3.2.1 Practice

The idea of practices replicates the overall routinisation of organisations. As MacIntosh et al. (2010, p. 291) emphasise, “a large part of organisational activity is in some way concerned with formal practices”. These include organisational routines and procedures that have evolved over time. Further, practices incorporate also norms and traditions that can even involve organisational mind-sets (Wolf & Floyd, 2017). Becker (2004) finds that a key component of organisational routines is tacit knowledge, which substantiates a need to consider the role of practice in strategizing.

As mentioned earlier in this literature review, it is argued that the understanding of the underlying practices is critical to understanding the drivers for the formation of strategies (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). Chia and MacKay (2007) regard the practices as defined by the S-A-P field as micro-processes. Within organisations, strategizing tends to take place within structured processes. Indeed, certain strategizing activities will be conducted in fixed patterns and formats on a recurring basis (Müller-Stewens & Lechner, 2005). These activities may take place in different contexts and may involve several participants or organisational groups. Nevertheless, they are also interdependent and clearly recognisable (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). These structures are referred to as “routines”. Routines are identifiable patterns of behaviour and actions within an organisational context (Pentland & Feldman, 2008). They occur repeatedly in different, independent settings with similar triggers or drivers that form a consistent pattern, thereby representing the practice in which organisational representatives engage (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014). Indeed, researchers have postulated, that organisations act as a cluster of routines (Salvato, 2003). Routines allow organisations to

- be coordinated
- be stable in action,
- be efficient in its resource input through standardised activites
- be knowledge-binding, by capturing tacit knowledge through the interactions within a routine (Becker, 2004).

According to Becker (2004) academic publications regard routines either as behavioural, or as cognitive regularities, while the former definition appears to be predominant in academia. This includes a re-appreciation of formalised strategizing practices and the role that they play for strategy formation (MacIntosh et al., 2010). In some instances routines can even be ritualized (Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd, & Bourque, 2010). If regarded as behavioural regularities, routines can been defined a "recurrent interaction patterns" (Becker, 2004, p. 662) . These patterns are both performative and ostensive (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014; Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Thus, routines are defined and shaped by the roles, actions and interactions of its participants (Larsen & Rasmussen, 2008), as well as the understanding of the participants how they should act in accordance with the routine. As explained, routines take place in the interaction of individuals and are characterised by patterns of actions in these interactions. In line with the frameworks of S-A-P, routines can inform strategizing practice (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014). Nevertheless, routines and practices are also variable and can change over time through their application (Becker, 2004; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Salvato, 2003). This can be triggered through a common understanding within the group that is conducting the routine (Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007). This is in line with the practice theory school's perspective (Hansen & Vogel, 2011). Practices are also deemed relevant by S-A-P researchers, because they represent a significant amount of the related operational costs in an organisation (MacIntosh et al., 2010). However, in S-A-P, there is no unanimous definition of the construct of practice, as is also explained in more detail in section 2.1.3.2.4. Floyd et al (2011) have proposed that S-A-P utilises definitions around practice elements as "bridging" (p. 942) or "umbrella constructs" (p. 943).

2.1.3.2.2 Praxis

Praxis identifies the activities that take place in a strategizing episode. This encompasses everything that people do along the strategy process (Wolf & Floyd, 2017). In an ideal world, decisions are being made according to a rationale process (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001). However, this is seldom taking place in organizations. According to Eden & Ackermann (2001), decisions in organisations are always the result of a negotiating process between decision makers, i.e. the management. Praxis represents this negotiating process by portraying the activities in which actors and stakeholders engage in the strategy process (Burgelman et al., 2018). It shows what the individuals actually do when they are engaged in strategy practice (Seidl & Whittington, 2014).

While strategy practices address the overall strategizing concepts and routines at a macro-level within an organisation, strategy praxis takes place when a strategy practitioner engages in a strategizing activity, such as a workshop, which happens on a micro-level (see e.g. Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014). Thereby, as outlined in the S-A-P framework macro- and micro-level in the form of practice and praxis appear to be separated. Praxis encompasses the episodes of strategic action, thereby reflecting on the interactions between macro and micro level (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Praxis in the definition of S-A-P also links the actual activities that take place in the strategy formation with the context in which this process is conducted (Bourgoin, Marchessaux, & Bencherki, 2018; Johnson et al., 2007). As practices do not just occur out of nowhere, it is important that the underlying praxis is understood to influence and develop the practice that is attached to it (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl, & Whittington, 2015). Thereby, it is also relevant how strategizing processes interact with the characteristics of the organisation members that perform and shape its elements and which define the behaviour sets for this praxis (Kauppila, Bizzi, & Obstfeld, 2018). However, the differentiation between practice and praxis has been criticised by Mueller (2018) as being implausible from a socio-theoretical perspective. In this regard, the analysis of consensus building which is the main theme of this thesis can be positioned in this segment of S-A-P.

2.1.3.2.3 Practitioner

The practitioners are the acting individuals during the course of a strategizing episode. Practitioners in S-A-P are both active actors in the processes as well as the carriers of the organisational practices around strategizing (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Wolf & Floyd, 2017). They apply practices in their strategizing praxis (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Thereby, they can represent the whole range of organisational groups or even external influencers, such as strategy consultants (Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Varyani

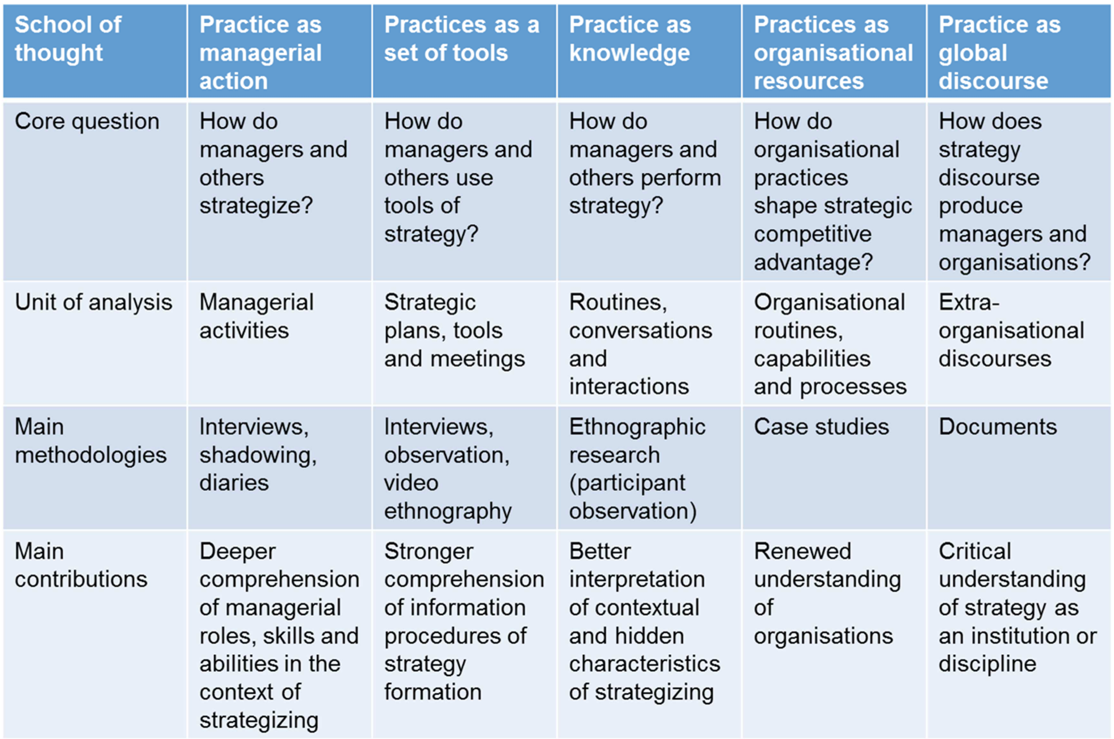
& Khammar, 2010). This is in contrast to previous academic model which regarded strategy as the domain of top management. Thereby, S-A-P follows the critique of Mintzberg, that strategizing takes also place outside of boardrooms (Wolf & Floyd, 2017; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Instead, the strategy formation process is far more distributed in an organisation. This implies that middle management should also be included in the locus of S-A-P research studies. This notion is also supported by Burgelman et al (2018). Meadows & O'Brien (2013) proposed even further that future research should in particular address the role of middle management in the context of strategizing micro-processes. Due to their position between the hierarchy levels that define strategy and that implement it, middle management is found to engage in several micro-routines and practices in the context of the strategy process (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013). The relevance of middle management is in particular attributed to the fact that they are responsible to convey the strategy message to the operational level and ensure the implementation as well as the motivation by the operations units (Rouleau, 2005). Therefore an improved understanding of the activites and roles of middle management can inform the overall understanding of pracitioners in S-A-P. This generates more input on the practice level as it is shaped through the interplay of praxis and practitioner.

As S-A-P extends the role of the actors in the strategy process, the practitioner, to a broader range of individuals, this has also an important impact on practice. As Jarzabkowski et al (2015) put forward practices can be shaped by the role, know-how and standing of those who apply them. Depending on the characteristics of the practitioner practice can be experienced, shaped and applied in very different ways.

2.1.3.2.4 Major schools of thought in S-A-P research

As several academics have identified or even criticised, the setup of the S-A-P stream of theory is very pluralistic (Burgelman et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2008; Carter & Whittle, 2018; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2015; Rouleau, 2013). Within S-A-P research several streams of thought or schools of research can be differentiated. The origins of these schools of thought relate to different views of the construct of practice that have aligned themselves with the research perspective of S-A-P. A good consolidated overview of these schools of thought has been presented by Rouleau (2013).

In her essay on potential future developments within S-A-P, Rouleau (2013) differentiates five major schools of thought within S-A-P based upon their views of practice. These five views of practice are presented in figure 6.



School of thought	Practice as managerial action	Practices as a set of tools	Practice as knowledge	Practices as organisational resources	Practice as global discourse
Core question	How do managers and others strategize?	How do managers and others use tools of strategy?	How do managers and others perform strategy?	How do organisational practices shape strategic competitive advantage?	How does strategy discourse produce managers and organisations?
Unit of analysis	Managerial activities	Strategic plans, tools and meetings	Routines, conversations and interactions	Organisational routines, capabilities and processes	Extra-organisational discourses
Main methodologies	Interviews, shadowing, diaries	Interviews, observation, video ethnography	Ethnographic research (participant observation)	Case studies	Documents
Main contributions	Deeper comprehension of managerial roles, skills and abilities in the context of strategizing	Stronger comprehension of information procedures of strategy formation	Better interpretation of contextual and hidden characteristics of strategizing	Renewed understanding of organisations	Critical understanding of strategy as an institution or discipline

Figure 6: The five major schools of thought within S-A-P based upon Rouleau(2013, p. 549)

The differentiation between the five major schools is guided by a different focus of interest. While the first school is looking specifically at the way in which management strategize, the second school is rather focused on the tools and procedures that are employed during strategy formation. The third school meanwhile addresses a knowledge perspective and how knowledge and experience shape strategizing. The fourth and fifth school of thought add to the micro- and meso-level of the first three schools by focusing on a macro-level of strategy on a organisational or even society level (Rouleau, 2013). None of these schools is supposed to exclusive in its specific focus area, but rather adds to each other in addressing the core themes of S-A-P (Rouleau, 2013).

2.1.3.2.5 The contribution of S-A-P to strategy research

Since the initial proposition of Whittington, this field of research has gained an increasing dynamic (see e.g. the overview of S-A-P related publications by Wolf & Floyd, 2017) and can nowadays be regarded as an established and accepted perspective in strategy research (Carter & Whittle, 2018) The proposal of Whittington requires researchers to involve themselves more with strategizing activities and those who conduct them in organisations, thereby shifting away from universally applicable concepts and models (Whittington, 1996). Thereby, this research field goes beyond the strategy process theory that had been introduced by Mintzberg and others (Chia, 2004). Chia and MacKay (2007) also credit S-A-P with transforming the academic discussion around strategy research. Further, since its initial development, the perspective of S-A-P has been linked with several streams of theory, and created several sources of interdisciplinary links in strategy theory (Carter & Whittle, 2018).

Carter et al (2008), however, criticise the apparent ambiguity of the S-A-P school of thought based on a lack of an overall theory frame that institutionalises the ideas of S-A-P research. In their view, core terms appear to be too vaguely defined (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008). This concern is also expressed by Chia who also concludes that the role of S-A-P within strategy theory remains unclear (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Chia, 2004). This is in parts also echoed by the different views that exist regarding the role of practice in S-A-P, as outlined by Rouleau (2013), which were presented in section 2.1.3.2.4. On the other hand, Chia (2004) argues, that S-A-P should rely less on analytical logic constructs and embrace what he calls “logic of practice” (p. 31) in alignment with the theory constructs of Bourdieu. He proposes that the S-A-P should apply a more pragmatic and involvement oriented approach in order to understand the underlying themes. This corresponds to some extent to early themes of Whittington. Whittington (1996) initially described the practitioner’s knowledge of strategizing as tacit and achieved over the particular career path of the researched individual.

In order to gain an understanding of the basis of strategizing routines and activities, there is, however, a need to extend the analysis beyond the macro-level of organisational routines. This can be achieved by analysing micro-routines (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014; Foss, 2011). From an academic perspective, a deconstruction of strategizing and overall organisational macro-structures into routines allows for an in-depth analysis into changing processes and interactions (Salvato, 2003).

In its focus on practice, S-A-P research has placed micro-practices at the centre of theory construction (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Some studies have focused on micro-routines in the context of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008), however, there has been a lack of research in the S-A-P field linking the practice perspective with the concept of routines (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014).

Jarzabkowski & Seidl (P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008), for example, analysed the impact that different manifestations of a meeting can have on the strategic framework of an organisation. They defined the different agenda stages of a strategy meeting - opening, main discussion and closure – as autonomous sub-stages of a strategy routine. Thereby, they concluded that different combinations or conductions of these micro-routines will have a different impact on the overall strategy.

The approach by S-A-P is, however not free of criticism. Building on his initial critique of S-A-P in 2008, Carter expands his critical position with regards to its breadth. According to Carter and Whittle (2018) S-A-P applies a very broad perspective on strategy issues and does not differentiate sufficiently among the elements of this perspective.

The distinctive feature of S-A-P research is the focus on micro-level praxis and the differentiation of local practices (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). This focus on the micro-level, as well as the attempt to link micro-level praxis to macro-level practices, conceptualises how and why humans act in a particular way within the social setup and routines of strategizing. Thereby, S-A-P assumes an individual deviation in the actual behaviour of strategists from postulated strategizing practices and aims to understand and explain this deviation (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015). This is credited as being a significant evolution in strategy research (Chia & MacKay, 2007). Several authors, however, criticise in this regard the lack of systematic empirical research to validate the theory positions developed in the field of S-A-P (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Belmondo and Sargis Roussel (2014) point out, that there is a gap in analysing how strategy practices are implemented in different organisational setups and how this is shaped by its participants. Likewise, Concannon & Nordberg (2018) have commented that there is a need to further understand what happens in less formalised strategizing activites and how this contributes to value creation for an organisation. Despite significant research attempts over the last decades, the connection between the strategy content and process and the performance of an organisation remains inconclusive (Wolf & Floyd, 2017). Further, several authors have recently outlined, that the application and effectiveness of strategizing tools are not yet fully researched (Healey, et al., 2013; Paroutis, et al., 2015).

This implies also that despite its focus on practice, S-A-P is seen as having insufficient interaction with practitioners. Thereby, S-A-P falls accordingly back into the same structure that it attempts to overcome. This is a manager-focused agenda of strategy (Carter & Whittle, 2018).The claim of an expansion of strategy knowledge by existing S-A-P literature is, thereby challenged by Carter et al (2008), who argue that S-A-P follows the same rationale as previous schools of thought: "…the deliverables of the old and the new approach are the same – they claim to help managers manage better" (p. 88). In their view, S-A-P follows existing organisational theory streams, which were, however, not labelled as practice-oriented. For a further development, they call for a stronger differentiation from these fields of theory.

2.1.3.3 Current Research Themes

Recent research in S-A-P has addressed in particular the topics of strategizing praxis in organisations, such as language and dialogue in strategizing activities (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2014; Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015), strategy tools (Paroutis, Franco, & Papadopoulos, 2015; Roper & Hodari, 2015), setup (Healey, Hodgkinson, Whittington, & Johnson, 2013; Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015) and routines (Belmondo & Sargis Roussel, 2014), and the shift towards strategy implementation or materializing of strategy (Balogun, Bartunek, & Do, 2015; Dameron, Lê, & LeBaron, 2015; Leonardi, 2015; Thomas & Ambrosini, 2015).

Despite an already significant number of findings since the emergence of S-A-P (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009), several remaining gaps in the field have been emphasised by authors.

Carter et al (2008) argue that the focus of S-A-P appears to be too narrow. In their perspective, S-A-P focuses too much on activities and principles that have already been covered previously, citing leadership and the resource-based view among others as examples. In their view, some of the foundations of S-A-P appear to limit its development perspectives, in particular with regards to the influence of factors outside of top management or strategy teams. In the same regard they criticise an overemphasis on existing models from strategy content and process theory and a lack of interaction with practitioners (Carter & Whittle, 2018).

This critique has to some extent been echoed by Seidl and Whittington (2014) who share the concern that a micro-level praxis focus can result in a merging of broader influencing factors into a non-specified context. They propose that S-A-P research should broaden its scope by covering the gap between micro-level and macro-level structures, as well as expanding towards relationships between micro-level activities and their micro context. They term these expansions as “flat” and “tall” ontologies. A flat ontology refers to the incorporation of “the network of connections that make it possible” (p. 1408), while a tall ontology incorporates not only the micro-, but also meso- and macro-level. Both allow the researcher to link the researched local strategizing praxis with phenomena in broader spheres. By elaborating this framework for research categorisation, Seidl and Whittington (2014) point towards the need for further research in S-A-P that overcomes “micro-isolationism”.

Likewise, Jarzabkowski & Spee (2009), among others (e.g. Whittington, et al., 2006; Chia & MacKay, 2007), emphasised earlier a need of the S-A-P field to uncover links between micro-level and macro-level of strategizing. Particularly, they recommend further research on the link between outcomes of strategizing and strategists’ actions.

This research topic is aligned with the recent stream of S-A-P research on strategizing praxis. However, it also draws on the highlighted gaps in existing research that were mentioned by Healey et al (2015), Paroutis et al (2015) and Seidl & Whittington (2014) and aims to add to theory in these voids. This implies also the need for further research along the avenues of existing publications in S-A-P, as well as a substantiation of existing research results with information from differing methodological approaches(van Aaken et al., 2013).

In this context, S-A-P researchers have also looked for a more comprehensive analysis and understanding of the cognitive processes that take place in strategizing, such as e.g. the process of consensus building (Kellermanns, Walter, Lechner, & Floyd, 2005; Tarakci et al., 2014). However, the process of how consensus is achieved and how this is realized under circumstances that ensure a good decision quality remain as a gap in existing theory (Kellermanns et al., 2011; Walter, Kellermanns, Floyd, Veiga, & Matherne, 2013).

In this context, there have also been recurring calls that urge for a focus on the micro-level interactions in strategic episodes (Burgelman et al., 2018). These calls have also been taken up by the researcher that focus on the understanding of strategic consensus (Tarakci et al., 2014). Additionally recent publications in the S-A-P field have also addressed methodological challenges concerning the connections of micro- and macro-practice and the choice of research approaches to address these links efficaciously (Kouamé & Langley, 2018). The consolidation of these different research impulses and their outlined areas of interest clearly show an existing gap in strategy research around the substantiation of the processes of consensus building and how this area of theory is incorporated in S-A-P.

2.2 Consensus building

2.2.1 Current research themes around consensus building

Despite several calls for a better understanding of the factors that shape strategizing in a workshop and a profounder understanding of the role of cohesion and consensus (Porck et al., 2018; Tarakci et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2013) this field is currently to some extent overlooked by recent publications in the S-A-P field in favour of other areas of interest (see e.g. the agenda for future research by Burgelman et al., 2018).

Healey et al (2015) call for further analyses of the mechanisms that develop consensus between stakeholder groups in a workshop. In this context, Healey et al (2015) have stated the need to increase the understanding of spill-over effects from strategy workshops.

Further, Kellermanns et al (2005) propose that research on strategy consensus that involves several hierarchy layers of an organisation should focus on the set priorities in the researched strategy process. Further they put forward, that the used language may be a relevant indicator for research and that the quality of the consensus should also be considered (Kellermanns et al., 2011, 2005). In this regard further research on vision-content has also been recommended (Porck et al., 2018).

An additional area of research has been opened in 2014 by an expansion of the view on consensus from within-group consensus to consensus and consensus building structures between different groups (Tarakci et al., 2014).

2.2.2 The concept of consensus in strategy research

“Strategic consensus has become a prominent concept in the strategy process and strategy implementation research” (Tarakci et al., 2014, p. 1067). The concept of strategic consensus is rooted in the claim of Floyd & Wooldridge (1992), that in order for strategic execution to be successful it requires an alignment of the management on the same strategic priorities. Worley et al (2011) suggest that consensus plays a core part for the development of ideas and strategies.

Based on previous academic publications, a number of definitions for consensus in this context exist. The most relevant definitions have been summarised in table 3. Most of the definitions vary in wording and focus, but link the definition closely to agreement and cohesiveness in positions or understanding of a particular subject (for a broader overview of definitions see e.g. Kellermanns et al., 2005).

Author and year	Definition of consensus
Grinyer & Norburn (1977)	“a statistically significant level of shared perceptions” (p.103)
Burgeois (1980)	An agreement within the dominant strategy-making coalition
Dess & Origer (1987)	“An agreement of all parties to a group decision that occurs after deliberation and discussion of pros and cons of the issues, and when all (not the majority) of the managers are in agreement” (p. 313)
Woolridge & Floyd (1990)	A product of middle management commitment to a strategy (p.235)
Dess & Priem (1995)	“level of agreement among TMT or dominant coalition on factors such as goals […] and perceptions of the environment” (p. 402)
Dooley, Fryxell & Judge (2000)	“agreement of all parties to a group decision that the best possible decision has been made” (p.1238)
Kellermanns et al (2005)	“shared understanding of strategic priorities among managers” (p.721)
Walter et al (2013)	Enabler for an implementation in accordance with the actions of other stakeholders and aligned to the intended strategy of the organisation

Table 3: Definitions of the term consensus (own reproduction based partially on Kellermanns et al 2005)

Kellermanns et al. (2005, p. 721) define consensus in the context of strategizing as “the shared understanding of strategic priorities among managers at the top, middle, and/or operating levels of the organization”. In accordance with Mirzaei (2015), Kellermanns et al.(2011, 2005) consensus comprises varying elements of shared understanding of facts and experiences, shared perspectives on problems and solution options, and a commitment to and an agreement on related decisions and measures. The agreement can hereby be both emotional and cognitive (Mirzaei, 2015). An important aspect of the perception of strategic consensus is, that it is regarded as an outcome of a process and not as a process of agreement itself (Kellermanns et al., 2011). However, “ironically, no consensus has cleary emerged as to how consensus should be defined

[…] and incorporated into strategic theory" (Inhofe Rapert, Velliquette, & Garretson, 2002, p. 302).

Based on the existing literature, this research defines consensus as a shared understanding between the majority of the workshop participants on elements of the strategy process (strategic goals, strategic problems, strategic options or strategic measures) at the respective stage of the workshop process with the overarching outcome of a joint commitment and agreement on the resulting definition of a strategy or strategic measures at the end of the workshop by all participants.

2.2.3 Theoretic approaches to strategic consensus

Consensus building has been an element of academic research as early as the 1930s (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989). It is regarded by academic theory as an element of negotiation processes and particularly in the context of this research, also as an element of the strategy formation process (S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Kellermanns et al., 2005; Markóczy, 2001; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989).

In strategy research, consensus is mentioned as one outcome of strategic decision making (see e.g. Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989). Consensus increases the acceptance of decisions among all workshop participants (Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989). According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), consensus creates the basis for a successful strategy definition and implementation by providing a common frame of focus and activity priorities for the involved stakeholders. Thereby, consensus is a desired result of strategizing activities (Priem, Harrison, & Muir, 1995). Indeed, academic researchers have proposed that consensus improves the performance of organisations based on increased cooperation and understanding between stakeholders. A large number of studies have focused on this impact that consensus building has on the following performance of an organisation (Dooley, R. S., Fryxell, & Judge, 2000; González-Benito, Aguinis, Boyd, & Suárez-González, 2012; Kellermanns et al., 2011, 2005; Kilduff, Angelmar, & Mehra, 2000; Walter et al., 2013). However, to date no clear link between consensus and organisational performance or success in strategy implementation has been established.

Garvin and Roberto (2001) have stressed that the involvement of participants is the most critical aspect of reaching an implementable decision. This is also reflected in the definition of strategic consensus that is proposed by Kellermanns et al. They define strategic consensus as "the shared understanding of strategic priorities among managers at the top, middle, and/or operating levels of the organization" (Kellermanns et al., 2005, p. 721). This definition resembles closely the definition of Priem et al. (1995), who defined consensus in a group as "general agreement among all or most group members” (p. 695). Schweiger et al (1989) raise the concern, that consensus should not be viewed as the ultimate outcome. In such an instance, this bears the risk, that for the sake of consensus open debate and challenging of options are subdued, resulting in poor results.

In earlier stages, Wooldridge & Floyd proposed a multidimensional nature of consensus, relating its extent to both the informational grap of the underlying problem by participating parties and to the level of commitment between those parties. As a result, they could differentiate different levels of intensity of consensus based on the interplay of these two dimensions, as shown in figure 7.

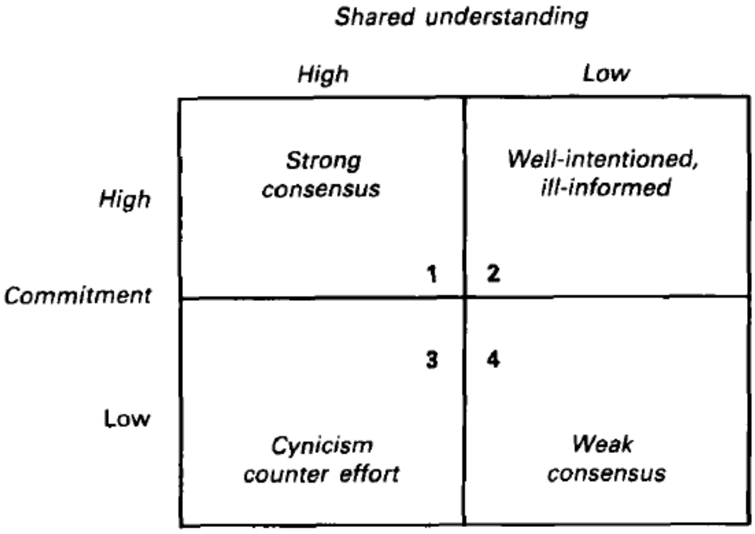


Figure 7: Dimensional model of consensus as proposed by Wooldridge & Floyd (1989, p. 299)

Priem et al. (1995) hint that a dialectic conflict is needed to trigger a cognitive argumentation process between participants to establish a solution that holds the potential to be collectively accepted.

However, it has been stressed by more recent research studies that the academic view of consensus and consensus building is ambiguous (Kellermanns et al., 2011, 2005; Markóczy, 2001). Kellermanns et al. (2005) argue that there is no joined view within academia on the construct of consensus and its measurable characteristics. In this regard, Markóczy (2001) puts forward that academia has a limited grasp of consensus building, as most of the research conducted so far has not differentiated between types of consensus, did not relate it to the context of strategizing or did not consider different perspectives on the strategy formation process. Kellermanns et al. (2011, 2005) additionally point out that different studies have come to different conclusions for example with regards to the impact of consensus building on organisational performance. However, based on a second study, Kellermanns et al. (2011) conclude that a positive relationship appears to prevail.

Nevertheless, some core models of consensus and consensus building can be derived from existing literature. Especially the theory model that consensus encompasses several dimensions, appears to be relevant. Wooldridge & Floyd (1989) first defined three dimensions in which consensus should be studied. Building upon previous research they established the first dimension as degree of consensus, meaning both the fit between goal and measures as well as the level of commitment by participants.

Further they added the dimensions of scope of consensus, focusing on the agreeing partners and the extent to which their consensus represents an organisation, and content of consensus, meaning the actual aspects and positions upon which partners developed agreement (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989).

Building upon these three dimensions of consensus as defined by Wooldridge and Floyd, Markóczy (2001) differentiates four aspects that make up the construct of consensus. These aspects determine consensus comprehensively. She terms these aspects as

- ‘locus’, meaning the specific stakeholder groups involved in the consensus building,
- ‘scope’, meaning the scale of stakeholders involved in the process,
- ‘degree’, which represents the strength and sustainability of the developed consensus,
- and ‘content’, which reflects the information set or decision which a consensus was agreed on (Markóczy, 2001).

This differentiation is also reflected in the research of Kellermanns et al. who use the differentiating criteria to capture the concept of consensus in their research (2005). Further Tarakci et al (2014) relate their consensus modelling logic also to this framework.

2.2.4 The development of consensus

Consensus building is the part of a negotiation process between the involved individuals or parties which aims to reach an agreement which reflects the individual positions of each party (Altuzarra, Moreno-Jiménez, & Salvador, 2010; Vetschera, 2013). Priem et al. (1995) for example cite the argument that conflicts need to be expressed and solved in a group discussion in order to generate a solid basis upon which decisions can be made. This can include both a decision frame for a solution, as well as a decision for the conclusion of the negotiation process without reaching a solution (Vetschera, 2013). From a cognitive perspective, this can also be summarised as establishing a collective cognitive alignment (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). According to Schweiger et al (Schweiger et al., 1989, p. 756) consensus is established once “all group members can accept certain assumptions and a recommendation on the basis of logic and a willingness to consider them as feasible”.

Markóczy (2001) sees a consistency between her findings of the consensus building approach and the emerging strategy model. This is supported by the theory review of Combe and Carrington (2015), which points to links between the consensus formation and the speed and success of the strategy process. Further, Markóczy (2001) herself underpins this claim with her findings that the consensus building approach tends to be rooted in the middle management of an organisation. This strong role of consensus building in middle management is also confirmed by more recent studies (Kellermanns et al., 2011).

Priem et al. (1995) dissect consensus into pre-decision and post-decision consensus or -as they call it- outcome consensus. They regard pre-decision consensus as the result of so called cognitive conflict, as participants discuss a commonly identified problem and agree collectively on the need to find a solution to this problem. In contrast, they define outcome consensus as a collective agreement on the selection option or action that is to be taken.

Existing research has identified several factors that were deemed as influencing or relevant for the development of consensus within a group of different organisational stakeholders. In this regard, Kellermanns et al. (2005) refer to studies that propose that a higher diversity regarding the participants may increase the likelihood for consensus.

Likewise, consensus building is only possible, once the participating parties have developed a sense and an understanding of the individual positions in the discussion and are able and willing to discuss these positions in order to reach an agreement (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). Consensus building in a group takes place, once the group members have engaged in the development of this shared view of the problem context (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). Accordingly consensus between different stakeholder groups develops once these follow overarching goals instead of individual aims and directions. However, this requires an adequate alignment among the groups (Tarakci et al., 2014).

The success of achieving consensus is also correlated to the structure and content of the decision making process in which it takes place, as well as the structural context of the organisation in which the decision making process is applied (Kellermanns et al., 2005). Cuccurullo & Lega (2013) state that conflicts of interest or organisational politics impede the establishment of strategic consensus. According to the references that Galbraith et al. (2010) make to previous studies, the development of consensus also depends on how balanced the initial positions of the workshop participants were.

As mentioned before, familiarity and previous cooperation experience between stakeholders also has a significant impact on the consensus building process. Experienced stakeholders may find it easier to interact in a discussion and reach a consensus more efficiently (Galbraith et al., 2010).

Further, Galbraith et al (2010) found that a wider range of options available to the discussion participants increased the likelihood of consensus building. Consensus also appears to be greater on actual actions and measures rather than on strategies (Priem et al., 1995). On the other hand, it has been shown that ambiguity and uncertainty with regards to data and context of a discussion have a negative impact on the formation of consensus (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

2.2.5 Consensus building as a contributor to strategy formation and problem solving

As mentioned earlier, academic literature regards consensus building as an essential element of the strategy formation process (see e.g. S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Recent publications sees strategizing as a “structured debate among [...] experts, who reach a shared understanding of the situation by debating and challenging well-supported ideas” (Bourgoin et al., 2018, p. 592).

Galbraith et al. (2010) refer to consensus building as a source of inspiration, trust and stronger commitment for actions within groups that have reached a consensus on a critical issue. Ackermann & Eden (2001, 2011) recommend also the application of group decision support systems to structure and improve strategizing. According to Eden (1992) such tools help to channel the flow of information needed and provide a basis for dialogue and agreement. It is argued that dialogue is the ultimate basis for an effective negotiation towards reaching agreements on a strategic decision (Eden, 1992; Mintzberg & Westley, 2001; Eden & Ackermann, 2001). Kellermanns et al. (2005) regard consensus in the context of strategy as a shared understanding of the relevant aspects and positions for a strategic decision rather than a complete agreement on a particular strategic position.

In fact, the strategizing process itself may be used mainly in order to establish consensus and commitment within an organisation (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Chanal

& Tannery, 2005). Garvin and Roberto (2001) have stressed that gaining the involvement of participants is the most critical aspect of reaching an implementable decision. Markóczy (2001) points out that integrating a larger set of stakeholders into the consensus building process could be more critical than achieving a higher level of consensus between top stakeholders. Complete consensus building within a group is relatively unlikely and also not desirable (Ackermann & Eden, 2011; Schweiger et al., 1989; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989).

Abdallah and Langley (2014) note, that a strong aim towards a high level of consensus building may bear the risk of ambiguity in case of very diverse stakeholders. This confirms sceptisim regarding consensus as an outcome of a strategizing episode that was mentioned earlier by Schweiger et al (1986; 1989). Likewise, Wooldridge & Floyd (1989) had already argued that, "Too much consensus, too early, may be as bad as too little" (p. 301).

A critical factor for the achievement of consensus appears to be the precision of the strategy formulation (Abdallah & Langley, 2014). According to the findings of Abdallah and Langley (2014), strategy formulation needs a certain level of ambiguity to allow for consensus building. Ackermann & Eden (2011, p. 297) describe the process of problem solving in the context of a strategy workshop with reference to its participants as follows: "…to elucidate their different perspectives, to listen carefully to the perspectives of others, to shift their own position, and to be able to reach an agreement that does not do too much violence to their position." In the beginning, for example, of a workshop each participant will hold his individual knowledge and opinion on the particular subject. Likewise, he will have differing priorities on issues and actions (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). Exchange of this information will help to bridge gaps between participants and can support the formation of strategies and decisions. It appears, that the transfer of diverse knowledge in a workshop scenario can drive innovation (Worley et al., 2011).

Several researchers have proposed a link between the intensity of knowledge transfer and the workshop outcome as well as the sustainability of this outcome (Worley et al., 2011). Galbraith et al. (2010) differentiate between informed and uninformed consensus. While the former appears to lead to results of a higher quality, the latter does not improve the workshop outcome. Uninformed consensus is regarded as the result of ill-conducted and hasty discussions that do not rely on a broad set of relevant information. Tacit knowledge and experience should therefore be applied as a source of information and inspiration for strategic decision making (Mintzberg, 1987). This is in line with Galbraith et al. (2010) who also regard consensus decisions that are the result of a thorough exchange of information as a desired outcome of workshops.

However, Bowman (2016) found in a case study on the application of scenario planning in intra-organisational settings, that in case of contrasting positions the flow of transferred knowledge between groups can actually be diminished or stagnate. This notion is partially in line with the findings of Worley et al (2011), who found that higher diversity may not contribute to discussion intensity or outcomes. Abdallah and Langley (2014) found also that while ambiguity of the strategy may lead to a higher level of inclusion of different stakeholders, it can also cause a questioning of the strategy as a whole.

As Weick et al. (2005) point out sensemaking takes place mostly once a deviation of the actual from the expected is being perceived. This notion has been confirmed by Tavella & Franco (2015). In their study about a facilitated workshop, they identified the communicative behaviours of clarifying, inviting, proposing and challenging as traits of the discussion process that were used to reconsider existing structures in the studied organisation and to develop new approaches towards the desired outcome. Rouleau has described two stages of sensemaking, which were named as “performing the conversation” and “setting the scene” (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). On this basis, the group will then attempt to collectively agree on a common interpretation of situation and solution options from a group perspective (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Weick et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, it remains a challenge to provide quantitative insides into consensus and consensus building formats that allow for a clear correlation between consensus and its impact on an organisation (Tarakci et al., 2014).

2.2.6 The role of consensus building in workshops

Strategic consensus is also regarded as a trigger for the setup of a workshop (Healey et al., 2015). Existing theory refers to strategy formats such as workshops as widely applied settings to enhance consensus (Tarakci et al., 2014) or even as a promoter for consensus building and knowledge exchange (Schwarz, 2009).The development of shared views in the course of meetings or comparable events has been identified by Seidl and Guérard (2015) as one theme that has received more attention in recent years. However, this can mainly be attributed to several research publications in this field by Clarke, Kwon and Wodak (Clarke, Kwon, & Wodak, 2012; Kwon, Clarke, & Wodak, 2014; Wodak, Kwon, & Clarke, 2011).

As already mentioned, literature highlights interaction and consensus building between participants as critical for a workshop. Consensus building requires time for the evaluation of the presented information and the discussion of controversial positions (Galbraith et al., 2010). Extensive exchange of information and knowledge by different stakeholder groups has been found to correlate positively with the formation of consensus in meetings or workshops (Galbraith et al., 2010). On the other hand if no common understanding is developed, research finds also that this can establish barriers to the implementation of a strategy (Inhofe Rapert et al., 2002). Indeed, “building social cohesion among decision makers is an essential function of workshops” (Healey et al., 2015, p. 17). However, research has also found that a focus on consensus building can reduce the overall quality of decisions that are made in a strategy workshop (Healey et al., 2015; Schweiger et al., 1986, 1989). Schweiger et al (Schweiger et al., 1989) argue that while consensus building increases team bonds, it may also lead to weaker outcomes compared to more confrontational approaches.

Tavella and Franco (2015) identified that six of their predefined communication clusters contributed to a shared acceptance of positions and solution elements. In their research, these communication elements are labelled inviting, clarifying, challenging, reiterating and building. The inclusion of several layers of hierarchy or different parts of the organisation in a workshop can create a common ownership for the issue that is being discussed. This influences the perception of participants for such a setting, creating a sense of collectivity in the problem solving, which also support the evolution of consensus (Healey et al., 2015). Markóczy (2001) finds that the consensus building stage within the strategy process is initially embedded in the middle management rather than in the top management.

2.3 Strategy Workshops

Strategy workshops are one of the widely applied tools in strategy processes in Western organisations (Healey et al., 2015). According to a UK-wide study by Hodgkinson et al. (2005) almost eighty percent of British companies apply strategy workshops. In the same regard, strategy workshops or strategic episodes are regularly referred to in S-A-P publications (see e.g. Johnson et al., 2010; Macintosh, Maclean, & Seidl, 2008; Seidl & Guérard, 2015)

MacIntosh et al. (2010) define strategy workshops as specific events with a strategic focus that are detached from the day-to-day business of an organisation. The aim of the workshop is thus to develop a shared understanding among participants regarding the future course of the organisation or to develop measures that support this course (C. Bowman, 1995; Macintosh et al., 2008; Schwarz, 2009), both in terms of strategy formulation and/or implementation (Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, & Schwarz, 2006; Johnson, Prashantham, & Floyd, 2006).

The complexity of strategizing stems from several aspects. These correlate with the three fields of strategy research and encompass context factors, internal agency factors such as differing goals and cultures, as well as issues of integration and motivation of different stakeholders (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013).

According to the review of Lechner & Müller-Stewens (2000), several authors consider dialogue as a critical element of strategizing, particularly in case of ambiguity. Dialogue and interaction allow for the experience of a joint learning by the group (Ackermann & Eden, 2001). Group interaction in this regard can be manifold and driven by several circumstances (Ackermann & Eden, 2001). According to Seidl and Guérard (2015) group interactions and meetings can be characterized by six factors:

- Informal versus planned occasion,
- Episodic versus unstructured,
- Focused on talk versus focused on other forms of interaction,
- Being a gathering,
- Presence of participants in actual or virtual space,
- Official purpose versus distinct event.

A particular type of group interaction on which this research focuses is the meeting format of workshops. Referring to Seidl and Guérard (2015), a workshop is a planned, episodic gathering with an official purpose within an organisation and whose participants are –usually- physically present in the actual space. However, its focus may be both on talk as well as other forms of interaction.

According to a study by Hodgkinson et al.(2005) workshops are applied regularly in various organizations as a tool for interaction between different groups and as a format to solve problems and derive actions. Likewise group interventions as a particular type of workshops are a tool for organisational development that is increasingly being used in organisations (Worley et al., 2011).

Organisations initiate strategy workshops in order to establish a platform for a detailed discussion and analysis of relevant topics and to develop a joined view on the related issues. This is fostered through different activities that are incorporated in the workshop design (Duffy & O’Rourke, 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). Workshops are often installed as “away-days or strategy retreats” (Healey et al., 2015, p. 17), thereby removing participants from their working environment and routines. This is commonly regarded as beneficial because it supposedly eliminates organisational barriers to dialogue and thinking, as well as critical reflection (Healey et al., 2015). According to the strategy workshop survey, almost three quarters of the strategy workshops are organised as away-days (Hodgkinson et al., 2005). This reflects on the earlier proposition of Doz and Prahalad, that strategic change requires a critical reflection of the existing from an outside perspective (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

On the other hand, it appears, that some activities, such as stating preferences, should rather be conducted in privacy in order to avoid group-think or influencing of individuals (Ackermann & Eden, 2001). However, this is also dependent on the level differences in opinion that is desired for the decision making process. As Ackermann and Eden (2011) put it, a successful group interaction format may "enable each member […] to be able to elucidate their different perspectives, to listen carefully to the perspectives of others, to shift their own position, and to be able to reach an agreement that does not do too much violence to their own position"(p. 297).

While workshops are widely applied in practice, researchers initially overlooked workshops and comparable interaction regarding them as of little relevance to organisational development (Seidl & Guérard, 2015; van Aaken et al., 2013). This view has changed only recently, with workshops now receiving increased focus, particularly in S-A-P research (Healey et al., 2015; Seidl & Guérard, 2015; van Aaken et al., 2013). The research interest in this regard is not solely on the workshop itself, but also on the perceptions of its participants (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

Workshops and comparable strategy tools are more than just analytical concepts that apply knowledge in an organisational context, but rather complex platforms for social interaction (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Wright et al., 2013). However, little has actually been uncovered on the actual mechanisms that shape these structures. This gap in knowledge has been outlined by several authors (see e.g. Bartunek et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2015; Macintosh, Maclean, & Seidl, 2008).

2.3.1 The role of workshops in the strategy process

Commonly, meetings and workshops play an important role in strategy formation in an organisation (Seidl & Guérard, 2015). Research has found that workshops are being applied as a core element in the strategic planning process (Healey et al., 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2005). They are mainly applied to generate contributions to the content of organisational strategies (Hodgkinson et al., 2005). They are mainly used as platforms to formulate strategies or to develop implementation measures for strategic decisions (Healey et al., 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2006). In most instances they are found to be initiated based on formalised processes rather than current crisis situations (Hodgkinson et al., 2005).

By the top management, strategy workshops are regarded as informal occasions of strategic exchange. In this context, workshops are regarded as opportunities for a free discussion of ideas and as a less constrained setting for the preparation of critical strategic decisions, than ritualised and formal meetings that are part of the annual process in an organisation (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018). These occasions are rare in regular organisational routines, which adds value to such diverse formats such as strategy workshops (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010).

Within the strategy process, workshops are applied for several reasons, covering all stages of strategizing such as the planning, formulation or review of a strategy (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2014; Healey et al., 2015; Schwarz, 2009). In particular, workshops are used throughout organisations to support strategizing, as they provide the means to involve more members of an organization in strategy formation and to actively incorporate their knowledge (Hodgkinson et al., 2006). Workshops help the evolution of the strategy process with the means of knowledge transfer and consensus building (Schwarz, 2009).

Previous studies have found that workshops work as liminal spaces among organisational routines and structures, thereby enabling discussions among equals in a structured context that is to some extent detached from the regular organisation (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018; Sturdy, 2006).

Healey et al (2015) highlight that the impact of strategy workshop reaches beyond mere organisational developments and impacts also groups and individuals participating in them. In their role as a participatory platform for discussion and decisions, workshops facilitate the "collection [of] participant's opinions and [the] inspiring [of] resonance towards the discussion topic" (Chang & Chen, 2015, p. 1284). Further strategy workshops are also regarded as stimulators for an out-of-the-box thinking as they allow the participants to engage in strategizing outside of their regular routines and structures (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018). As Seidl & Guérard (2015, p. 564) state, "meetings shape the activities that take place within their span." In addition, workshops promote bonding and the creation of groups behind the strategic initiatives which they address (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010).

Further, workshops may also be used as a platform for the legitimisation of top-down decisions by the management board (Healey et al., 2015). From a legitimisation perspective, workshops are used to close ongoing discussions in order to foster pre-defined decisions or concepts (Johnson et al., 2010). Schwarz (2009) proposed that workshop participants appropriate the outcome of a strategy workshop based on the interactions that take place within the workshop.

According to Jarzabkowski & Seidl (2008) and Duffy & O'Rourke (2014) strategy workshops can be differentiated by embeddedness in the strategy process, structure, discussion format and the resulting impact on the executing organisation.

Strategy workshops are usually triggered through strategizing routines within an organisation (Hodgkinson et al., 2005). In their preparation and organisation, they tend to be formalised and pre-structured and are sometimes even ritualised (Johnson et al., 2010). Further studies have also pointed out, that it is critical that a strategy workshop has links to the regular organisational routines and structures, in order for it to deploy relevant strategic activity (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

Strategy Workshops were found to be relevant as they provide an opportunity to remove relevant individuals from daily routines for the purpose of strategizing (Johnson et al., 2010). Therefore they are considered as a good setup to generate new ideas and to reconsider approaches (Hodgkinson et al., 2006). They appear to be a suitable vehicle for creativity, which in turn helps the development of an organisation. However, little is known so far about e.g. how the actual interaction of the participants takes place (Paroutis et al., 2015). Therefore, it has been difficult to assess why workshops can succeed or fail to reach their targets (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013).

Further, workshops can also be used to initiate strategic change. Workshops with this aim appear to be more valuable to an organisation than those with the aim to define a strategic direction. However, it has been found to be an exception that one workshop can have a lasting and major impact on change in an organisation. Nevertheless, changes on the micro- or personal level appear to take place regularly (Healey et al., 2015).

Healey et al (2015) have developed a three-dimensional model to measure the impact of a workshop outcome. They differentiate the impact measuring by influence on corporate strategy, influence on interpersonal development and influence on cognitive development. This model differentiates four characteristics that can apply to a strategy workshop and is presented in figure 8. These characteristics are *goal and purpose*, *routinization*, *involvement* and *cognitive efforts*. These are further broken down into items which define the characteristics. According to the presence of the design characteristics, three outcome dimensions can be realised through the strategy workshop. These are organisational outcomes, which represent so to speak classic results of strategizing, interpersonal outcomes, which addresses changes in personal relations or cohesion and third cognitive outcomes, which contribute to the understanding of the strategy by the participants.

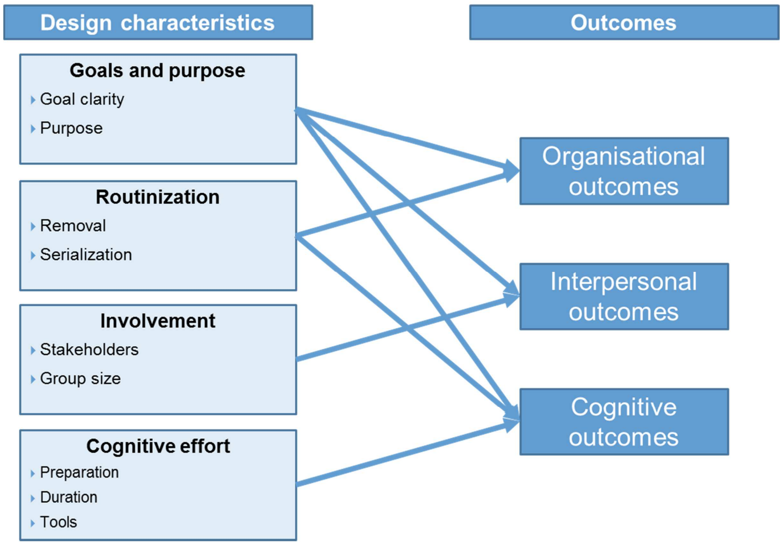

Design characteristics
Outcomes
Goals and purpose
Goal clarity
Purpose
Routinization
Removal
Serialization
Involvement
Stakeholders
Group size
Cognitive effort
Preparation
Duration
Tools
Organisational outcomes
Interpersonal outcomes
Cognitive outcomes

Figure 8: Framework linking workshop design and workshop outcomes(Healey et al., 2015, p. 3)

According to their study, the model was to a large extent confirmed, particularly in the case of a strategy implementation workshop. However, Healey et al (2015) also call for further research that validates this model in other scenarios.

A critical limitation in existing academic research appears to be the fact that it is very complex to derive quantifiable standards against which the outcome or success of a strategy workshop could be measured (see e.g. van Aaken et al., 2013).

The study of Concannon & Nordberg (2018) also gives vague hints that the institutionalisation of strategy workshops may have a negative impact on their effectiveness, if this ritualization is not connected to underlying strategic topics. This supports to some extent the findings of MacIntosh et al. (2010) who also regarded the relevance of strategy workshops not in the establishment of rituals, but in their role as a catalyst for transformation.

Cuccurollo & Lega (2013) found that strategy workshop can establish cohesion and establish transformational forces that were not precedent in their respective organisation of study. This is supported by the findings of Markóczy (2001) that the consensus building stage within the strategy process is initially embedded in the middle management rather than in the top management.

MacIntosh et al. (2010) have analysed under which circumstances strategy workshops can initiate a transformation in an organisation. They find that an initiation of change is more likely to happen in case of a series of connected workshops in a constant time cycle that are able to maintain the momentum required for change. However, it seems to be exceptional, that strategy workshops or workshop series as stand-alone events have a significant transforming impact on organisations and their strategic positioning

(Healey et al., 2015). In many instances it appears that strategy meetings or workshops tend to be inefficient and hard to handle for participants (Bourgoin et al., 2018). Workshops have been criticized for their unclear aim in the context of strategy formation (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010; MacIntosh et al., 2010). This is closely linked to the observations in several studies that many workshops have only a minimal impact on their organisational context or that their results are not tangible for participants (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010).

According to several studies, the strategizing process in a workshop can be split in different stage formats, depending on the focus and the clustering of its content (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Vetschera, 2013). Meadows & O'Brien (2013) have also highlighted that differences in the set of participants can also influence the observable micro-routines in the process.

In their study on micro-practices in strategy formation, Meadows & O'Brien (2013), have differentiated three stages, that take place over the course of a workshop. They have labelled these stages

- preparing and orientating,
- generating and working with content,
- and reflecting and validating (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013).

During the first stage –preparing and orienting-, workshop participants developed the process of strategizing, as well as exchanging knowledge and capturing the relevant pieces of information from the data context. Once this stage is completed, the study found that the focus group would collect ideas and proposals and focus this generated content to a manageable level. This outcome was then reviewed and adjusted in order to use it in the further strategy process (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013).

Similarly, Rouleau (2005) has identified four micro-routines that all focused on sensemaking and solution development and decision-making. She coined these as

- translating the orientation,
- overcoding the strategy,
- disciplining the client,
- and justifying the change (Rouleau, 2005).

For this research, the various approaches towards problem solving have been merged into a group of 5 actions which –in combination- all lead to strategic decision making and problem solving. These actions are defined as:

- Knowledge transfer
- Exploring
- Sensemaking
- Consensus building
- Decision making

In the course of a workshop these actions can occur repeatedly in themselves, as well as an overall sequence along the timespan of the workshop.

Sensemaking describes a process of interpretation of previously unknown or uncertain information. In the context of group interactions, sensemaking takes place, once each participant is able to reconstruct and structure the interactions i.e. the knowledge-sharing and discussion contributions (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). This process can take place both on an individual, as well as a collective level such as a working group (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

It has also been found that sensemaking is a critical prerequisite for learning mechanisms during the strategy formation process (Healey et al., 2015). Sensemaking appears to be closely linked with the assertion of existing knowledge rather than the creation of new knowledge or solutions (Tavella & Franco, 2015). This assertion grounds elements of discussion as non-negotiable, thereby forming a frame in which a decision or action can be taken.

A critical aspect of problem-solving towards reaching a decision is the consensus building process, which has already been the focus of chapter 2.2. Consensus building forms the nucleus of the research questions that are to be answered in this thesis. It implies reaching a “commonality of understanding”, rather than resorting to “power plays or compromise”(Ackermann & Eden, 2011, pp. 293, 294), if possible.

The final stage of the problem-solving process is the definition of a decision that addresses the solution of the initial problem. Academic theory treats decision making as the core stage in the strategy process (Lechner & Müller-Stewens, 2000). It describes the selection process for the solution alternative that is to be implemented (Nutt, 1976). Among others, Hendry et al. (2010) have confirmed that decisions making is the outcome of non-linear and complex processes that can be applied iteratively. In contrast, it appears, that decision making is in practice usually wrongly thought of as a single moment of inspiration (Garvin & Roberto, 2001). Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) therefore state correctly that strategizing is a social activity which is shaped by its actors, the management, and their power relations and skills. This defines how decisions are ultimately made, whether with a focus on consensus or rather on the basis of power relations.

2.3.2 Workshops in S-A-P research

Workshops are an organisational element of particular interest to S-A-P researchers, as they can be regarded as a closed strategic episode that can be analysed and theorized (Healey et al., 2015; J. Hendry & Seidl, 2003). Thereby, they have become an “established and important research area within the field of strategy as practice”(Seidl & Guérard, 2015, p. 564). S-A-P research to date implies that strategy workshops provide structural change within a clearly differentiable setup (Seidl & Guérard, 2015). To date, workshops have been analysed by S-A-P researchers from several perspectives.

Several academic analyses of workshops have been conducted, both with a focus on the content, as well as the outcome of a workshop (Duffy & O’Rourke, 2015; Healey et al., 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2006; MacIntosh et al., 2010; Schwarz, 2009) .

However, to cite Mueller (2018, p. 24) “somewhat paradoxically, even though meetings are the main locations where strategies are proposed, debated, modified, contested, agreed upon, and argued over, they have not attracted corresponding empirical work from strategy researchers.” It acknowledged even by recent academic publications that despite existing research efforts, the nature and the impact of workshops remains unclear, as Healey et al. (2015) point out that most studies on workshops were relatively limited in scope and detail. In this regard they mainly extended the scope of research on strategy workshop towards the cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of the participants, but recommending that these aspects should be analysed further. In this context there is also an increased interest in the individual perspective of workshop participants (MacIntosh et al., 2010; Schwarz, 2009). Nonetheless, “we know little about the outcomes of these events or the factors that influence those outcomes” (Healey et al., 2015, p. 15).

Moreover, existing literature has so far not identified systematic approaches towards identifying the success of a workshop. Most studies have aimed to link workshop outcome to organisational performance or the instigated strategic change (Healey et al., 2015). However, it is recognised that it is difficult to capture the success of a workshop through such a measurement (Healey et al., 2015). Likewise, Johnson (2007) raises the question, how effective workshops actually are other than being an initiator of strategic discussions. Bartunek et al. (2011) highlighted, that there is a gap in informed knowledge and knowledge transfer between practitioners and organisational theorists on group interventions and drivers for strategizing in groups, while both groups individually appear to hold significant experience in this field. They recommend a stronger exchange of both perspectives on this matter.

With regards to the micro-level functioning of meetings or workshops, Dittrich et al. (2011, p. 30) identify the need for further research concerning the question “How do environmental, organizational and individual contingency factors influence initiation, conduct and termination practices?”

Seidl and Guérard (2015) also propose that future research looks into differences in function and practices of workshops that incorporate middle management rather than top management. They assume that the nature of workshops will differ depending of the organisational hierarchy. Moreover, they also outline the need to assess the compatibility and connectability of the functions which a meeting or a workshop can provide. There has also been a general call for further analysis of design features and factors that impact the workshop course and its outcome (Healey et al., 2015; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009).

Concannon & Nordberg (2018) suggest a need for further research into the relationship of applied practices and the process outcomes of settings such as workshops or strategy retreats. In line with these themes, S-A-P research has stated the need for more systematic research on strategy workshops that is able to provide evidence on structure and process of those workshops and how those enable the establishment of results (Healey et al., 2015).

It is debated among S-A-P researchers, whether strategy workshops can be effective as standalone events, or whether they need to be embedded in a series of workshops or strategizing episodes (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

Despite their wide application and some existing studies on strategy workshops, S-A-P researchers acknowledge that the drivers of these episodes and their success are relatively uncharted. Healey et al. (2015) encourage further research on how strategy workshops contribute not only to organisational transformation, but also to socio-cognitive developments in the strategy process.

However, the concept of routines allows for a bridging of this gap. It is implied, that strategy praxis is based on micro-routines that occur repeatedly during strategizing activities. These activities are informed and guided by overall structures and processes that are installed in the organisation. It might even be claimed, that the presence of strategizing routines will cause the occurrence of strategy formation without an initial definition of goals (Chia & MacKay, 2007). The macro-routines, which guide the overall strategy process in an organisation, should therefore be directly linked to the micro-routines in the strategizing activity, as also proposed by Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel (2014) and Chia & MacKay (2007). However, this aspect has received limited attention by research so far and lacks systematic coverage from studies on the impact of micro-routines (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014; Salvato, 2003).

Despite their widespread occurrence in the daily business of companies, the understanding of events and activities such as strategy meetings or workshops is relatively limited. Several studies address workshops as context factor and without specific focus (van Aaken et al., 2013).

Academic research has to date not been able to identify clear distinctions in workshop success rates between strategy formulation or strategy implementation workshops (Healey et al., 2015).

2.3.3 The impact of strategy workshop elements

According to theory, decision making is a process which can require several iterations and significant input from different sources (Garvin & Roberto, 2001; K. P. Hendry et al., 2010).

In the context of this research, micro-routines are defined as closed sets of activities and interactions between workshop participants during the workshop. They build upon strategizing praxis, as defined by Whittington (2006), which comprises "[…] all the various activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy […]" (p. 619), while utilizing strategy frameworks and tools (Belmondo & Sargis Roussel, 2014). Thereby, micro-routines can e.g. take the form of micro-actions within applied strategy tools, methods or discussions within a workshop (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014; Healey et al., 2015). These are in the following referred to as context factors.

Micro-routines can be adjusted and do not necessarily form fixed patterns. According to the findings of Salvato (2003), this can for example be directly influenced by top management. Likewise, different kinds of micro-routines can be applied, in case of different process participants or once the participants act outside their usual organisational role (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013).

The initial assumption of Nutt (1976) that the selection of a particular decision making approach is dependent on the organisational environment, hierarchy structure and the nature and urgency of the underlying problem, has been confirmed by other researchers (K. P. Hendry et al., 2010).

The lack of understanding of the dynamics of strategy workshops also leads to a gap in academic and practitioner publications concerning guidelines for the preparations of the critical events (Healey et al., 2015).

Existing research has analysed and dissected workshops from several perspectives. As a result, academia has defined several elements that are considered as influential to the performance and outcome of a workshop. These are for example captured in a framework of influencing factors that has been developed by Schwarz (2009). This framework has been developed based on the notion that the construct of a workshop is shaped by the ambiguity of its context and the way it is informed by practitioners. The dynamic of workshop elements based on focus, scope, setting and participants of a workshop was confirmed by the longitudinal study of MacIntosh et al (2010)

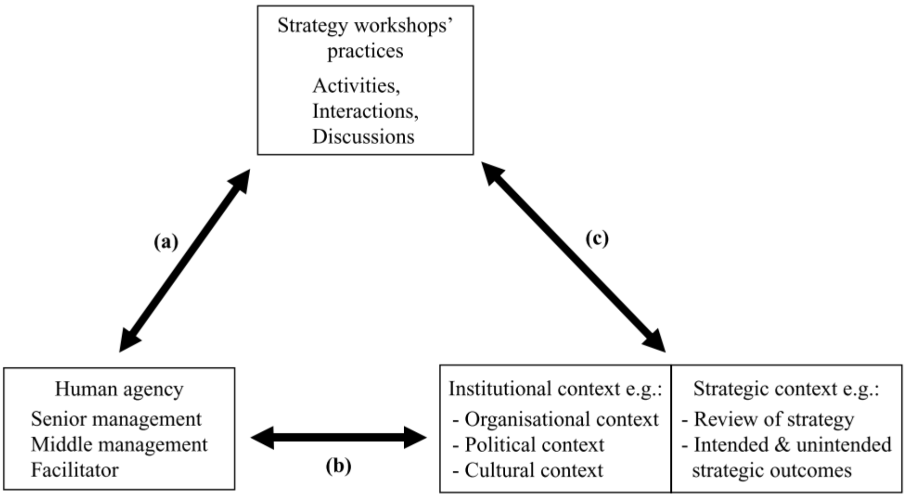

Strategy workshops' practices
Activities,
Interactions,
Discussions
(a)
(c)
Human agency
Senior management
Middle management
Facilitator
(b)
Institutional context e.g.:
- Organisational context
- Political context
- Cultural context
Strategic context e.g.:
- Review of strategy
- Intended & unintended strategic outcomes

Figure 9: Framework of influencing factors of strategy workshops (Schwarz, 2009)

The framework of Schwarz, that is presented in figure 9, can be extended with the theorized model of strategy workshop design by Healey et al (2015), that links the elements of goals and purpose, routinisation, involvement of stakeholders, as well as cognitive effort to the impact of a workshop on organisational and individualised results.

Healey et al (2015) single out goal clarity, routinisation, the inclusion of various stakeholders and the cognitive complexity of the workshop design as critical factors for strategy workshops.

Among others, the most relevant aspects appear to be

- The design of the workshop, including its setup as a retreat,
- the dynamics of workshop members and groups within a workshop,
- the use of artefacts or materialised forms of strategic discourse,
- the application of specific tools and techniques during the workshop,

- the presence and form of facilitation of a workshop,
- the language used during the workshop,
- the context in which the workshop is conducted, both regarding the organisational context and the strategizing context (Dameron, Lê, & LeBaron, 2015; Dittrich et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2015; MacIntosh et al., 2010; Paroutis et al., 2015; Schwarz, 2009; Tavella & Franco, 2015; Thomas, Hardy, & Sargent, 2007; van Aaken et al., 2013).

The following sub-chapters will review the relevant literature that relates to these seven aspects.

2.3.3.1 The relevance of the workshop design

Existing theory outlines that workshops tend to be more successful, if there has been a higher effort in their preparation and the crafting of the workshop design (Healey et al., 2015). Workshop design facilitates the structuring of the strategic dialogue and debate over divergent ideas (Bourgoin et al., 2018).

Healey et al (2015, p. 16) name “goal clarity, routinization, stakeholder involvement and […] cognitive effort” as critical sub-characteristics of workshop design. According to their research findings, particularly the transparency and clarity of workshop goals to workshop participants appears to hold significance for the successful conduction of a workshop (Healey et al., 2015). Eden and Ackermann (2014), however, argue that initial ambiguity can also be overcome through a workshop design that pushes the participants towards a clarification of goals and boundaries. They argue that a workshop needs to provide enough freedom for participants to encourage them to share their perceptions and goals.

There needs to be a close alignment between workshop design and workshop purpose (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson, 2007). Otherwise, there is a risk that the workshop design will not address the required scope of discussion and may even confuse workshop participants in the course of the workshop by creating a gap between path and target.

The workshop design focuses on achieving the desired interaction between participants (Hodgkinson et al., 2006). Eden and Ackermann(2014) state that a design needs to ease the flow of discussion, promote collective thinking and knowledge exchanges. This implies that the workshop format should aim to develop trust and resolve conflicts, as well as maximising perspectives (Eden & Ackermann, 2014). This can for example be achieved through regular changes of the setup in order to spur shifts in the interaction of participant groups and to broaden the discussion. Such an approach is for example applied in the workshop concepts of Team Syntegrity and World Café (Beer, 1994; Chang & Chen, 2015). Further, the workshop design can also specifically use tools or documents that are familiar to participants and that provide so called affordances to the participants (Demir, 2015). This refers to elements, which instigate strategizing activities based on the cognitive processes which they inspire. According to Demir (2015), this is particularly effective where such elements combine intuitive use for the participant on one hand, and help to transport the strategic goals of an organisation on the other hand. This aspect is addressed in more detail in section 2.3.3.3 with the review of the relevance of artefacts and tools.

Strategy workshops are also used for an active disconnection from the daily routines in order to review and discuss overarching topics (Healey et al., 2015). The disconnection from daily routines is supposed to provide the workshop participants with more room for reflection and sensemaking (J. Hendry & Seidl, 2003). Designing workshops as retreats is a feature that is therefore widely perceived as being successful. Johnson et al. (2010) argue that the creation of liminal spaces through retreats in the form of removal from the regular structures and working spaces improves the effectiveness of strategizing. This is to some extent supported by the interview findings of Concannon & Nordberg (2018), that also stated retreats or away-days as positive for strategizing. In these findings particularly the informality of those occasions, as well as the time space for discussions were cited as the preliminary contributors to effective strategizing. These findings are in line with the findings of MacIntosh et al. (2010) who outline the same impact of off-site workshops.

However, Healey et al (2015) contest this idea by pointing out that workshops are aimed to provide solutions that can be incorporated in organisations. Therefore, workshops need integrative links to the organisation, instead of being fully removed from their organisational context. This relates for example to the factor that specific vocabulary, that is evolved out of the previous strategy process or which is closely linked to the organisation’s culture, helps to structure the discussions within a strategy workshop (Demir, 2015). Likewise, transferability of results into the day-to-day routines is regarded a critical aspect that should be considered in workshop design (J. Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Johnson et al., 2010). While retreats may have a positive impact on sensemaking and generation of ideas, it bears the risk of generating a gap between the workshop scenario and organisational routines if such links are not established (Healey et al., 2015). Overall, the study of Healey et al (2015) also sees the organisation of strategy workshops as retreats critical, confirming the research of Johnson et al (2010).

In the same regard, von Aaken et al (2013) have also not found any evidence that support the assumption that retreats are regarded as more successful than workshops that take place within the daily organisational context. However, their study found evidence that integration into existing planning processes provides for a more successful outcome of strategy workshops. The costs of away-days are thereby not solely justifiable through perceived strategic outcomes.

Based on their field studies of several strategy workshops, Cuccurullo and Lega (2013) propose an early objectification of the strategy context through hard facts in order to limit the impact of political conflict or imbalances between stakeholder groups, as well as the risk of unrealistic expectations and targets.

The particular design of a workshop and its instruments should also be adapted by the participants based on the context, in which it takes place (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013). However, Priem et al. (1995) point out, that it is difficult to make adjustments to a chosen format, as this may result in less confidence in the overall format and the outcome by participants. Nonetheless, specific methods can for example be used to develop different streams in the participant group in order to improve the development of measures as well as the challenging and optimisation of these proposals (Priem et al., 1995).

Establishing workshops as a serial event has been attributed with a higher success (Healey et al., 2015). Likewise, Cuccurullo and Lega (2013) also found workshops with a short time scope to be more effective by focusing the participants on the key issues. This notion is not fully confirmed by van Aaken et al. (2013), who identified no correlation between workshop duration and workshop outcome. On the contrary, Galbraith et al. (2010) and several authors which they cite in their research on decision quality in review panels for technology investments, argue that time pressure has a negative impact on discussion participants when it comes to reaching decisions or establishing an objective consensus. In the same regard, Schweiger et al. (1986) argue that a larger timespan allows for a more thorough discussion and a richer debate in the strategizing format. This notion was also confirmed by Healey et al. (2015).

Priem et al. (1995) found that discussion formats that provide room for the expression and legitimization of positions and that help to resolve conflicting positions will lead to a bigger consensus on the decisions. According to findings by Galbraith et al. (2010) consensus building and decision making are positively impacted by a setup that provides room for discussions and a collective learning process.

However, in the view of van Aaken et al. (2013) achieving strategic consensus is not a matter of time, which can be regarded as supporting the call of Cuccurullo and Lega for a tighter regime on the time span of strategy workshops. The study of MacIntosh et al. (2010) provides also a hint, that a tight administrational regime, such as minute-keeping and intra-organisational communication of decisions, helps the workshop group to keep track of their decisions and stimulates commitment.

The workshop design can also deliberately integrate decisional conflict situations in order to stipulate interaction and to increase the need for participants to engage in sensemaking and dialogue (Schweiger et al., 1989).

2.3.3.2 The relevance of team dynamics

Further important aspects of the workshop structure are the relationships and interactions between workshop participants. Workshops can have a direct impact on the dynamics between the participants from different organisational or hierarchical backgrounds. Schwarz for example, identified that cross-hierarchical cooperation appeared to function better in workshops than in regular strategy meeting. Nonetheless workshops are at the same time also affected by the dynamics that unfolded from these relations (Healey et al., 2015).

Despite the application of a previously successful workshop design, workshops can nonetheless fail in achieving their targets once the interaction between participants is different. As Tavella and Franco (2015) found in their case study, different communicative behaviours and levels of interaction can result in a differing performance of the same workshop format. This is in line with the argument of Schwarz (2009) that the level of participation and interaction is critical to the success of a workshop. In cases where participants refuse to engage with the group and the applied tools, this can halt the dynamics and result in failure of the workshop(Ackermann & Eden, 2011; Schwarz, 2009).

While traditionally strategizing was regarded as an activity in the realms of top management, this view has shifted over the last two decades. In more recent publications, the inclusion of mid-level management is increasingly found in the studied organisations and advocated by researchers (see e.g. Paula Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Wooldridge et al., 2008). This hierarchical decentralisation increases the complexity of workshop scenarios, in particular in the case of strategy workshops. As has been explained in section 2.1.3.2.3, researchers recommend therefore a stronger focus on middle management as practitioners.

In line with Jarzabkowski and Balogun (2009), Healey et al (2015) highlight, that the fostering of team dynamics requires more input that just the mere setup of a joint meeting of different stakeholder groups. Indeed, the workshop design will need to orchestrate the development of team dynamics (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). This requires a clearly driven strategic dialogue that sticks to the spoken word. Team dynamics can be negatively impacted in case of overly present hidden agendas, a strong presence of politics or an over-relying on formalism (Brundin, Melin, & Nordqvist, 2008).

Workshop groups can consist of several stakeholder groups with varying goals, ideas and working cultures. A high level of heterogeneity among participants can reduce integration and communication between these stakeholders, while also stimulating creativity and reducing group-think (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013; Galbraith et al., 2010). In the same regard, a large number of participants appears to complicate the process of developing strategies or consensus (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013; Priem et al., 1995; van Aaken et al., 2013). This could for example be related to different behaviour patterns of different groups of professionals regarding adherence to initially made decisions (Galbraith et al., 2010).

On the other hand, groups and group dynamics can positively impact the behaviour and positioning of individual workshop members (Priem et al., 1995). Galbraith et al (2010) found for example that in case of a well-functioning team VC panels were easier able to develop a decision consensus. Likewise, language and similar symbols or structuring objects were found to stimulate participation and discussion (Johnson et al., 2010)

Therefore, it is important that the workshop setup generates socialisation between the various stakeholders in order to establish a common ground for interaction (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013). Smaller workshop setups appear to be effective in establishing ties between participants (Healey et al., 2015). Seniority and expertise of the participants appear to be also relevant aspects that contribute to the quality of the interaction and the overall working environment (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013). The familiarity of the workshop participants with each other has an impact on the process of establishing a consensus and making decisions (Galbraith et al., 2010). Groups with a high level of familiarity may even act on the basis of informal or silent agreements (Cheng & Havenvid, 2017). Group dynamics usually tend to be too inadequate in order to capitalise on its full creative potential (Markman, 2015). Von Aaken et al. (2013) found no evidence that a broad coverage of hierarchy levels has an impact on the outcome of a strategy workshop. In their view the positive impact of an inclusion of wider parts of the organisation may be outweighed by the increasing complexity which results from a broader set of workshop participants with different backgrounds. While they regard an inclusion of more hierarchy levels as a positive aspect in the case of strategy implementation workshop, von Aaken et al. (2013) assume a reduced likelihood to achieve consensus in such circumstances.

Nevertheless, Worley et al (2011) found also, that diversity and contrast in positions can contribute to higher novelty in generated information. Comparing the findings of both studies, it appears that the development of a joined knowledge base is dependent on the balance between participating groups and the relationship context between these groups (G. Bowman, 2016; Worley et al., 2011).

A cooperative discussion culture and an absence of dominance by individuals within the discussion format are mentioned by Galbraith et al. (2010) as elements that provide the basis for consensus building.

Team dynamics can also have a negative impact on the outcome of a workshop. Priem et al. (1995) for example state that a high level of coherence in the discussion may lead to group-think. Likewise, they also express concern that team dynamics may also a lead to a premature end of a discussion once the discussion appears to converge on consensus. At that point, several studies point to the risk, that further options may not be evaluated anymore as the group may settle on the first option that appears to have a majority of confidence (Priem et al., 1995).

Existing relationships and familiarity may cause a more straightforward debate, as well as allowing for a better understanding of the individual positions and concerns of the participants (MacIntosh et al., 2010). Participants usually have the chance to discuss strategic issues as a group and add their positions to the discourse. A display of strongly contrasting positions can, however, also negatively impact the progress of a workshop. As the workshop may uncover underlying differences among the workshop participants, this can lead to disengagement and rejection of the format (Healey et al., 2015).

A wider range of participants may also support the establishment of collective positions and the development of groups (Healey et al., 2015). On the other hand, a diverse set of opinions and positions can also create alienation and divide among participants (Schweiger et al., 1989). A diverse set of participants appears to contribute to consensus building and team dynamics (Healey et al., 2015). However, the underlying dynamics for this trend have to be examined further. In this regard, particularly the interactions and processes that lead to consensus building are singled out as a field of interest (Healey et al., 2015; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008).

Key components of decision making in organizations appear to be the relationship between the top managers and the role of politics in their interaction, which shape the decision process and the way relevant knowledge is spread among the decision makers (Eisenhardt & Burgeois, 1988). This notion is confirmed by Eden & Ackermann (2001). These findings are particularly relevant, as Hodgkinson et al (2006) have found that in UK companies strategy workshops are only regularly executed on a top management level and that they function mainly as a discussion forum. However, even in cases where the top management is not actively involved in the formulation of strategy e.g. through participation a strategy workshop, it could still influence the final outcome by counselling the strategizing process through revolving interactions with the involved organisation members(K. P. Hendry et al., 2010).

Burgelman (1988) and other authors perceive strategy as a social learning process (Wrona, Ladwig, & Gunnesch, 2013). A significant part of this knowledge creation and exchange is driven by individuals and internal networks, which hold different forms of knowledge (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Reihlen & Ringberg, 2013). To capitalise on this, it is important for organizations to stipulate these networks and to promote internal knowledge transfers. This can be facilitated e.g. through an increased diversity in strategizing teams.

Nonetheless, Dittrich et al (2011) critique existing the overemphasis on individuals in existing strategy research and calls for further studies that focus more on the social and interactive components of strategy formation.

2.3.3.3 The relevance of artefacts and tools

Strategy workshops utilize artefacts and tools to support the discussion and decision making process. There has been a tendency to link collective sensemaking solely to verbal interactions (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). The focus on communication has, among others, been emphasised in particular by Weick et al (2005). More recently, however, research has also highlighted that artefacts and materials can play an important role for interpretation, both by individuals and groups (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). The main idea of these elements is that they can provide a common ground for workshop participants and can bridge the gaps between diverse participant groups or hierarchical divisions (Roper & Hodari, 2015). Artefacts and collections of facts help to provide a common information basis and a shared sensemaking among participants (Bourgoin et al., 2018). This links sensemaking to the role of artefacts and strategy tools in a workshop. Further, the application of tools and artefacts is supposed to support an argumentative and fact-based discussion (Bourgoin et al., 2018). Galbraith et al. (2010) found also that a solid informational basis has a positive impact on the formation of consensus in a decision panel.

Artefacts can also be used to reduce complexity of content or crucial information (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013).In cases where artefacts build the backbone of a particular workshop design, their legitimacy is also critical for their successful application. Thereby, participants are more likely to accept their use and interpretation, once these artefacts or their sources are well known and established in the organisation (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009).

However, Bowman (2016)outlines in this study on scenario planning that the impact of artefacts and tools can be restricted to an immediate group of workshop participants instead of capturing also stakeholders at a later stage of the strategy process through its results.

Galbraith et al. (2010) mention that groups tend to discuss rather information that the group is familiar with or which is already acknowledged, than sharing and discussing unique knowledge of individual participants. They relate this tendency to an underlying desire to quickly achieve agreement or consensus on a topic.

A second important group are strategy tools. Following the terminology in various academic papers (see e.g. Paula Jarzabkowski, Giulietti, Oliveira, & Amoo, 2013; Roper & Hodari, 2015; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009), this research uses the term 'strategy tools' to consolidate various forms of frameworks, models or canvases that are applied in strategizing activities. Research has shown that strategy tools are particularly applied by senior management and management representatives with links to either strategic functions or consulting (Paula Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Figure 10 provides an overview of the most commonly used tools and frameworks in strategizing.

Scenario planning
Dynamic capabilities analysis
SWOT
Value chain analysis
Porter’s five forces
Globalization matrices
Strategic groups analysis
Resource-based analysis
Portfolio matrices (e.g. BCG, McKinsey)
Bowman’s strategy clock
PESTLE
7Ps
Porter’s diamond
Benchmarking
Industry/Product life cycle
Porter’s generic strategy model
Key success factors
Balanced scorecard
Methods of expansion matrices
Ansoff’s product/market matrix
Market segmentation models
Core competences analyses
Lean canvas
Value proposition canvas
Business model canvas

Figure 10: Examples of strategy tools that are applied in workshops (partially based on Hodgkinson et al., 2005; Paula Jarzabkowski et al., 2013)

Tools are applied for different purposes, ranging from the conduction of analyses to foster a valid basis for decision-making to stimulating creativity in the form of e.g. greenfield approaches to problem solving (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010). Tools can also help participants during sensemaking periods, as the use of analytical tools is attributed with an improved cognition by the participants regarding the match of strategy and context (Ackermann & Eden, 2001; Eden & Ackermann, 2014; Healey et al., 2015; Jarratt & Stiles, 2010). The application of several tools provides participants with different views on the problem. This may challenge initial prejudices and assumptions regarding the underlying problem. Further, this increases also the cognitive effort in the problem solving process, requiring a bigger effort from the participants. Both aspects are regarded as contributors to individual sensemaking which in turn raises the quality of the problem solving (Eden & Ackermann, 2014; P. Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Schweiger et al., 1989; Wright et al., 2013). In addition Jarratt & Stiles (2010) found that strategists employ tools to identify efficiencies and resources, as well as relationship management frameworks. Further, tools may support the process of generating new ideas (Hodgkinson et al., 2006).

The presence of tools or artefacts -in particular the 'right' ones- has a significant influence on the structure and the content of the workshop (Healey et al., 2015; Meadows & O'Brien, 2013). Their introduction to a workshop setting will both lead to interaction between participants on the application of these elements, as well as the evaluation of the output of their application (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013). These tools act as a structuring support to workshop participants and are mainly utilised to apply knowledge or capture the discussion (Ackermann & Eden, 2011; Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015). Cheng & Havenvid classify tools as being "interaction-facilitating or interaction-creating" (2017, p. 145). According to the study of Hodgkinson et al. (2006) strategy tools appear to be an important element in strategy workshops. They are intended to simplify complexities and problems that arise from business practice (Roper & Hodari, 2015). Visualisation has also been found to be beneficial for the structuring of the strategizing approach, as well as the reduction of cognitive bias (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013). Some tools are also used for learning or transformation initiatives (Franco, Meadows, & Armstrong, 2013). Further, more recent research points also to the application of strategic tools as a means of influencing stakeholders (Cheng & Havenvid, 2017). Additionally, Paroutis et al(2015) found that strategizing tools contribute to sensemaking and knowledge transfer and support the argumentative discussion process.

Familiarity with tools can also be an important influencer for the role that tools can have in a strategy workshop. If tools are familiar to participants, their application can help in structuring existing knowledge in the relevant scope of the underlying problem (Healey et al., 2015). This furthers the development of ideas or solutions during the workshop.

According to Cheng & Havenvid (2017), tools can be used to instigate action and facilitate new connections between actors in the strategy process. By enabling discussions, artefacts and tools contribute to the desired dialogue that provides the basis for a successful workshop. Thus, these elements themselves become transaction agents for the discussion process (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). While their research focused on trans-organisational relationships, this finding should also hold true on a intraorganisational perspective.

However, the application of tools that take participants out of their regular organisational boundaries may also have a negative impact on transferability of workshop results back into the organisation (J. Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Johnson et al., 2010). Results of the research of Healey et al (2015) show, that quality and selection of tools are more relevant than quantity. Hence, it is more important to add suitable tools to the workshop design, then merely applying common or popular tools.

Important aspects for the choice of strategy tools appear to be transparency and simplicity in their application (Meadows & O'Brien, 2013). This is important, as workshops will not only consist of experienced strategists, but also of management and organisational functions that do not work with such tools on a regular basis. Simple tools are easier to apply in a scenario, where workshop participants do not cooperate regularly or are unaccustomed to each other (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). Strategy tools are also expected to be flexible and adaptable (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). In practice, strategy tools are being adapted based on the context of strategy workshop (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015; Meadows & O'Brien, 2013). These adaptions can even lead to forms of application, where strategy tools are adjusted “beyond recognition”(Roper & Hodari, 2015, p. 5).

According to Spee & Jarzabkowski (2009), the most renowned strategy tools all fulfil the named criteria and owe their success to them.

However, it has also been put forward that most existing research has focused solely on the selection of tools that are being used rather than their actual application in the workshop setting. In particular it appears to be unclear, why certain tools are used or not used in different circumstances. Therefore, researchers have proposed the need for further evaluation of the application of strategizing tools as well as the impact that these tools may have (Gunn & Williams, 2007; MacIntosh et al., 2010; Meadows & O'Brien, 2013).

Further, more recent research has also contradicted that view that tools are commonly used in strategizing activities across industries or that they have a positive impact on a workshop. Von Aaken et al. (2013) could not attribute any link of the outcome of a strategy workshop to the application of strategizing tools. They conclude that strategy tools and frameworks are not a necessity in order to define a strategy, but may serve other purposes. Likewise, research on the impact of management eduction by Jarzabkowski, Giuletti et al. (2013) also found a link to a relevant number of tools which are familiar to management practitioners, but still not applied in practice by them.

A study by Roper & Hodari (2015) in the tourism sector has also found that the use of strategy tools is widely rejected on the basis of a non-conformity to existing decision making processes and to the perceived idea of strategizing in the studied organisations. Research participants echoed in particular that such strict tools were impractical and that frameworks and models were less relevant for strategizing than practical experience. However, it has to be pointed out, that Roper & Hodari (2015) argued that the rejection of strategy tools coincided with a lack of structured interaction formats such as strategy workshops in the studied industry. Therefore it is assumed that organisations which employ more structured strategizing processes and use strategy workshops may have a different view on the value of tools. However, van Aaken et al (2013) were not able to substantiate this proposal in their large scale survey with more than 1,000 participants. Materiality and tools are outlined as promising areas for further research. This materialises in particular in the articulated need to view tools in the frame condition of the context of the strategizing event (P. Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015).

2.3.3.4 The relevance of facilitation

The impact of facilitation in strategy workshops has been debated in academic literature (Meadows & O’Brien, 2013). Franco et al (2013) see for example a strong link between the behaviour and approach of a facilitator and the cognition that is applied in strategy workshops. It is argued that the inclusion of external facilitators, such as consultants, helps to remove organisational hierarchies and gridlocked structures that my impede constructive and open debates (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018).

Further, facilitation is supposed to help the knowledge exchange process among participants (Tavella & Franco, 2015). In this instance, however, existing research identified the need that the facilitator follows and ensures a communication behaviour that focuses on “inviting, clarifying, proposing, building, affirming, and deploying authority” (Tavella & Franco, 2015, p. 466) during the discussion. As shown in figure 11, a discussion format that follows these patterns based on an initiation and steering by the facilitator, was found to generate outcomes that imply both an increased knowledge basis as well as concrete decisions.

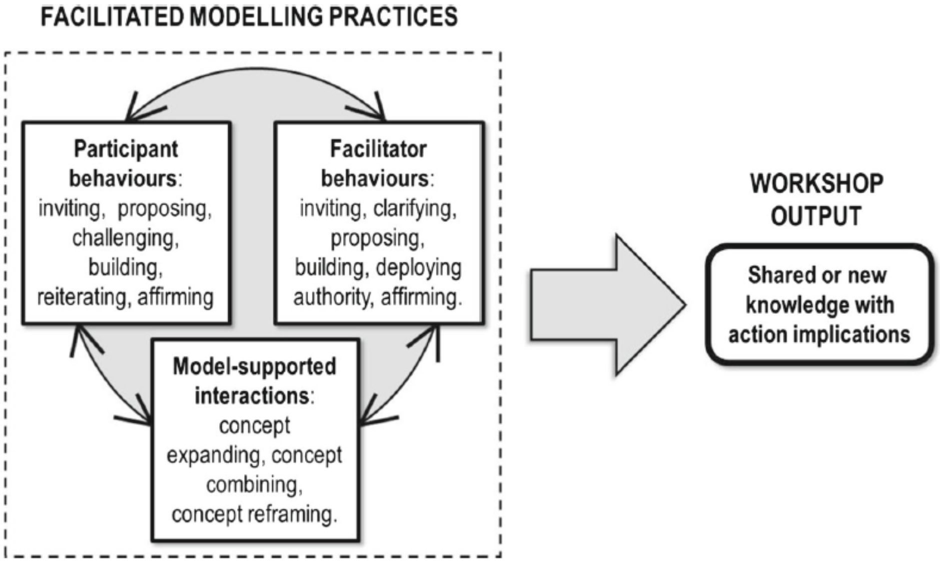

FACILITATED MODELLING PRACTICES
Participant behaviours: inviting, proposing, challenging, building, reiterating, affirming
Facilitator behaviours: inviting, clarifying, proposing, building, deploying authority, affirming.
Model-supported interactions: concept expanding, concept combining, concept reframing.
WORKSHOP OUTPUT
Shared or new knowledge with action implications

Figure 11: Theory model of the role of facilitation in workshop interactions (Tavella & Franco, 2015, p. 468)

Kellermanns et al. (2005) highlight the presence of a facilitator has a notable impact on the strategizing process based on the comparison of the results of different studies. This is similarly postulated by Johnson et al. (2010). This is also confirmed by further research by Whittington et al who found a strong controlling function on the discussion structure with the facilitator (Whittington et al., 2006). However, his impact on stimulating a positive organisational impact from the consensus building appears to be unclear (Kellermanns et al., 2011). In this regard, Schwarz (2009) argues that facilitation stimulates the discussion and consensus building based on the role that the facilitator takes on in a workshop. As mentioned earlier, the asymmetry in knowledge between participants may therefore also create a need for an external moderator that provides a platform for exchange of this knowledge. Facilitators can develop consensus for particular decisions by leading the group towards agreement on certain preconditions (Healey et al., 2015). In order to stipulate consensus, the facilitator could also use forms of decisional conflict, such as devil’s advocacy, in order to generate a wider debate and positioning by participants (Schweiger et al., 1989). On the other hand the facilitator is usually empowered to deal also with participants who oppose the workshop. As Schwarz (2009) points out that opposition can lead to an active circumvention or undermining of a workshop format in the hiding, it is the role and position of the facilitator to make these developments visible and to deal with them in line with the workshop concept.

Facilitators are also credited with contributing to a removal from the organisational routines due to their mere presence. The importance of this aspect is emphasised by several researchers (Ackermann & Eden, 2011; Eden, 1992).Facilitation can for example impact the application of artefacts within a workshop and their contribution to the workshop outcome (Meadows & O’Brien, 2013). This can for example help to reduce complexities in the strategizing process (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013).

However, research also shows that the role of a facilitator can be ambivalent. Von Aaken et al. (2013) found in their study that external facilitators only have a positive impact in workshops that focus on strategy implementation. Their data shows actually a negative correlation between the use of consultants and the outcome of strategy development workshops. Their study, however, does not go into further analysis, what aspects lead to these correlations, and argues that the correlations are relatively weak. They attribute the rejection of external facilitation largely to a lack of familiarity of an external consultant with internal power structures and legacy issues. This knowledge gap and the perception of the consultant as an outsider may complicate the interactions between workshop participants in cases where consensus is yet to be achieved (van Aaken et al., 2013).

In the same regard, existing research also shows that the facilitator is also dependent on the interplay with further context factors. According to their study of facilitated workshops, Tavella and Franco (2015) found that the application of the same steering and communication style by the facilitator for different topics or dynamics could lead to success or failure depending on the instance. Facilitators can control the debate and thereby control the progress of the workshop (Healey et al., 2015). This requires the facilitator to be able to adjust his approach according to the setting. It appears that a facilitator needs experience and sensitivity with regards to the existent team dynamics. Otherwise, his use of communication and authority measures may fail to succeed (Tavella & Franco, 2015). This argument is supported by von Aaken et al (2013). They argue that the development of a strategy requires more tacit knowledge and experience of a particular organisational setting than the definition of implementation measures. While strategy implementation builds upon an already established consensus, the critical aspect of a strategy definition is to establish this consensus even in the context of political and organisation divergence (van Aaken et al., 2013).

Overcoming such divergences and fields of conflicts, requires critical insights and experiences from within an organisation, as well as a clearly defined and established role for the facilitator. An outsider tends to lack this information and position in the process, which was also confirmed by the data of the study by other studies that are cited by von Aaken et al. (van Aaken et al., 2013). These kinds of shortcomings can result in a lack of acceptance of strategic proposals or the facilitation of a strategizing process (van Aaken et al., 2013). In this regard, Eden and Ackermann (2014) suggest that a facilitator should be provided with tools that help him to survey the discussion and the development of consensus.

A research gap seems to exist regarding the micro-level interactions between facilitator and workshop participants during workshop discussions and their impact on the overall process (Tavella & Franco, 2015).

2.3.3.5 The relevance of language

Language plays an important role in strategy formation and strategizing episodes. As Bourgoin et al put it: “Strategy happens through conversation, which is why mastering strategic dialogue is crucial”(Bourgoin et al., 2018, p. 588). Language shapes the process through which a strategy is developed (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Kwon et al., 2014). The actual strategizing is reported to be transported by language and conversation (Fenton & Langley, 2011). Kuhn (2008) proposes that communication acts as a leaver for consent between stakeholders and the development of strategies.

According to Weick et al. (2005), the core of sensemaking is a verbalisation of the developments that are to be analysed or discussed. Thereby, relevant information and its interpretation materialise and become tangible for further usage. This leads to organising of the information, both through categorisation as well as through simplification, thus building the foundation for action (Weick et al., 2005). This implies that dialogue is important in a strategy workshop. In this regard, Bourgoin et al (2018) refer to the critical dimensions of dialogue, which include the dimension of communication style. Thereby, it is also important how communication is conducted and whether it is appropriate to the situation and the participants. They highlight that depending on the role and background of the participants’ different forms of language may be adequate.

Healey et al. (2015) cite directness in language as a contributor to effectiveness of strategy workshops that were observed in other studies. This is supported by Bourgoin et al (2018). Likewise, Bourgoin et al (2018) define that strategic communication has to be argumentative.

Further, the application and adherence of adequate language helps to overcome tendencies of abiding to hierarchies and rule of the strongest (Bourgoin et al., 2018). In the same regard, Johnson et al. (2010) found that ritualised language and word codes improves the strategizing activity and the process of strategy formation in a workshop. Nonetheless, this raises also the need for a facilitator to be aware of such codes and be able to apply them accordingly in order to stimulate a goal-oriented discussion in a workshop (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2015). Thereby, language under these circumstances becomes part of the concept and performance of the workshop (Johnson et al., 2010)

Nonetheless, Burgelman et al (2018) state that language in the context of strategy formation is still comparably underdeveloped as a research subject. This notion is supported by Duffy and O'Rourke (2015), who studied the different forms of dialogue and their impact in workshops. According to their study, dialogue and dialectic can shape the course of a workshop and therefore also impact its outcome (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2015).

2.3.3.6 The relevance of context

Context is a relevant factor in a strategy workshop. Context defines the setting in which issues are discussed and decisions are made. This serves as an orientation for workshop participants who aim to apply their expertise and opinions based on the frame that is provided by context (Schwarz, 2009). The importance of a clear focus is echoed by several researchers (Bourgoin et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski, 2005). In the case of a diverse participant setup, clarity in the overall workshop goals, as well as in the targets of sub-sessions, is regarded as critical, as this provides a common ground for the participants' interactions (Healey et al., 2015). Workshops need to have a clearly defined target and an organizational context in which they operate in order to be effective. They are "not an end in themselves" (MacIntosh et al., 2010, p. 300).

Context appears to impact the overall course of a workshop, as it has been proposed that "the characteristics of the issue under discussion influence how group interactions unfold over time" (Tavella & Franco, 2015, p. 471). This is in line with the more recent publications that find an interrelation between macro-level variables, as in the financial situation of the company and micro-level processes (see e.g. Kauppila et al., 2018). It appears to be important to derive clear targets from the context, as this helps the structuring of the workshop. Further, clear goals are also attributed with releasing energy and commitment to the strategizing activities by workshop participants (Healey et al., 2015). Healey et al. (2015) have found that goal clarity is the most critical factor in workshop design as, according to their findings, it correlates strongest with positive workshop results.

Sensemaking is a prerequisite in order to develop a structured course of action in a predefined context, which can then lead to consensus building or decision making (Ackermann & Eden, 2011; Weick et al., 2005). The relevance of a linkage of a strategy workshop to the general strategy process in an organisation is supported by the survey of van Aaken et al (2013). Von Aaken et al. (2013) argue that a link to the organisational structures is particularly important once the issues that are targeted through a strategy workshop are complex. In their view this is also shown by the positive impact which repetitive workshops have on their outcomes.

A general sentiment in academic literature appears to be, that context events as a driver for the establishing of a strategy workshop tend to positively influence its outcome (MacIntosh et al., 2010; van Aaken et al., 2013). It is perceived that context factors such as recent critical developments can help to offset organisational sluggishness (van Aaken et al., 2013). A lack of context may also limit the ability of workshop participants to integrate the workshop decisions and defined actions back into their regular business routines (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

Transparency and objective presentation of information help particularly in the case of critical situations to generate urgency and thereby may support consensus building (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013). A lack of context may cause confusion and rejection by workshop participants (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

Other studies hint that in case of an actual need such as time pressure or a current crisis for the organisation, a strategic transformation is more likely to happen (MacIntosh et al., 2010). Such events underpin the relevance of the workshop for its participants.

However, van Aaken et al. (2013) found a negative impact of recent events as precedents for strategy development workshops on the perceived outcome of the workshop. The authors propose that the urgency established by recent events counteracts the purpose of a strategy workshop to establish grounded decisions.

Likewise, Cuccurullo & Lega (2013) reflect in their study, that the creation of full transparency of the critical situation that lead to an initiative for strategic reorientation did cause a standstill instead of support from the involved participants. This is needed as a decision by a management team requires a collective view and a common understanding from the same perspectives on the initial problem (Ackermann & Eden, 2011).

2.4 The outcomes of strategy formation and the importance of consensus building

Based on a case study from the telecommunication sector, Grundy & King(1992) developed a model, that defines strategic change management as an interplay of a company’s strategy, structure and culture, which materializes through leadership, mission and “how we do things around here” (p. 106). The notion of strategic planning as a change agent was already present in earlier theories, but often overlooked in organizational approaches to strategy(Grundy & King, 1992; Liedtka, 2000). Lorange postulated already in 1980 that, "[…] if […] strategic planning does not support innovation and change, it is a failure" (Liedtka, 2000, p.195). Likewise, Mintzberg(1994) argued, that a planning process needs creativity and should emphasise communication. Thereby, change plays a critical role for the success of strategic initiatives. However, according to Chanal and Tannery(2005), strategy communication appears to be a field of activity that is relatively untouched by academic research on strategizing.

In support of Mintzberg, both Grundy & King (1992) and Liedtka (2000) emphasise a need for an integrative dialogue to activate a broader part of the organization for strategic planning. This is supported by Canales & Vilá (2004), who found that an open interaction of different management levels facilitates the implementation of strategic principles while providing legitimisation to the resulting strategy. Managers play a critical role in this process, as they act the initial providers for sensemaking impulses (Balogun, Bartunek, & Do, 2015).

Studies in various settings propose that the establishment of a consensus during the decision making is positively linked to the resulting implementation quality and organisational performance (Galbraith et al., 2010; Ho, Wu, & Wu, 2014; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Tarakci et al., 2014). The formulation and communication of a strategic decision can be regarded as a first step towards implementation. The communication of a decision on an organisational level, institutionalises the action behind this decision (Chanal & Tannery, 2005).

MacIntosh et al. (2010) raise the point that strategic change is enabled by strategizing episodes that allow for a retreat from the organisational routines, such as strategy workshops do. This is in line with the findings of Schwarz (2009), who also identified a link between a workshop series and a resulting transformation in the studied organisation. Likewise, practice theory treats routines such as strategy workshops as a core element of organisational change (Hansen & Vogel, 2011).

By shaping a new strategy and its implementation, strategic planning acts as a driver of change in an organization (Liedtka, 2000). Strategic change can manifest itself in different ways, such as a change in an organisations' targets, operational focus or even the business model (Balogun et al., 2015). Indeed, several authors have raised the point, that the formation of a strategy is a change process in itself. MacIntosh et al. (2010) have hinted that organisations may initially need a phase of adoption of the new measures in order for strategic change to be effective.

In addition to the observed enhanced performance, established consensus leads also to a higher acceptance of a decision. It has been found that consensus in the decision process generates a higher level of commitment for the decision among the decision makers. This in turn was also found to result in better outcomes during the implementation (Dooley, R. S. et al., 2000). This establishes a buy-in from different stakeholders involved in the consensus and increases overall satisfaction with a decision or course of action (Galbraith et al., 2010; Ho et al., 2014). According to the findings of Markóczy (2001) and Kellermanns et al. (2011) the middle management of an organisation is initially strongly involved in the consensus building that provides the basis for decisions that trigger strategic change. As these are the individuals, who will hold the responsibility for the operational execution of strategic measures, the need for the acceptance in the middle management appears to be reflected in the consensus building process. Sensemaking plays also a vital role for organisational or strategic change in relation to this consensus building (Balogun et al., 2015).

However, it was also found that a higher level of commitment to a decision leads to a slower implementation process comparing to implementation decisions that were not taken in consensus (Dooley, R. S. et al., 2000). As several authors (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Ho et al., 2014) have pointed out, the establishment of consensus is difficult in an organisational environment that incorporates several groups with different interests.

In case of external pressure or an internal desire to quickly establish consensus as a basis for a decision, it appears that the resulting implicit hastening may lead to poorer decisions (Galbraith et al., 2010; Priem et al., 1995).

The formation of such a consensus, appears to be related to a certain ambiguity of the formulated strategy (Abdallah & Langley, 2014). This ambiguity allows the involved organisation members to interpret it in correlation with their perceptions. However, over time these interpretations cause tensions among different groups in the organisation along the implementation of the strategic measures. The ambiguity and developing gaps in an overall consensus create the need for a revision of the formulated strategy (Abdallah & Langley, 2014).

However, it has also been put forward that there is little consistency in existing studies regarding the framework according to which the impact of consensus on the outcome of the strategy process is measured (Kellermanns et al., 2005). Over the last three decades several researchers have aimed to establish a link between consensus building and organisational performance. However their success has been relatively limited and now consistent outcomes can be mapped (see e.g. Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989).

Other states also provides hints that strategic change falters where key management representatives withdraw from an active role in the transformation or where the change process is gradually reduced to the same level of importance as day-to-day business issues (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

It has also been stated that strategic change requires the support or even the instigation from top management, as middle management for themselves will not be able to execute the required steps to implement the decided actions from e.g. a strategy workshop (MacIntosh et al., 2010).

2.5 Conclusions from the review of academic literature and conceptual framework

The review of existing literature underpins the outlined gaps in academic theory, which were referred to in the introduction. The identified gaps relate in particular to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape the interactions in a strategy process and the expansion of knowledge that relates to specific episodes of strategizing practice. This study attempts to address these gaps in the context of the stated research questions. Nevertheless, existing theory provides also a clear frame for the research on strategy workshops and for the research on further analysis of the formation of consensus in these workshops. This frame will be used to position and inform this research study.

Based upon the differentiation of different schools of thought within S-A-P, this research aligns itself with the school of practices as a set of tools (Rouleau, 2013). As this research analyses specific processes and activities in a particular strategizing procedure, the second school of thought that aligns with a definition of practices being a set of tools, is of particular relevance to this study.

From the review of existing literature several critical features of existing theory on consensus and strategy workshops can be deduced that have impacted content and structure of this study. The findings from the literature review can be linked based on their impact on each other in the context of strategy workshops and in their impact on content and structure of this research project, as is shown in the visualisation of the conceptual framework in figure 12.

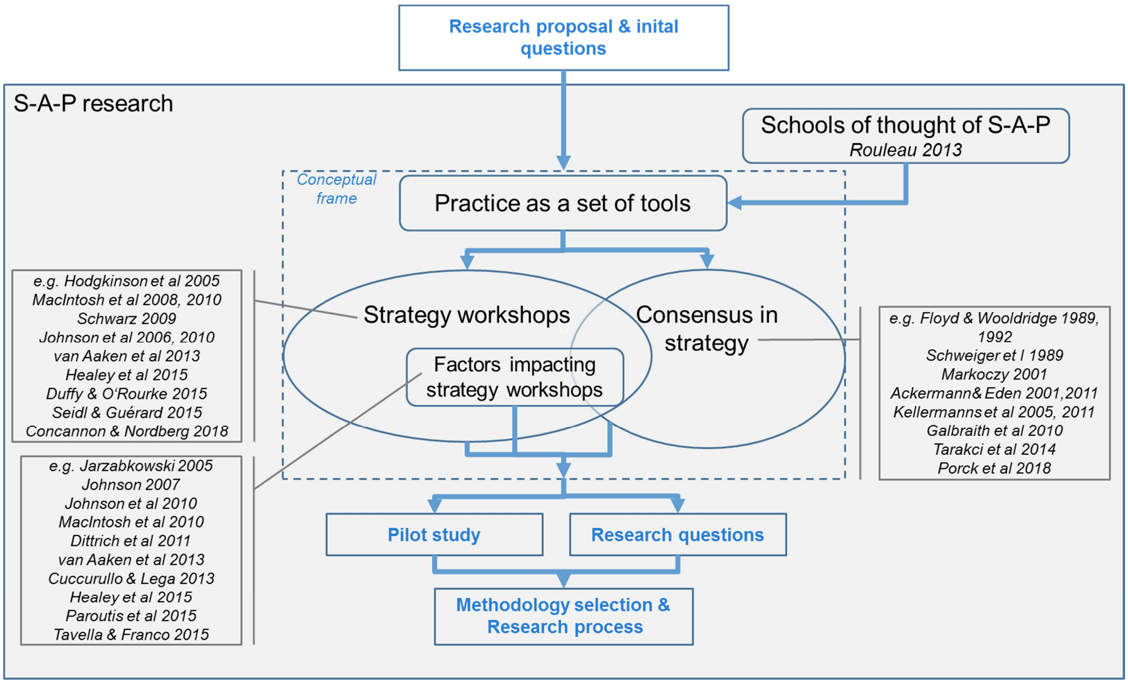

Research proposal & inital questions
S-A-P research
Schools of thought of S-A-P
Rouleau 2013
Conceptual frame
Practice as a set of tools
e.g. Hodgkinson et al 2005
MacIntosh et al 2008, 2010
Schwarz 2009
Johnson et al 2006, 2010
van Aaken et al 2013
Healey et al 2015
Duffy & O'Rourke 2015
Seidl & Guérard 2015
Concannon & Nordberg 2018
Strategy workshops
Consensus in strategy
Factors impacting strategy workshops
e.g. Floyd & Wooldridge 1989, 1992
Schweiger et l 1989
Markoczy 2001
Ackermann& Eden 2001,2011
Kellermanns et al 2005, 2011
Galbraith et al 2010
Tarakci et al 2014
Porck et al 2018
e.g. Jarzabkowski 2005
Johnson 2007
Johnson et al 2010
MacIntosh et al 2010
Dittrich et al 2011
van Aaken et al 2013
Cuccurullo & Lega 2013
Healey et al 2015
Paroutis et al 2015
Tavella & Franco 2015
Pilot study
Research questions
Methodology selection & Research process

Figure 12: Conceptual framework of this study (own reproduction)

The presented key findings were used as conceptual signposts for the further design and conduction of this study, as well as reference points for the analysis and discussion of the findings from the data of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Walsham, 2006).

According to existing literature, consensus is regarded as a manifestation of a common understanding and agreement on a particular aspect (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Kellermanns et al., 2005). This outcome of an agreement can take on several dimensions or facets regarding understanding, commitment or locus within a group, with a strong link to the establishment of commitment as a result of consensus building (Markóczy, 2001; Porck et al., 2018; Tarakci et al., 2014; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989). Consensus is treated as an enabler for better communication and involvement in a group. Therefore, consensus is regarded as an important prerequisite for both, a successful strategy formulation and implementation (Kellermanns et al., 2011). Consensus is hence presented as an integral part of the strategy formation process.

Different forms of consensus have been noted in existing theory. However, the evaluation and role of consensus in existing academic publications is to some extent ambiguous, as several academics also outline the lack of theory focus on and understanding of the role of consensus in the strategy process (Ateş, Tarakci, Porck, van Knippenberg, & Groenen, 2018; Kellermanns et al., 2011, 2005; Walter et al., 2013).

Strategy workshops are regarded as an important element of the strategy process in organisations that is regularly applied. They are detached from the daily business routine and are used to formulate strategies or prepare strategy implementation (Hodgkinson et al., 2005; P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; van Aaken et al., 2013).

Academic theory outlines that strategy workshops are often initiated as a removal from the daily business, as in the case of away-days and they can even function as rituals which connect participants and provide guidance (Johnson et al., 2010).

Despite existing coverage of workshops as elements of the strategy process, many studies focus largely on the operational outcomes of strategy workshops and their embeddedness in strategy routines. However, recent publications have highlighted a need to improve the understanding of the micro-level interactions, results of a strategy workshop and the links of both elements. In this regard, Healey et al (2015) proposed for example a view of three identifiable outcome dimensions of a strategy workshop, which expand the view of workshop results beyond a merely operational perspective.

Similarly, academics have outlined the need to expand the view of strategy workshops beyond the role of top management and to study what contributes to the success of a strategy workshop (Macintosh et al., 2008; Schwarz, 2009). Overall, it can be summarised, that there is a need to expand the theoretical understanding of the interactions and activities that take place in a strategy workshop, as theses aspects of strategy workshops have gained little coverage in academic studies (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010; Mueller, 2018). In the same regard, the factors that shape these interactions have also been outlined as gaps in existing theory models (Healey et al., 2015).

From existing studies, several context factors can be identified in existing publications which appear to influence the progress and outcome of strategy workshops (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2014). Of these, seven factors in particular were identified to have an impact on strategizing. These factors are: workshop design, team dynamics, artefacts and tools, facilitation, language and context. All of these factors have received coverage regarding their role in the context of strategizing, particularly in S-A-P research (see e.g. Healey et al., 2015; MacIntosh et al., 2010; Paroutis et al., 2015; Schwarz, 2009; van Aaken et al., 2013). However, their role in relation to consensus building has not been a specific focus and this relationship has no yet been addressed in detail.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The following chapter addresses the academic basis for this research. Starting with an explanation of the philosophical stance of the researcher, this chapter outlines the rationale for the chosen research approach and the resulting choice for the data collection approach.

Further, the research framework and the studied units of analysis are explained with further reference to the impact of a pilot study on the methodological and data collection decisions. The developed data collection models with their elements and the operationalised data collection approaches are presented and detailed, as well as the fundamental structure for the resulting data analysis.

3.1 Research Philosophy

This research aims to add to existing theory of consensus building in strategy workshops. It will focus on an analysis of the practices of consensus building in the scope of strategy workshops and the way in which routines and elements of a workshop shape these practices and contribute to consensus building. As stated in the opening chapter, the author of this thesis is an experienced practitioner in strategy and management and aims to derive a contribution to business practice. These circumstances are reflected in his philosophical stance on research and the methodological approach of this research project. Further, these circumstances were also continuously reflected in the research process that has led to this study (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

The outcome of research, particularly in social sciences such as business and management, is strongly influenced by the standpoints of the researcher, so called paradigms. These paradigms impact how research questions are stated and how they are answered (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, they shape how the researcher sees the reality, in which he conducts the study, and how he understands and structures the knowledge of this reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They define the philosophical stance of a researcher and the philosophical foundation of a research project. These two elements are embodied in the ontology – addressing the nature of the research – and the epistemology – addressing the accepted knowledge and how it is reflected in research – of a research project (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Robson & McCartan, 2016; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

They inform the research in many ways encompassing it as a whole from the definition of research aims and scope towards the conduction of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2009). This includes the choice of the research methods and the approach to analyzing the findings.

3.1.1 Ontology

From a philosophical perspective, this research assumes social constructivist stances. The research topic itself is regarded as a real world phenomenon independent from the researcher's perception (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Symon & Cassell, 2013). The emphasis of this project has been to establish guidance for practitioners in the context of a research setup that has been constrained in terms of time and scope and social actors. This links this research to real world research and to social constructivism (Robson & McCartan, 2016). As this study aligns itself with S-A-P, this philosophical perspective is assumed to support the aim to approach the research questions from the question "how is it done in the doings?" (Mueller, 2018, p. 26).

The application of academic knowledge in the context of a research project on aspects of social interaction in the real-life routines of people has been termed by Robson and McCartan as "real world research" (Robson & McCartan, 2016). According to them, real world research differs from academic research as it aims to explain and contextualise elements of day-to-day life rather than to broaden academic theory. In the context of strategy and management, this means that real world research attempts to provide guidance for managerial or organizational problems that are present in the regular business environment (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Likewise, real world research can also be differentiated from academic research in terms of its focus on practical relevance and practitioners and a more pragmatic approach to methods and the employment of resources (Mirabeau, Maguire, & Hardy, 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). This is also reflected in the views of methodological approaches for S-A-P by Mirabeau et al (2018) and Heracleous & Jacobs (2008)

The ontology of this research is informed by social constructivism. This ontological position views reality as a social construct of human actors that shape this reality through jointly developed perceptions and understandings of its objects. Thereby, reality is subject to a particular social group and its construct of reality, which may not necessarily be shared by other groups (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In the context of this research, this idea is applied to the activities of strategy formation. This follows the notion by Mueller (2018, p. 26) that "Strategy is a way to frame reality". Conclusively it can be implied that a strategy workshop and the consensus building within it are viewed as socially constructed activities that can only be fully captured by developing an understanding of the perspective of its participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The understanding of the research topic and the data results will be connected in a structure that is formed based on the existing experience of the researcher with strategy workshops and facilitation tools (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012). Nevertheless, the researcher perceives that the underlying truth of the researched topic is relative depending on the circumstances and agreed understandings of the stakeholders, or even further thought, that the underlying truth is solely reflected in differing perspectives of actors and their relative agreements. Notions of the relevance of particular activities that will be analysed or on the applicability or success of consensus building in strategizing routines particularly in the context of a strategy workshop are also derived from social consensus and discourse in the respective organizational environment. Thereby the perception of consensus and the success of a workshop are not fully detached from individual perceptions. This has to be considered in the setup of the research, as this project does not take place in a closed laboratory setting, but in the daily routines of organizations (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The developments and phenomena recorded in this research can therefore also be singular events that could be reviewed from different stances. It is accepted in the context of this study that multiple explanations and notions of the same topic, in this instance the formation of consensus, can exist depending on the stand-point of the researcher and the context of the research conduction (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Symon & Cassell, 2013).

3.1.2 Epistemology

As the ontology shapes what is considered as knowledge and how it can be obtained, the epistemology is grounded in the ontology. Regarding the epistemology, this research is approached with a pragmatist research perspective. This implies that the researcher holds an open perspective on the methodological approach that is appropriate to the research questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Knowledge in this stance is seen as something that is both constructed by theories and based in the reality of the environment that is researched. Thus, knowledge is also restricted to the understanding of the routines and procedures in which the perceived reality takes place (Morgan & Smircich, 1986). Robson & McCartan have listed several aspects that sum up the pragmatist approach to research. These are shown in Table 4.

- Balance between dogmatism and scepticism
- Preference to moderate and common sense views of philosophical dualism
- Acknowledgement of both natural and psychological/social worlds
- Apraisal of the reality and impact of experience on action
- Acknowledgement of knowledge as a dualism of construction and reality
- Assumption of assertability for justifications
- Instrumentalisation of theories
- Endorsement of eclecticism and pluralism
- Apraisal of human enquiry in addition to science and experiments
- Acknowledgement of knowledge, meaning and truth as being tentative and amenable to change
- Endorsement of practical theory

Table 4: Main characteristics of a pragmatist approach based on (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 29)

One important aspect is that pragmatism assumes that the beliefs in which the research is grounded as well as the conclusions from the research are not absolute and reflect the prejudice of the researcher of what is important and corresponding to own values (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Due to the relationship of the researcher with the context of the research project, a certain bias in this regard is likely. This position is informed by the described social constructionist perspective that is part of the researcher's ontology. The approach to this research is influenced by the researchers' experiences in business practice and in the role as a consultant. Based on this experience, the notion has been derived that concepts in business are closely linked to the actors in organisations. In this sense, the pragmatist perspective that is taken in this research builds upon interpretivism (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Interpretivism aims at understanding developments and concepts on the basis of the experiences and interpretations of social actors which are connected with these developments (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Symon & Cassell, 2013). Thus, interpretivism attempts to gain knowledge of the perceptions and actions of the research participants in order to understand the underlying problem that is researched. The meaning of an element of the research is thereby subject to the research participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The core idea behind this view is to gain a deeper understanding of an aspect of knowledge by interpreting the meaning of actions of humans in the specific context of their social setting and their point of view. Behaviour is thus explained out of individual realities. From a perspective of strategy and management this implies that strategizing in organisation exists merely as a concept of the social actors that are part of that particular organisation. Therefore research findings may only hold validity for the organisation in which they were gathered. This puts interpretivism in contrast to the more traditional positivist epistemology that advocated a more scientific and objective approach to social sciences (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Because the author is involved with the practice context of the research topic and has already some prior experience in strategy formation and the undertaking of workshops, the notion of an unbiased and neutral observation of the underlying truth of the research topic is rejected (Morgan & Smircich, 1986; Symon & Cassell, 2013). It is acknowledged that a subjective view on the perceived reality exists and that this view could be challenged from a different research perspective (Mirzaei, 2015; Morgan & Smircich, 1986; Symon & Cassell, 2013).

3.2 Proposed Research Methodology

3.2.1 Methodology selection and its aims

The choice of methodology has been guided by the stances of the researcher as expressed in the ontology and epistemology that frame this research project and by the overall research goal to develop a broader understanding of a particular social setting, the strategy workshop. The scope of the research project is small-scale and set in a specific context, thereby fitting into the frame of real world research (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The methodology of this research follows a pragmatist and interpretivist theoretical approach. In accordance with the philosophical stance of the researcher and with the notion of the S-A-P movement (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), this research aims to uncover an actual understanding of how and what is happening in the interactions of strategy formation, consensus building and its context (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Symon & Cassell, 2013). It attempts to generate guidelines for management practice in the context of the researched environment in addition to a contribution to existing academic theory. Thereby, the author follows a notion that is grounded in the model of Goffman and which implies that “each situation, which is sustained as real is significant irrespective of demonstrating causal links to narrowly defined outcomes” (Mueller, 2018, p. 19).

To address the stated research questions from an academic and practitioner perspective, the research follows a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods are found to be more appropriate than quantitative methods in circumstances, where the studied phenomena have to be viewed in an open approach and where the research aims to understand the symbolic and processual interactions among individuals (Morgan & Smircich, 1986). The research questions are explorative in an area that is not yet well covered by existing theory, as the findings from the literature point towards a vague understanding of existing theory of what is actually taking place within a strategy workshop. As they require an in-depth analysis of the topic and its context rather than a description of a generalised statistical dataset, a qualitative methodology is considered to be more suitable to answer these questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Saunders et al., 2009). This consideration was also substantiated by the review of existing academic literature which shows that existing publications outline that the underlying processes of strategy workshops and the connections between practitioners, influencing factors and results are not yet fully understood (see e.g. Healey et al., 2015; Paroutis et al., 2015; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). A qualitative methodology was also chosen, as the restrictions of the doctoral program such as the limited timeframe may result in a data sample that could be regarded as not representative in case of a more fixed design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Robson & McCartan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2009). The recognition of practical restrictions during the data collection process was also a relevant determinant for the chosen approach to the data analysis.

Due to these determinants, research and analysis have been conducted inductively. An inductive approach means that the research is not fitted into a pre-constructed theory framework with sharp hypotheses that are to be tested. In contrast to such a deductive approach, the inductive approach allows for more flexible working hypotheses and its theory frame is derived from the analysed data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). As the area of research is relatively new and not yet broadly addressed by existing S-A-P research and as there are only few empirical studies on strategy workshops, this approach was considered to be more appropriate.

An inductive approach facilitates the distinction of patterns within the collected data without the bias of existing theory models (Tracy, 2013). In contrast to a deductive approach, an inductive strategy allows for casual modification of the analysis frame, based on the information gathered in the data collection. Thereby, the analysis patterns evolve over time and in direct alignment with the data basis (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014). This supports the underlying aim of this research of generating a broader understanding of the topic by facilitating the development of a general framework of assumptions based on the specific findings made through the data collection (Bartunek, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2009). Bengttson and Herting (2014) argue that a conceptualisation of findings provides for a generalisability from the specific to social constructs with comparable characteristics and context. As this research focuses on an area, which is not yet fully covered by existing theory, an inductive approach may reduce a bias towards the findings that are to be uncovered in the research process.

3.2.2 Chosen Case Study method

In line with the inductive approach to this research, following a case study approach appeared to be best suited for this project. Yin (2014) recommends the application of a case study in research where the rationale of a subject is investigated, where there is little chance to control the cause of behavioural events, and where the subject is contemporary. This type of practice oriented workshop research fits into this frame and has therefore applied an explorative case study design approach.

Following the design framework of Yin (2014, p. 50), the proposed case study applied an embedded multiple-case design with a single-company focus. Yin (2014) argues that a multiple-case study is superior in generating knowledge. According to Mintzberg (1979), case studies should be as descriptive as possible, in order to capture and reflect what has actually happened. De Massis & Kottlar (2014) argue that a single case would only be prudent once it provides a unique opportunity of access to detailed data. The review of multiple cases was also selected as it references the diverse nature of the analysed workshops better (Yin, 2014).

Further, case studies as a research design are well suited to use multi-method approaches to the data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Symon & Cassell, 2013). For the conduction of the research, the author has intended from the start to combine two methods of qualitative data collection, in order to provide more depths to the findings and to triangulate the gathered data. According to literature, a case study can facilitate such an approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Bryman & Bell 2007). Due to this feature, as well as a common use of case studies nowadays in academic research, case studies are mostly regarded as a reliable, sound and established design in organisational research (Symon & Cassell, 2013).

However, it should be noted, that more recently, criticism has grown around the epistemologies in which case studies are grounded. As Symon & Cassell (2013) state, this criticism is mostly based on concerns regarding the generalizability and validity of case study findings outside their specific context. Nonetheless, in line with the researcher’s epistemological stance, these concerns are not considered as critical in the context of this research. Further, several academics have highlighted the issues concerning generalizability and how they can be addressed adequately in the context of qualitative research (see e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morgan & Smircich, 1986), and this research follows their positions in this issue.

The company in which this case study has been conducted is the employing company of the author. The case company operates globally in three segments: infrastructure provision, transportation and logistics services. These segments operate relatively independent from each other in the form of own legal entities and inhibit also very diverse types of organisational culture. To generate a robust data set in a single company research focus environment, the individual consensus building routines within a strategy workshop have been used as a unit of measure for the research.

Each observed workshop has been treated as an individual sub-case. For each workshop closed meso-routines that cover an episode which shapes consensus have been considered as elements of this sub-case. This approach has already been applied successfully in earlier S-A-P research, when Whittington et al (2006) analysed the impact of selected practice tools and routines on a change process. The chosen sub-cases for Phase 1 of the data collection are described in detail in section 3.5.2.1.2.

The researcher acknowledges that the single company approach might restrict the external validity of the findings (Bryman & Bell 2007; Jin, 2014) and may not justify replicability and uniqueness of the research results (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). However, due to its positioning in real world research and a social constructionist ontology, these short-comings are accepted and it is assumed that the research will nevertheless provide a valid input to academic knowledge. The use of an additional data collection approach has established further validity of the findings.

3.2.3 Research design

The initial starting point for the conduction of a research is the idea of its components and the definition of the focus that the research should have. Together with a definition of further aspects that the research should address or embody, these elements shape the research design (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014).

As shown in the following graph of figure 13, the structure of a research design is made up of 5 core elements, with the research questions as a nucleus of the research design.

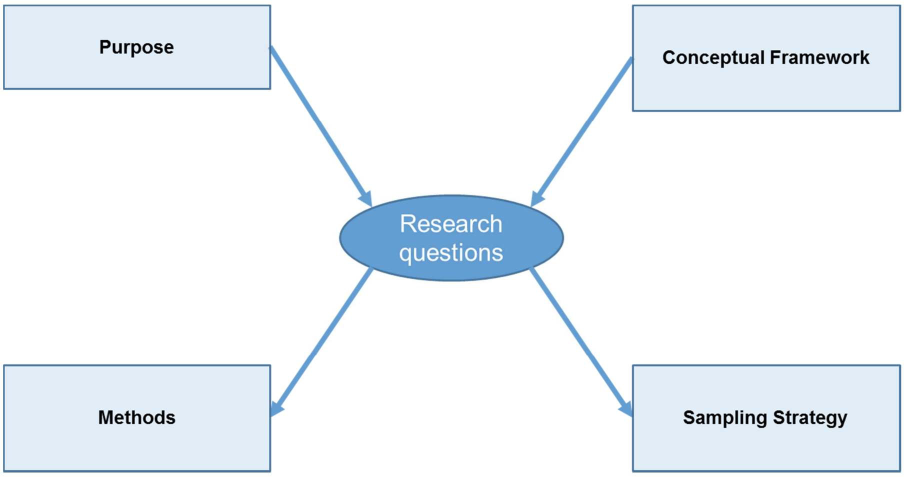


Figure 13: Research design framework according to Robson & McCartan(2016, p. 73)

The research questions are informed by the conceptual framework and the purposes of the research, while the questions themselves provide the rationale for the applied methods and the sampling strategy that are used in the study (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The setup of this research project has followed this model.

The research questions, which are stated in chapter 1, were defined on the basis of the initial research aim to generate practical recommendations for management practitioners for the use of strategy workshops and to contribute to existing literature in the field of S-A-P. Moreover, the formulation of these questions was also shaped by the factors that were identified as been the focus of the study based on the researcher's experience and the findings from existing academic literature.

On the other hand, the chosen methods and sampling strategy that are explained in this chapter, link directly back to the research questions. They were chosen based on the perception which approaches may be best suited to derive answers for these questions. Further, the methods were also selected based on their capability to address the relationship between researcher and the researched subject, based on the fact, that this study is conducted in an environment that is familiar to the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Robson and McCartan (2016) differentiate between fixed and flexible designs for studies. Based on the framework conditions of this study and the inductive nature of it, the research follows a flexible design.

A flexible research design is characterised by several factors, which have been put forward by Cresswell (2007) and by Robson & McCartan (2016). These characteristics include among others that

- the research employs multiple data collection techniques with a particular focus on qualitative data collection.
- the research is set in a particular framework that includes an evolving design of the study along the research process, a socially oriented focus that emphasises the positions of the research participants and links the researcher with the research process.
- the research employs a mix of several research traditions that can be joined by the researcher.

All of these described characteristics can be attributed to this research project.

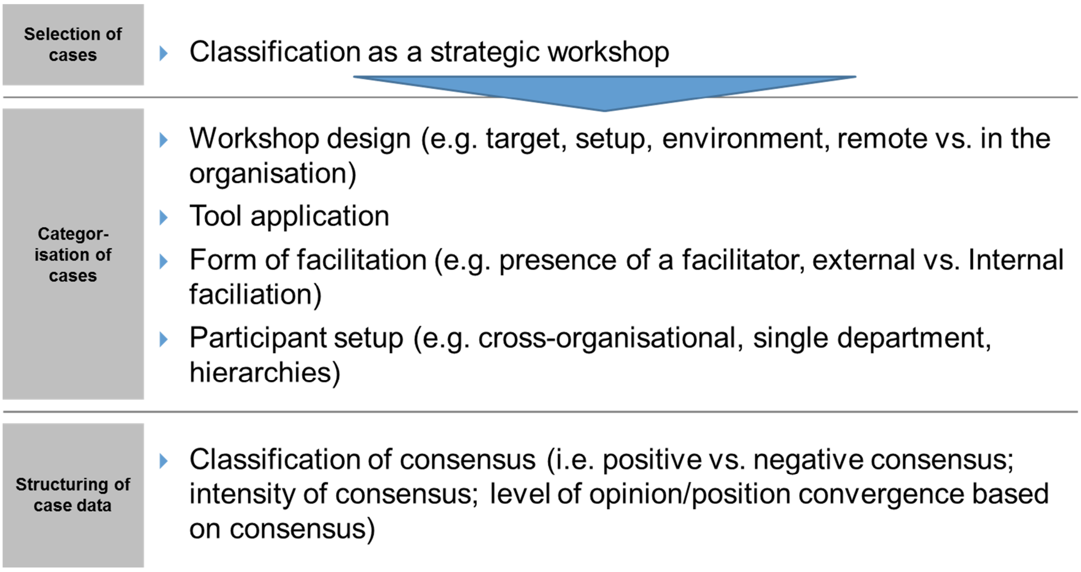
3.3 Research framework and applied methods

3.3.1 Unit of analysis

For the proposed case study design, each studied workshop will be treated as an individual sub-case. As shown above, this structure follows the approach of previous studies in the field of S-A-P. These studies have also used workshops as individual units of analysis in the context of a single case study of one company or multi-case studies that compared various workshops or organisations (see e.g. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008, Paroutis et al, 2015, Schwarz 2009).

In order to establish a clear structure in the analysis of the selected cases, each case will be approached through a three stage framework, which is shown in figure 14. This scrutinizing of the cases is supposed to ensure a selection of relevant cases and a clear categorisation of findings

First of all, workshops will be scrutinised according to established academic criteria in order to identify whether they qualify as strategy workshops. Second, those cases that are strategic workshops will be clustered according to different criteria that address the characteristics of the workshop such as its design or the participant setup. This procedure aims to provide a data framework upon which the analysis of the collected data can be referenced and clustered (Symon & Cassell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Finally, the different forms of consensus that takes place in each of the studied cases will be classified according to its characteristics that can be observed in the workshop.



Selection of cases

- Classification as a strategic workshop

Categor-isation of cases

- Workshop design (e.g. target, setup, environment, remote vs. in the organisation)
- Tool application
- Form of facilitation (e.g. presence of a facilitator, external vs. Internal faciliation)
- Participant setup (e.g. cross-organisational, single department, hierarchies)

Structuring of case data

- Classification of consensus (i.e. positive vs. negative consensus; intensity of consensus; level of opinion/position convergence based on consensus)

Figure 14: Elements of the structuring framework for the data collection and analysis (own reproduction)

3.3.1.1 Classification of a strategy workshop

The selection of the units of analysis is based on a criteria set that is supposed to help in differentiating between strategy workshops and other forms of workshops or meetings. It should also be noted, that many publications that relate to strategy workshops do not elaborate on how they specifically define these workshops (see e.g. Hodgkinson et al., 2005). Nonetheless, classification criteria were used to provide a clear orientation on the content and scope of this research.

This criteria set is based on the findings of the literature review, as well as a verification with strategy experts. As a result the following identified criteria will classify a strategy workshop for this research:

- The workshop is a clearly framed event that is not part of the regular business routine of its participants and that is not part of the regular procedure within the organisation's processes and does not apply the existing organisational hierarchies (Healey et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2006; Macintosh et al., 2008; Schwarz, 2009).
- The workshop has relevance to the strategizing procedures in the researched organisation. The aim of the workshop is thus to develop a shared understanding among participants regarding the future course of the organisation or to develop measures that support this course (C. Bowman, 1995; Macintosh et al., 2008; Schwarz, 2009), both in terms of strategy formulation and/or implementation (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2006).

- The trigger of the workshop is a need to develop the organisation, either from a perspective of the regular strategy process or from a perspective of organisational change (Hodgkinson et al., 2005). The workshop is specifically not triggered by a current crisis or sudden deterioration of the organisational performance (van Aaken et al., 2013).
- The workshops audience is cross-departmental and consists of representatives of general management or line management, rather than only of representatives of the strategy department or business development (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Schwarz, 2009).

It is recognised, that depending on the scope or the context of a study, different definitions for a strategy workshop may exist. Existing publications also state, for example, that strategy workshops are supposed to be an element of the regular strategizing processes of an organisation (Kwon et al., 2014; Wodak et al., 2011) or that they contain a physical removal from the organisations premises (Johnson et al., 2010; Seidl & Guérard, 2015). Likewise, several publications specify the timeframe for a strategy workshop at one or more days (Hodgkinson et al., 2005). However, van Aaken et al (2013) have also found that the location of the workshop or the timeframe appear to hold no relevance for the impact or definition of a strategy workshop. These findings were also supported by the strategy experts. Based on the review of existing academic publications the proposed structuring elements have therefore been chosen to provide the most suitable identification framework for this research.

3.3.1.2 Categorisation of the sub-cases

In order to generate a better inside into which characteristics of a strategy workshop impact the formation of consensus, the studied sub-cases were categorised according to selected structural elements which they can inhibit and which are deemed as influential to consensus building. This categorisation is presented in figure 15.

In most instances workshops are extensively pre-organised with formal elements including a clearly defined agenda (Duffy & O’Rourke, 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2005). This research has clustered the aspect of pre-organisation into two categories: whether detailed information was provided upfront and whether a pre-defined and specific agenda existed. Kellermanns et al. (2005) conclude that strategic consensus is dependent on information exchange. Likewise, transparency is also regarded as an important element to establish a position or decision. Therefore it has been tested, whether the in advance provision of information has a differentiating impact on the formation of consensus. This has been achieved through the criterion for the cases of having information shared up-front or not.

As literature has highlighted the importance of transparency and goal clarity (see e.g. Healey et al., 2015), the categorisation has also probed, whether such clarity had been pre-established by communication of a clear and structured agenda in the particular studied case.

In line with the findings of Hodgkinson et al (2005, 2006) and the defined workshop characteristics of Johnson et al (2006), a differentiating criterion has also been the level of separation of the participants from their daily routines. While Johnson et al (2006) postulate, that one characteristic of a strategy workshop tends to be that it takes place off-side and outside of the regular organisational environment, this notion is not reflected in all studies that address strategy workshops (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Seidl & Guérard, 2015). However, as several studies have tested this element as an indicator of workshop success (Hodgkinson et al., 2005; van Aaken et al., 2013), this aspect has also been applied as a differentiator in this research.

Another element that has been applied as a categorization is routinization. Several academics describe examples of workshops that are part of a regular routine (see e.g. Schwarz, 2009). However, other studies have also referenced on workshops which were not part of such an annual series, but singular events (Johnson et al., 2006). Van Aaken et al (2013) found that routinization appears to have a slightly positive impact on the success of a strategy workshop. In order to identify whether such a routinization of strategizing impacts also consensus building in a workshop, it has also been reviewed if the studied cases belong to a workshop series or are stand-alone.

As discussed in the literature review, the participant setup has been found to be influential for the success and course of a workshop. Therefore, this important factor was also considered as a differentiator to categorise the studied workshops, in terms of the number of participants and in terms of level of functional diversity. The size of a participant group has been studied in literature (Healey et al., 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2005). Therefore a differentiating criterion has been, whether the workshop is small (up to 10 participants), medium (up to 20 participants), or large (> 20 participants) according to the number of participants. Likewise, the functional diversity has looked at whether the participants came from the same functional background (low) or are from various functional backgrounds (high).

A tendency for facilitation was also confirmed by Hodgkinson et al (2005). According to their study, this facilitation tends to be based on a pro forma structure and to be provided by external consultants. The existence of facilitation has also been considered as being influential on the strategizing discussion in a workshop (Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013; Kellermanns et al., 2005). As facilitation can play an important role in a workshop, the studied workshops were categorised according to the fact whether they had been facilitated by an external facilitator or not.

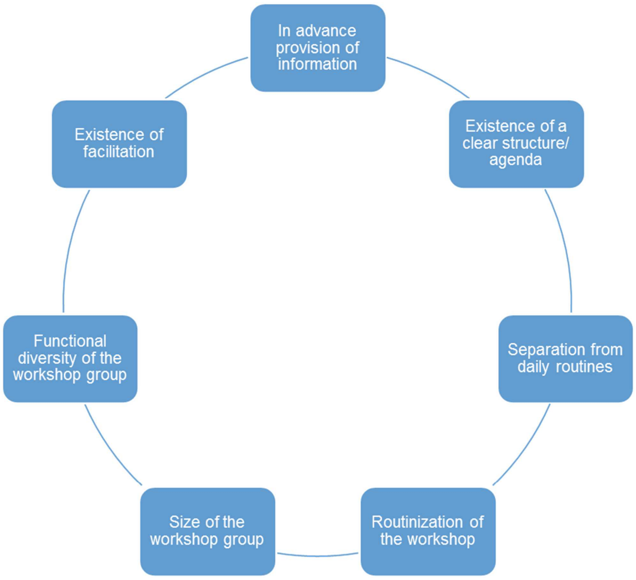

In advance provision of information
Existence of a clear structure/ agenda
Separation from daily routines
Routinization of the workshop
Size of the workshop group
Functional diversity of the workshop group
Existence of facilitation

Figure 15: Overview of the workshop categorisation criteria (own reproduction)

Several further factors that have also been mentioned in previous studies were not considered for the categorisation. These include the familiarity of participants and the level of seniority of participants.

Though certainly of relevance for the interaction process and thus the building of consensus, these factors were not applied as differentiators, as it had been assumed that it would be difficult to establish whether and how well the participants know each other. The level of seniority the participants was not used as a categorisation criterion as almost all larger strategy workshops in the studied organisation includes participants from middle or top management. Further, differing organisational structures among individual legal entities and subsidiaries of the studied organisation complicate the precise comparability on a more detailed seniority categorisation other than broad management hierarchies such as top, middle, lower. Therefore the decision was made to focus on clearly identifiable criteria (Miles et al., 2014).

Likewise, the application of tools in general or a specific type of tools in particular has not been chosen as a criterion of categorization of the workshops. However, the research has aimed to identify which tools were applied during the workshop, and how these tools may have impacted the formation of consensus.

3.3.1.3 Research setting and data sampling

The researcher has conducted the primary data collection in inhouse consulting projects on strategic topics in different segments and departments, where workshops will be applied. The sub-cases and their context vary due to their connection to different projects and organisational units. The existing corporate strategic management structure and target steering provide a comparable context frame for this study. Hence, this approach with several units of analysis allows for a diverse dataset addressing the posited research questions.

The final sampling of the sub-cases was decided upon after data collection approval of the relevant stakeholders of each considered workshop and the successful conduction and review of the respective data collection.

3.3.2 Research Methods

3.3.2.1 Approach to research

The research process followed several stages, starting with a pilot stage, in which the intended process of data collection was tested, followed by phases 1 and 2 of the actual data collection for this study. With each of these stages, the author has aimed to achieve the required rigour to ensure dependability, confirmability and transferability of the results of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This approach is also visualised in Table 5 which shows the structural approach to this research project and the procedure which the data collection followed, in the form of a research protocol. This research protocol has been established in order to allow for reflexivity regarding the chosen approach to research design, data collection and data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Tracy, 2013).

Research stage	Nature of the activity	Approach & description (incl. rationale)	Challenges & limitations	Outcome & input for following phase
Aim of the study	• Definition of scope and focus of the study	• Review of personal professional experience and initial scoping of research topic • Identification of potential research questions	• Identification of a suitable research topic and matching research questions • Very broad scope of the research idea • Lack of focus	• Definition of research topic around strategy workshops and interactions in strategy workshops
Literature review	• Review and analysis of existing theory • Classification and selection of relevant literature	• Review of themes and theories and identification of theory gaps • Development of a conceptual frame • Challenging of research questions with existing theory	• Scrutinization of relevant literature • Scoping of review process • Structuring of themes and models	• Revised research questions • Key themes and theory gaps • Conceptual frame for analysis
Method selection	• Definition of methodological scope	• Review of applied methods in existing	• Gaining transparency of the research and data	• Establishment of a qualitative study based

	and frame of the research study • Definition of the data collection and analysis approach	studies • Analysis of potential data sources • Matching potential methods to research questions and selection of methods	collection approach in other S-A-P studies • Validating the own methodological approach – particularly for the analysis - against existing studies	on cases • Definition of a data collection based on first-hand data from observations and surveys or interviews
Pilot study	• Piloting of research methods and data collection approach in order to validate the chosen methodological approach and the research scope.	• Test the applicability of observations for this study • Develop and test a suitable observation protocol • Understand dynamics of a strategy workshop • Test several methods of data collection	• Broader study on micro-routines too complex in order to generate data • One data collection method not suitable to generate meaningful data – pre-/post-workshop data collection (surveys/interviews) not applicable	• Revision of the observation log • Adjusted data collection approach to the use of two methods • Narrowed research focus on to consensus • Expansion of method selection to expert interviews to generate more data
Case selection & access	• Identification of suitable workshops for the data collection process	• Approach of management representatives and strategy project leaders from the own professional network • Explanation of the purpose of the study and research ethics	• Identification of suitable workshops • Gaining access to strategy workshops due to concerns or lack of interest by workshop organisers	• Identification of two strategy workshops as sources of data • Gained access to strategy workshops
Phase 1	• Observation of strategy workshops with the help of an observation log and note taking	• Generation of data from interactions and dialogue of participants • Noting of key phrases, actions and interactions among participants and facilitator along the stages of the workshop with the help of an self-defined observation log and additional notes • Early analysis of findings from the collected data	• Ensure confirmability and transferability of the findings • Recognising inter-personal relations and power structures Referencing pre-workshop activities that impact workshop • Testing of validity of personal impressions • Unsuccessful approach to data collection from surveys and interviews	• Collection of data on dialogue and interactions of workshop participants and facilitator from two strategy workshops • Identification of limitations of observations and the collected data • Establishment of expert interviews as second data set instead of surveys • Input for questions and scope of the expert interviews
Phase 2	• Conducting of expert interviews based on a pre-defined interview questionaire	• Arranging for expert interviews • Validation of interview questionaire • Clarification of nature of study and research ethics • Conduction of semi-structured interview of 1-1,5 hours each	• Identification and approach to suitable experts • Organisation of interviews and interview settings • Generation of saturated data set	• Collection of data from 16 expert interviews • Triangulated and validated findings from Phase 1
Data manage-ment & analysis	• Structuring and analysis of the collected data • Triangulation of findings from each data collection approach	• Triangulate data from phases 1 and 2 • Review findings with conceptual framework	• Transcription and structuring of the data • Identification of themes and codes • Matching of themes with the literature	• Findings on the nature and role of consensus, factors that impact workshop and findings on strategy workshops (see chapter 4)

Table 5: Research protocol of the research project on consensus in strategy workshops (own reproduction)

Along the approach to this research, a researcher is being exposed to new information and insights both from existing studies, the setting of the data collection and his personal experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These elements were all used to continuously rethink and refine the research approach and the applied methods. How these elements of reflexivity have affected this research study will be explained further in section 3.3.2.5.

3.3.2.2 Review of primary data collection in existing studies

In order to establish a methodological approach that has validity from an academic perspective, the choice of applied methods has been informed by approaches employed by previous studies in the field of S-A-P research.

To analyse the problem-solving process, researchers have applied various forms of qualitative data collection, including the observation of the workshop participants. A critical aspect of the data collection is the ability to differentiate which elements are critical to the research and to record and categorize those pieces of valuable information in order to analyse them (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014). Further, it has to be ensured that the gathered data can be reviewed in its specific context of occurrence.

In the literature review in the previous chapter, the considered studies which are based in the field of S-A-P have employed various approaches to the research methodology and the data collection and analysis. The most relevant of these studies are listed in the following table (Table 6) with their respective approaches to the research.

Author (Year)	Title	Aim of study	Methodology	Data Collection approach	Analysis approach
Ambrosini, Bowman (2003)	Managerial Consensus and Corporate Strategy: Why Do Executives Agree or Disagree about Corporate Strategy?	Analysis of the presence of strategic consensus within management teams	Quantitative, deductive	Questionaire survey	
Jarzabkowski, Seidl (2008)	The Role of Meetings in the Social Practice of Strategy	Identification of the impact of strategy meetings on the stability of strategic orientation of an organisation	Qualitative Case studies	Observations, triangulation with secondary data from meetings	
Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, Schwarz (2006)	The Role of Strategy Workshops in Strategy Development Processes	Definition of the role of workshops in the strategy process in companies	Empirical, quantitative survey	Questionaire survey	
Paroutis, Franco, Papadopoulos (2015)	Visual Interactions with Strategy Tools: Producing Strategic Knowledge in Workshops	Identificiation of the impact of visual interaction with strategising tools on the strategy process	Qualitiative case study	Observation	Inductive video analysis
Schwarz (2009)	Strategy workshops facilitating and constraining strategy making	Development of a categorisation framework for elements of strategy workshops	Empirical case study	Observations, interviews	Combination of inductive and deductive methods
Healey, Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson (2013)	Off to Plan or Out to Lunch? Relationships between Design Characteristics and Outcomes of Strategy Workshops	Analysis of the impact of strategy workshops	Quantitative survey	Questionaire survey	Factor analysis, regression analysis
Duffy, O'Rourke (2014)	Dialogue in Strategy Practice: A Discourse Analysis of a Strategy Workshop	Identification and categorisation of management dialogue in strategy workshops and its impact	Qualitative case study	Observation and recording	Inductive Discourse analysis
Tavella, Franco (2015)	Dynamics of Group Knowledge Production in Facilitated Modelling Workshops	Categorisation of group interactions in facilitated modelling workshops	Qualitative case study	Observation	Template analysis
Dittrich, Seidl (2011)	The role of meetings in the strategy process – Towards an integrative framework	Identification and categorisation of functions and practices of strategy meetings	Qualitative review	Literature review	Deductive
Paroutis, Pettigrew (2007)	Strategizing in the multi-business firm: Strategy teams at multiple levels and over time	Identification of practices of strategy teams	Qualitative case studies	Interviews	
Von Aaken, Koob, Rost, Seidl (2013)	Ausgestaltung und Erfolg von Strategieworkshops: eine empirische Analyse	Identification of success factors and their impact for strategy workshops	Quantitative, empirical	Questionaire survey	Inductive

Table 6: Overview of methodological approaches in relevant comparable studies (own reproduction)

As can be seen from the table above, existing studies have employed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. However, based on the choices for the data collection, it appears that most researchers have tried to position their data collection as close as possible to the actual setting in which strategizing takes place.

3.3.2.3 Data collection through observation

As workshops are shaped by their participants (Healey, Hodgkinson, Whittington, & Johnson, 2013) it will be a challenge for the researcher to retain the focus on the large workshop setup rather than individuals and their perceptions. The evaluation of micro-routines will help the researcher to focus on the developments in the workshops and to remain objective. This is in line with the acknowledgement of Antonacopoulou and Balogun that “practices cannot be divorced from the context in which they are performed”(2010, p. 407).

The method of observation provides the researcher with a possibility for a naturalistic exploration of experiences and perceptions of the social group that is being researched. Observations allow the researcher to uncover the subjective meanings of interactions among participants that may hold knowledge that goes beyond the documentation of a simple process flow (Morgan & Smircich, 1986). Several studies have aligned around the quote of Montaigne that “saying is one thing; doing is another”(Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 320). Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) for example, expressed regret that they were unable to employ observational techniques in their research on strategy teams, as this might have provided them with more detailed information of what is actually happening in strategic interactions.

At the same time, an observation allows also for a better insight into aspects that might not be openly conferred within interviews or surveys (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In the context of the chosen topic, it is very likely, that participants will not openly state their perception of e.g. a workshop element or result. Therefore, observations may help to uncover more underlying themes in the research environment. On the other hand, it is also considered, that mere observation may not help to uncover the actual motives for the specific actions of research participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

In this research, observations will be used to develop an insight into how micro-routines shape the discussion and consensus building as well as the interaction between participants and facilitator (Johnson, et al, 2010). The data collection focused on selected parts of the workshop agenda that focus on consensus building.

Observations can be conducted with different techniques, such as note-taking, audio or video recordings (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This provided the research project with a variety of options to the data collection. The initial aim to ground this choice in existing research was, however, not realised. Despite the existence of several publications with a comparable research context which also employed observational data collection methods, little information is shared in these studies on the actual approach to collect this data and to analyse it in its context (see e.g. Schwarz, 2009).

In order to validate the data collection approach, this research project has therefore used a pilot study to test different techniques of note-taking and audio recording as observation methods. Hereby, the focus was on the mapping of the occurrence of the different aspects that contribute to consensus building. The capturing and analysis of dialogue has already proven to be successful in earlier workshop studies in the S-A-P field (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2014). Further, the pilot study was aimed at developing an appropriate approach to the data collection.

Observations as a method for the data collection were selected as the topic of research requires a close and first-hand access to the dynamics of a workshop and the interaction between participants. Likewise, as strategy-as-practice theorists put an emphasis on the activity-based view of strategy, a research project that aligns with this stream should follow this notion (P. Jarzabkowski, 2005). In this context, observation appears to best suited for the chosen project, as it provides a more realistic picture of workshop interactions and pattern then for example interviews, and allows also for a more fine-tuned approach to the analysis of the data as it captures the active elements of strategizing (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010; Kwon et al., 2014; Schwarz, 2009). In this selection, this research is also in line with existing studies in the strategy-as-practice field that applied observations (Duffy & O’Rourke, 2015; P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Kwon et al., 2014; Schwarz, 2009). Potential criticism with regards to external validity is accepted accordingly (Schwarz, 2009).

3.3.2.4 Data collection through interviews

Interviews are a common and even central method for gathering qualitative data in all kinds of research settings (Symon & Cassell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Interviews are particularly used in the context of studies with a qualitative research design and in social sciences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Likewise, interviews are employed regularly in case studies (Yin, 2014).

A particular advantage of interviews is that they can be used relatively easily in combination with other forms of data collection. In ethnographic research, interviews are usually used as an additional source of data to extend the information scope of observations (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Further, interviews allow for a controlled inclusion of the personal perspectives of interview participants into the analysis (Jin, 2014, Robson & McCartan, 2016). In contrast to e.g. observations, the quality of research data can be enhanced, where research subjects are not only observed, but are also adding their personal views to a particular research situation (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Likewise, interviews have proven to be a good source of data in instances, where the research is limited by resource or time constraints. This has evolved interviews into a widely applied data collection tool (Robson & McCartan, 2016, Symon & Cassell, 2013)

However, interviews as a source of data are also facing criticism from an academic perspective. This criticism is to some extent based particularly on this wide-spread use of interviews in academic research (Symon & Cassell, 2013). Even though interviews are easy to conduct, they can nonetheless be a source of problems with regards to their theoretical fit to the research or their analytical vigour (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Academic literature raises the concern, whether the provided information in interviews reflects the actual situation in the researched organisation or context. As the interview narrative represents a potentially biased view of the interviewee, results have to be scrutinized regarding their credibility. Likewise, the style of the interview conduction needs to abide to high academic standards in order to ensure validity of the information (Symon & Cassell, 2013). However, it is also put forward that a critical conduction of the data analysis and a balanced selection of interview partners can limit the impact of such a bias (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014).

It has to be considered, that interviews are “guided by the researcher’s mental agenda” and do not deliver “the exact same verbalization with every participant interviewed” (Yin, 2014, p.239). Therefore, the analysis of the gathered data can be impacted by language barriers or a researcher bias. This aspect can be critical to research situations in which there is a divergent view on the research topic between interviewer and interviewee. However, due to the widespread use of interviews as a data collection tool, academic literature provide an extensive array of guidelines, that can be used to minimise the impact of the mentioned limitations of interview data (Robson & McCartan, 2016, Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014). As the researcher has experience with interviews as a source of research data, this method has been considered as a source of data over other alternatives, where the lack of experience with the particular method may negatively impact the data collection process. According to this rationale interviews were applied as a second source of data collection in Phase 2, once the data collection of Phase 1 of the main study proofed to be insufficient to address the research questions in a broader data scope.

3.3.2.5 Reflexivity in this research project

The application of research methods, in particular those that are utilised for the collection and the analysis of research data, is an element of the research process that is not solely attached to ontological and epistemological stances of the study and the researcher. As Mauthner & Doucet (2003) argue, decisions in these areas and the results of these approaches are also influenced by “personal, interpersonal, […], institutional and pragmatic influences” (p. 415). This implies for example that familiarisation with the ontological and epistemological stances in a particular field of theory, such as S-A-P, may also reflect on the decisions that are made by the researcher in his own study. As this study has been developed in pursuit of doctoral degree, influences in epistemological and methodological choices are acknowledged and are also referred to in this study, such as e.g. in 3.3.2.2. Reflexivity has also been applied regarding the data collection process and the analysis of the primary data from two different data collection processes.

Particularly, the design of both the observation log and the interview questionnaire were strongly influenced by the conceptual framework that could be derived from the review of existing academic literature and theory models. This is for example reflected in the pre-defined seven context factors which were tested for relevance and impact on strategizing and consensus building in the expert interviews.

On the other hand, the inductiveness of this study and the identified theory gap regarding practice research on strategy workshops and consensus building in strategy workshop, may have limited the scope of influence of existing academic stances in contrast to studies that are conducted in areas that have already been more broadly addressed by academic publications (Symon & Cassell, 2013). Likewise, conducting this study in complete independence from the employing organisation of the researcher has minimised any potential sources of influence on the outcomes from a institutional perspective of the studied organisation in this research (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

Further, the influence of existing research was, among others, also consciously addressed in the approach to the semi-structured interviews. By providing room for information input from the interviewed experts and by actively incorporating this data in the analysis, as will be shown in section 4.2.3.8, reflexivity in the data collection was actively applied in the research process.

As there is generally a continuous interaction and impacting between researcher and research topic, this connection also applies where the research object relates closely to the professional practice, previous experiences or institutional obligations of the researcher (Symon & Cassell, 2013). Prior professional experience in the field of the research object and e.g. insights into the cultural patterns in the studied organisation, are some of the potential sources of pre-understandings and assumptions to the interpretation of the collected data, which have to be addressed with consciousness at the stages of collection and analysis of primary data. It is acknowledged that the professional experience with strategy workshops will have implicitly informed the approach to the data collection, as it informed e.g. the judgment on the applicability of different methods of data collection in the setting of a strategy workshop.

The reflexivity in the research approach to this study does not only apply to influences from previous academic sources and to professional knowledge from the researcher, but also to the experiences that were made along the course of this research project. As outlined in section 3.5, pre-conceived experiences from the pilot study have also reflected on the design of the main study of this research project. Nonetheless, while this study was certainly implicitly informed by previous publications and academic approaches, building upon reflexivity, the research approach of this study has attempted to minimise subjectivity and external influences in the structuring and interpretation of the collected data (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

3.4 Research Ethics

3.4.1 Research ethics in the context of the research project

Research ethics are an important aspect of conducting a sound and good research project. Elements of abidance of research ethics range from an appropriate information and handling of research participants to an unbiased and open approach to research evidence and related research (Yin, 2014).

In the context of this research project, potential sources of conflict with research ethics can mainly be attributed to the data collection process. Such sources of conflict relate to the usually confidential and critical nature of the information that is shared during strategizing activities and in the setting of a strategy workshop (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2015; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007). This confidentiality needs to be ensured along the data collection process, as well as the analysis stage of the research project.

Further ethical issues could have arisen from the choice of the research topic. As stated in the introduction, this project has a close thematic connection to the professional career of the researcher. Strategizing and strategy workshops are core activities of management consulting firms (van Aaken et al., 2013). The conduction of workshops and the support of strategic projects are likewise important aspects of the service portfolio of the consulting unit in which the researcher is employed. Therefore, it was important in such a research project to maintain an unbiased and objective position during the research and to avoid preconceived position on the research questions (Saunders et al., 2009; Yin, 2014). Maintaining high ethical standards has been a prerequisite of all activities that were conducted along this research project and this has been ensured through several measures as will be presented in the following section.

3.4.2 Handling of ethical issues in this research project

This research project has addressed all ethical aspects in compliance with the code of ethics of Northumbria University. This includes in particular the information of research participants and the handling of the collected primary data.

Research participants have been informed in advance on the nature and content of the research and have been asked for consent by signing a consent form (Northumbria University, 2010). The consent form used was an adaptation of the recommended consent form template of Northumbria University and its templates are depicted in Appendix I and II. By signing the consent form, the participants agreed to participate in this study, and that anonymized, recorded data from their interactions and discussions in the observations or of their statements in the expert interviews is being used as part of this study to answer the research questions.

In the case of the observed workshops all involved workshop participants were informed in writing of the purpose of the observation. This information was passed to the respective participants through the organisers of the workshop. In addition, written consent was obtained from the department heads that were responsible for conduction and outcome of the respective workshops.

Participants were made aware of the researching individual at the beginning of the observed sessions. Consent from them was gathered as part of a regular internal routine in the organisation which also included the consent to other forms of documentation such as picture-taking during the workshop, even though such data was not part of this study. As mentioned in sections 3.2 and 3.3.2, the researcher has made his role known to the participants of the analysed workshops and has communicated his research interests openly (Bryman & Bell, 2007). All participants had the explicit opportunity to object to or withdraw from the observation of the workshop. No participant in any of the observed workshops chose to do so. This procedure of advance information and voluntary participation should have avoided an occurrence of any conflict of interest or issues regarding the interaction with the workshop participants.

In the same regard the interviewed experts were approached by the researcher with the enquiry whether they would be willing to participate in expert interviews relating to consensus building in strategy workshops. All experts received a written outline of the proposed research study and the interview questionnaire (see figures 24 and 25) as well as the consent form (see Appendix II) in advance. Each interview session also started with a small introduction and description of the research context and the aim of the study.

Thereby, it has been ensured, that all participants of this study were fully aware of the nature of this study, the use of the collected data and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The confidentiality of the collected data has been ensured during the whole research process. No participating individuals or companies are fully named without anonymization in the research documentation, and along the stages of the analysis and documentation it has been ensured that no results can be related directly to any particular individuals or their company. Critical data has been anonymised and handled with confidentiality in accordance with the ethics standards of Northumbria University.

Particularly the topic of commercially sensitive data has been treated with special care. In order to avoid the collection of sensitive or confidential data that relates to the business operations of the organisations in which the data collection took place, the author had decided not to collect such data at any stance. This approach resulted in a selective note-taking in the case of the workshop observations, where commercially sensitive data were specifically left out or paraphrased in the documentation along the observation.

Off-the-record statements that occurred before or after the interview or outside of the observed workshop sessions were not included in any way into the study.

Further, the author ensures that the storage and processing of the collected data is in line with the requirements of Northumbria University (2010) and the guidelines from RESPECT (Rosier & Vereecken, 2003). The data is stored securely and any processing and analysing has been conducted with prior consent from the data subjects. All critical data will be destroyed upon completion of the research project and after passing the viva voce.

The author acted independently and out of own interest for the proposed research topic. The conducted research is not sponsored or impacted by the employer of the author or a third party. Thereby, the choice of research approach and research content i.e. in the sense of external pragmatism were not enforced from outside, but rather developed out of the own stance of the researcher (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Nevertheless, as mentioned in the previous section, the proposed topic touches a field of interest of the employing department of the author. The author therefore aims to act as independent as possible in his research approach.

To abide with the code of ethics and governance of Northumbria University (2010), an application for a research ethics approval was drafted and has been submitted in June 2017. As the collection of primary data is based on observations and interviews, the author has sought ethics approval on conducting “amber”-level research (Northumbria University, 2010) as stated in the presented ethics approval application. The necessary initial approval from the council was gained on August 16th 2017. After adjustments were made to the data collection process, a second approval for the revised methodology was gained on November 29th 2018. The research project was conducted in line with the provisions of these two approvals.

3.4.3 Ethical considerations made during the research project

This research project was conducted in accordance with the previously stated standards and guidelines. This was assured based on a familiarisation with existing ethical guidelines for research projects at Northumbria University and by the seeking of approval of the ethics council of Northumbria University. Nonetheless, this required several considerations along the course of this research. In particular, the abidance of ethical standards requires sensitivity regarding the use and the handling of research data that was being collected during a research project. From an ethical perspective, this resulted in careful considerations regarding the approach to potential interviewees and the communication of the study content as well as the handling of the related information. Thereby, it was ensured that participants were informed up-front and had to provide consent to participating in the research. This approach is closely aligned with the epistemological position of the researcher to ensure transparency in the personal interactions with the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Participants were also informed that any information given would be anonymised and treated with confidentiality. Further, each participant was given the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any stage in case of any doubts or uncertainties. In line with the careful preparations of this study, these steps were not taken by any participant.

To ensure anonymity and safety of the data, all collected data has been anonymised upon transcription and all data was stored solely digitally on a secured external hard-drive.

In the same regard, the position of the researcher had to be evaluated from an ethical stance, as the research has been conducted within the employing organisation. Thereby, the researcher could be considered an insider and hence a risk of bias or use of insider information had to be mitigated through the methodological approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The issue of use of commercially sensitive data for example had been raised during the review stage of the initial ethical approval process. This aspect was met by explicitly avoiding or altering any data that could potentially contain commercially sensitive information. As the focus of this research lies on interpersonal and interaction information, abidance with ethical standards in this regard was ensured along the data collection process. By including expert interviews the ethical risk of researcher bias was also mitigated.

An initial approval of the abidance of ethical standards by the research project has been granted in August 2017 in line with the commencement of the primary data collection. However, as the data collection progressed, changes were made to the data collection process, that led also to necessary adjustments in the ethical considerations that had been made initially. The respective adjustments are also referenced in the research protocol. These changes to the methodological approach resulted also in changes in the approach to research ethics. Therefore, a revised ethics proposal was submitted in 2018 in order to reflect upon the new ethical challenges that resulted from an extension of the data collection scope with semi-structured interviews.

An important aspect of the re-application for an ethical approval was also to inform the supervising academics, who review the applied standards, of the nature of the changes to the methodology and its implications for research ethics. These changes were clarified in writing in order to gain approval for the chosen adjustments by November 2018. The newly identified challenges from a research ethics perspective corresponded mainly with the assurance of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data gathered from the interviews. On the other hand this adjusted methodology allowed also to defer potential ethical challenges that corresponded with the initially attempted data collection from surveys.

3.5 Data collection process

3.5.1 Pilot study

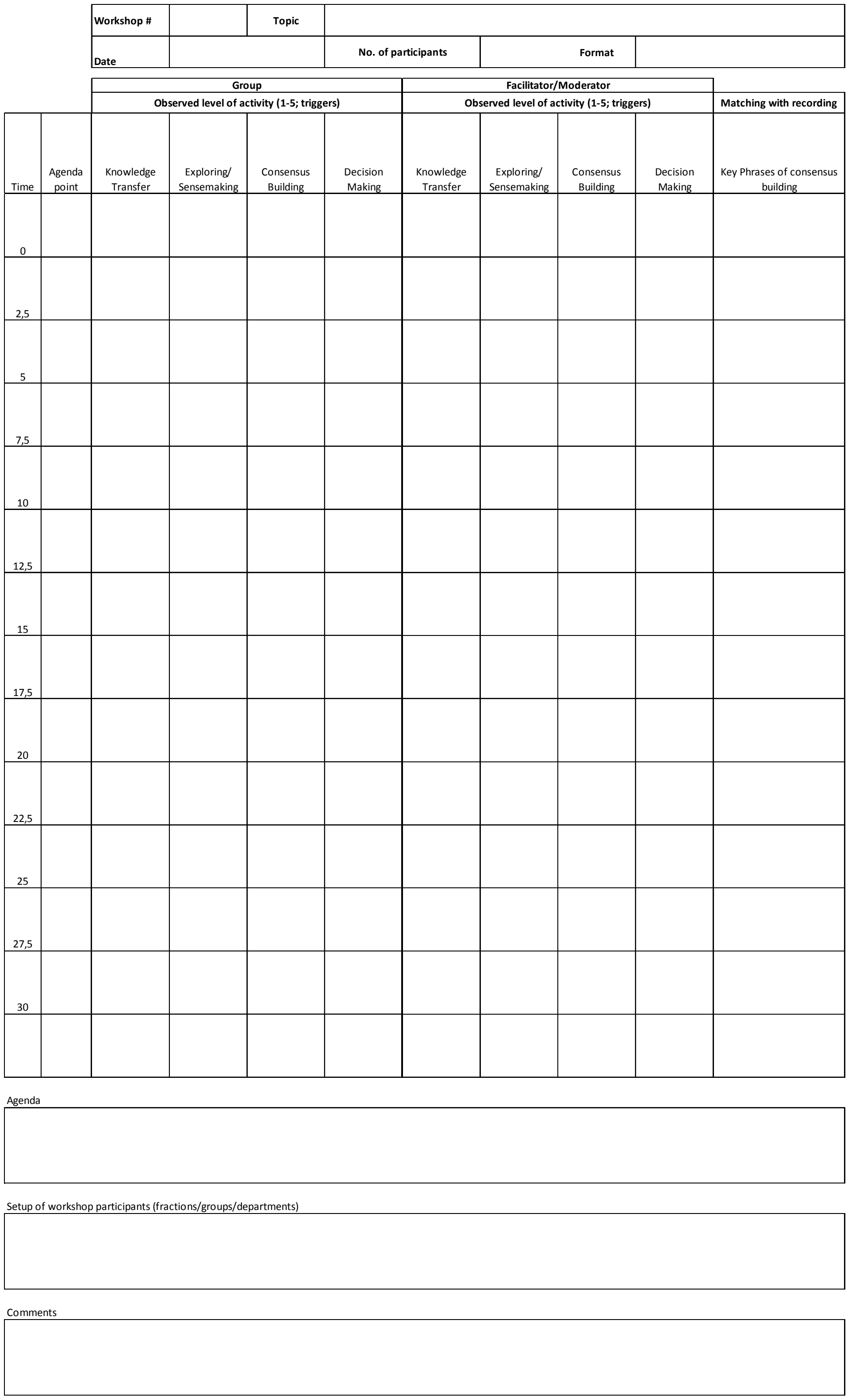
In order to refine the data collection approach, a series of early pilot study activities, such as a testing of a recording log, have been conducted in the second half of 2016. The final methodology has accordingly been adjusted. Likewise, the methodological approach and the data collection process have been clarified and detailed based on the early pilots. The pilot study has provided the opportunity to experiment with the chosen techniques for the data collection.

In order to capture observations made during a strategy workshop, an observation log has been developed for the respective data collection. This log was aimed at measuring the types, the occurrence and intensity of the initially defined micro-routines of problem solving along the timeline of the workshop, as well as linking them to participants and facilitator and identifying key phrases.

An observation log was just one option that could have been used for this purpose in the context of data collection from workshops. An alternative choice for a recording tool would have been e.g. the application of cognitive maps, as proposed by Colin Eden (Eden, 1992; Eden & Ackermann, 2001). However, this method was not chosen due to a lack of familiarity with this technique as well as concerns regarding their practicability in the potential strategy workshop setups.

The observation log was created based on field note examples from DeWalt & DeWalt (2011) and the research questions. The aim of the observation log was to develop a format in which the gathered notes from the observation could initially be structured according to their connection to the research questions.

In order to validate the data collection approach, a pilot study to test the recording log was conducted in two strategy oriented workshops in fall of 2016, in order to test its practical usability. A draft version of this tested log is shown in Figure 16.



Workshop #		**Topic**			
Date		**No. of participants**		**Format**	

		Group				**Facilitator/Moderator**				
		Observed level of activity (1-5; triggers)				**Observed level of activity (1-5; triggers)**				**Matching with recording**
Time	Agenda point	Knowledge Transfer	Exploring/ Sensemaking	Consensus Building	Decision Making	Knowledge Transfer	Exploring/ Sensemaking	Consensus Building	Decision Making	Key Phrases of consensus building
0										
2,5										
5										
7,5										
10										
12,5										
15										
17,5										
20										
22,5										
25										
27,5										
30										

Agenda

Setup of workshop participants (fractions/groups/departments)

Comments

Figure 16: Self-developed Observation log template that was tested in the pilots

Both workshops took place in a timeframe of one to two hours and consisted of management representatives from different departments and hierarchy levels. One workshop used an external facilitator, while the other one was moderated internally.

In these pilots, data was solely collected with the help of this log template with no further data collection methods being used during the workshops. Results from this pilot were not used further for the main study of this research and the information from these logs has been destroyed once conclusions and adjustments for the conduction of the main study had been derived.

3.5.1.1 Outcome and conclusions from pilot study

The complexity of the data collection from the pilots, as well as the volume of information that could be derived, provided findings which emphasised initially a too complex and broad research focus. It proved to be difficult to record meaningful information on several streams of interaction, as well as gaining the required depths in information on a particular stream in order to derive data that informs the research questions and to generate a relevant amount of data for each aspect for the analysis.

Further, the identified risk of lacking meaningful data based on the sole application of one observation method was met with an extension of the data collection approach. It was therefore initially planned to frame the observation with information that would be gathered through short surveys, which were to be conducted pre- and post-workshop. These were chosen to inform the analysis of the observational data with broader insights into the individual perspectives and expectations of the participants (P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). This approach would have been in line with several others strategy-as-practice studies, that combined observations with other forms of data collection in order to embed the findings into the context (P. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Schwarz, 2009).

On the other hand, the observed discussions in both workshops provided a notion that consensus appeared to be relevant for a structured flow of interactions in order to achieve the desired workshop targets. Hence, the outcome of the data collection pilot resulted in several adjustments to the scope and focus of the research projects. The main adjustments were, as followed:

- A shift of the overall focus of the research project from strategic problem-solving and its micro-routines in general towards focusing the research on consensus building between participants of a workshop as a specific element within the strategizing process.
- A related shift in the focus of the data collection from capturing several streams of interaction and developments during a workshop towards only capturing the presence and the evolution of consensus in a workshop scenario. This has also led to a revision of the proposed data collection log that was used during the observation in the main study.

- Initially, an expansion of the data collection surrounding a workshop by including pre- and post-workshop short surveys into the scope of the data collection was also considered. However, an implementation of this approach proved to be impractical, as workshop participants and workshop organisers were reluctant to participate in these or even allow the conduction of these types of surveys around an important workshop.
- Individual interviews before or after observed workshops were not considered anymore as a core element of the data collection toolset. Instead, interviews with individual experts on the strategy process or strategy workshops were conducted in order to extend the data set of this research and in order to validate the main study findings from the analysis of the observational data.

Based on these adjustments the main study was commenced in the summer of 2017.

3.5.2 Main study

The main study was conducted based upon the above described findings and experiences from the pilot studied which were analysed and discussed with the supervisory team. Further, additional input from the reviewed academic literature was utilized in order to finalise the data collection approach.

The main study has then applied the refined data collection process for the workshop observation. The findings from this data collection were later used to contrast the studied workshops and to derive robust and valuable conclusions to answer the research questions. Despite a broad preparation of the main study with the help of the initial pilots, the circumstances around gathering data from strategy workshops proved to be challenging. Due to the sensitivity of strategy meetings in general, and corporate strategy workshops in particular, the possibility to attend strategy meetings and workshops with the possibility for data collection proofed to be very limited. This led to a delay in the data collection from a practical perspective, but more important also a very limited set of observational data for this research project. As a result, it was decided to divide the data collection of the main study into two phases with separate data collection approaches, as will be explained in the following sections. The resulting data collection hence consists of two formats with a resulting data set that builds on each other.

3.5.2.1 Phase 1

3.5.2.1.1 Data collection in Phase 1

The data collection in phase 1 of the main study focused on observations of strategy workshop. These observations were conducted based on leads that were achieved through personal contacts of the researcher and in coordination with the managers responsible for the respective workshops in which the data collection took place. The data collection was communicated in advance to workshop participants.

For the main study of this research two strategy workshops have been observed. This approach was regarded as successful, based on the outcome. The observations have helped to gather a more profound set of data than a mere conduction of interviews would achieve in the same scope (Pålsson, 2007).

3.5.2.1.1.1 Focus of the data collection from observations

Observing workshops in the context of consulting projects of his employing department has implied in the instance of case 1 that the researcher had been actively involved in the preparation and conduction of elements of the observed workshops, though this did not extend to those stages of the workshop which were observed for this study. Therefore, the author has taken on a researcher-participant role in the observation process. This role manifested in this instance as a "participant-as-observer role (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The insider view has allowed for deeper understanding of the dynamics of the researched workshop elements, as the researcher gained a more profound understanding of the circumstances in which the observed workshop sequences took place (Symon & Cassell, 2013). The potential risk of an adverse influence of the collected data is acknowledged. However, as the observer was not an active participant in the specific researched workshop sequences, but only in other related workshop sequences, the impact of such influences should be limited in this case. In the other studied cases, the researcher had no involvement in the preparation and conduction of the workshop and acted solely as an independent external spectator.

Per workshop, up to 90 minutes of observational data were collected, depending on the agenda of the workshop. This resulted in a total of up to 180 minutes of recorded information from observations. The information was recorded in an observation log, which is presented in section 3.3.2.3.

Data was solely gathered from the observed group discussion and recorded manually with the help of the observation log. A data recording by video was deliberately dismissed due to perceived rejection by the business partners who organised the workshops and the fear of changed behaviour patterns by participants. This reflects similar experiences by other researchers, such as Tavella and Franco (2015) who also refrained from video recording.

In the course of this research project observations were conducted in two strategy workshops. During the observations notes were taken in the observation log and on a separate piece of paper. In the transcription phase these notes were again consolidated. .

Observing interactions in a workshop or of a group allows for a large variety of collectable data. Therefore a clear focus for the conducted research has been proposed and applied (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010). In line with Duffy (2014), it was assumed that observations provide for contextual evidence of the interactions in workshops, as well as providing a grounding of the research question in a real setting.

Based on the pilot studies, the focus of the observations has been put on those activities that directly relate to the formation of consensus. Other activities that occur along the interactions will only be recorded where they are deemed to be of relevant to the formation or communication of consensus.

Likewise, the recording of dialogue will be limited to key phrases that advance the interaction in the workshop setting. Further, in order to abide with research ethics and to honour the confidentiality of the information that is passed on during a strategy workshop, the recording of dialogue is avoided where critical information without relevance to the formation of consensus or strategic decision making is shared in the workshop setting.

The data collection has therefore only focused on the dialogue and interactions that contribute to consensus building within a workshop. It is, however, recognised, that off-topic discussions and interactions may provide an important basis for shaping agreements and consensus.

Further, the data collection will not recognize personal allegiances or alliances between workshop participants, nor will it collect data on historical impacts that took place previous to the observed workshop. It has been recognised in the literature review, that these aspects can have a significant impact on the dynamics in a workshop. However, incorporating these elements into the data would have posed several risks and challenges. As the researcher is not familiar with the actual nature of these personal ties, incorporating such aspects into the data may pose the risk of inaccuracies or a researcher bias. Therefore these aspects have not been referred to in the data collection and the analysis.

3.5.2.1.1.2 Observational data collection log

Based on the pilot study, the recording log for the observations was further advanced with the aim to facilitate the collection of observational data in the setup of workshops that involve multiple stakeholders.

For the data collection, a self-developed log has recorded when and in which intensity consensus shaping interactions take place. The recording will document the dialogue and activities by the participants during the meso-routine and along the different micro-routines that took place. This aims to capture key phrases and actions which help to identify the course of the discussion and the evolution of consensus.

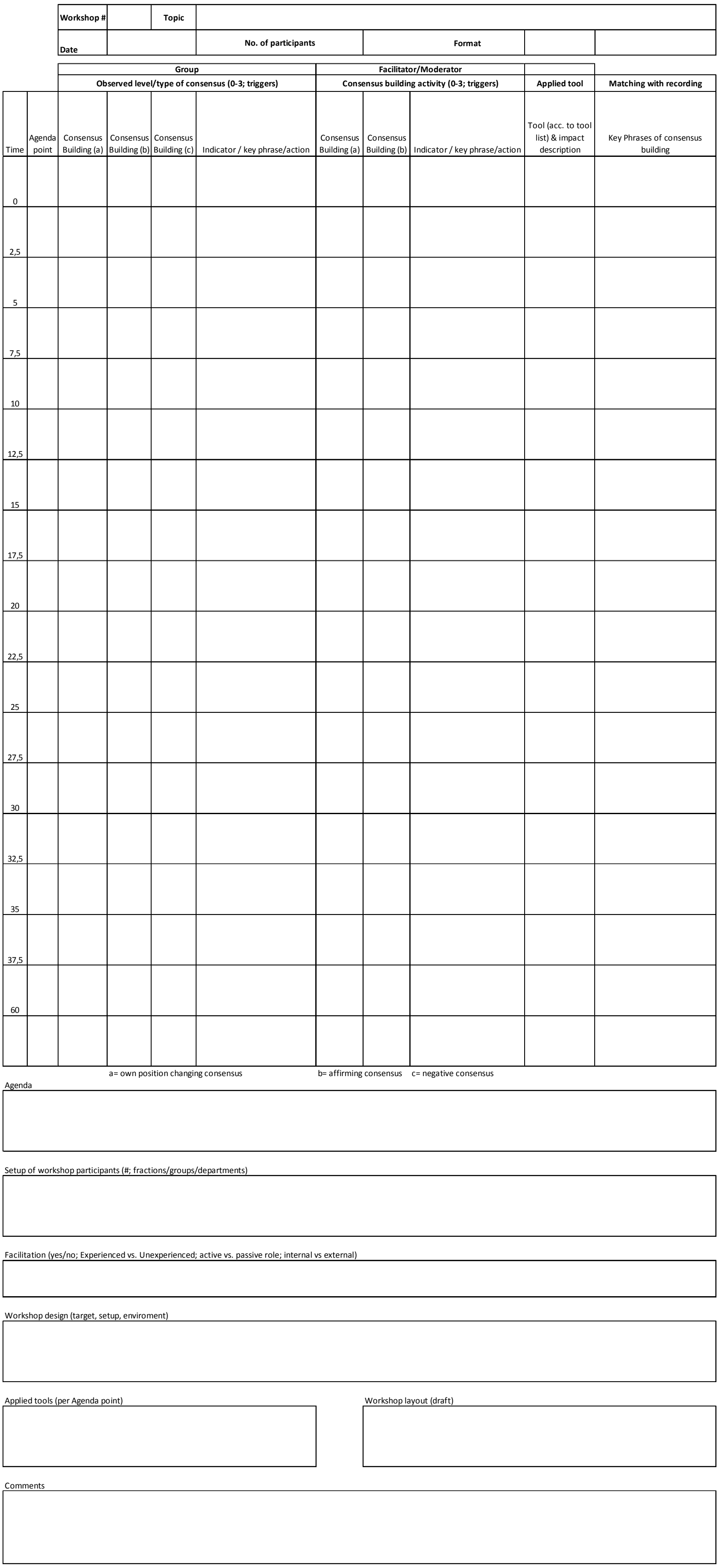
This allows for the uncovering of the relation between the context factors, dialogues and actions and how they lead up to a formation of consensus and strategic decisions. The log will be recorded on paper and afterwards transcribed into an Excel-template.

The data collection is clustered into two spheres. Sphere 1 records the observed interaction of the workshop participants, sphere 2 records the interactions that are triggered by a facilitator or moderator.

The facilitator or moderator was recorded separately, as this role stands out in the workshop context in contrast to the ordinary participants. His role is usually also empowered in order to provide guidance to the workshop participants and to ensure the smooth delivery of the workshop. The role of the facilitator shapes the course of the interactions, as he will guide the workshop participants along the workshop agenda and will record and point to critical information that is relevant for the course of the workshop and its outcome. Further, the facilitator can restrain or inspire dialogue and interaction between participants. Thereby, the facilitator is deemed to be a critical contributor to the formation of consensus or its lack of formation.

As there is a strong tendency to use external sources for facilitation of workshop settings, this separation of the collected data can also help to generate a better understanding of the role of the facilitator as a context factor to the workshop interactions.

In addition to the recording of the workshop interactions, the observation log will also be used to record the agenda, workshop setup as well as notable group structures of the workshop participants. The observation log template that was used in the main study is exhibited in figure 17.



Workshop #		**Topic**			
Date		**No. of participants**		**Format**	

		Group				**Facilitator/Moderator**				
		Observed level/type of consensus (0-3; triggers)				**Consensus building activity (0-3; triggers)**			**Applied tool**	**Matching with recording**
Time	Agenda point	Consensus Building (a)	Consensus Building (b)	Consensus Building (c)	Indicator / key phrase/action	Consensus Building (a)	Consensus Building (b)	Indicator / key phrase/action	Tool (acc. to tool list) & impact description	Key Phrases of consensus building
0										
2,5										
5										
7,5										
10										
12,5										
15										
17,5										
20										
22,5										
25										
27,5										
30										
32,5										
35										
37,5										
60										

a= own position changing consensus b= affirming consensus c= negative consensus

Agenda

Setup of workshop participants (#; fractions/groups/departments)

Facilitation (yes/no; Experienced vs. Unexperienced; active vs. passive role; internal vs external)

Workshop design (target, setup, enviroment)

Applied tools (per Agenda point)

Workshop layout (draft)

Comments

Figure 17: Observation log used in main study (own reproduction)

3.5.2.1.2 Description of studied cases

In the following the two cases are described regarding their elements and purpose. Both cases fit the defined workshop criteria. The cases were recorded with the help of the self-developed observation log. For the purpose of anonymization the participants were represented with an abbreviation-letter according to the alphabet.

3.5.2.1.2.1 Case 1: Syntegration workshop

The first case comprises two episodes of a stand-alone workshop format that focused on the identification of strategic measures to integrate and digitalise the international Asset Management organisation of a subsidiary of the case study organisation. The workshop was conducted in a syntegration format and was highly structured. The format lasted for 2.5 days during which the strategic measures were consequently being developed. This process started on day 1 with an identification and prioritisation of topic areas to address the workshop goal. In these topic areas brainstorming ideas and existing measures were consolidated. Day 2 and 3 applied then an iterative sequence of 1-hour breakout sessions in which the Top 6 topic areas were analysed in detail and in which concrete strategic measures were developed. This process started with the identification of measures and cumulated in the development of accurate measure profiles including milestones and effects. The workshop was completely prepared and organised by representatives of the inhouse consulting and also facilitated by them. The workshop was organised as an away day in a hotel in 1-hour travel distance from the European headquarters of the subsidiary.

The workshop participants consisted of 32 national and international management representatives with responsibilities in the areas of asset management, asset maintenance, finance & controlling from 6 countries. Further the head of an innovation lab which is affiliated with the Asset Management department participated in the workshop. All representatives held top or middle management roles in their respective organisations.

The specific episodes that were observed for this study took place on Day 2 and focused on the clustering and prioritisation of leads for strategic measures around the issue of international collaboration and integration among the participating country organisations (session 1) and the consequential initial development of measure profiles from the results of session 1 (session 2).

All participants were equipped with an extensive fact book that comprised all the relevant data and KPIs concerning Asset Management and Maintenance of the affiliated countries that participated in the workshop.

The workshop followed a strict regime with pre-defined tools and formats per session and a clear time-keeping schedule. The sessions applied a prioritisation matrix, post-its and profile templates as tools.

The setup of the workshop sessions that were observed is shown in figure 18.

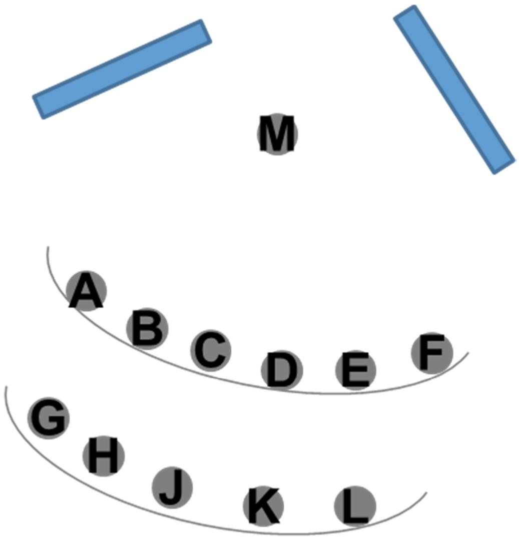


Figure 18: Physical layout of the workshop room in Workshop 1

3.5.2.1.2.2 Case 2: Workshop as part of a nine months long workshop series

The second case is a one-hour strategic workshop that took place as part of a corporate restructuring project of a subsidiary of the case organisation. The workshop was part of a series of bi-weekly workshops that took place over a period of nine months. The workshop series was part of a strategic project which was embedded in an entity-wide two year restructuring programme. The purpose of the workshop series was the definition of a strategic and conceptual framework that was supposed to generate a steering logic as a control system for all organisational units of the restructured subsidiary in order to support the overall aim to generate a turnaround in business performance for the respective company. The particular workshop that was observed focused on the definition of several elements of this steering logic and the impact that these elements have on sales and operations in the context of achieving the strategic goals.

The workshop was prepared by a responsible sub-project manager with the help of one inhouse consultant and several members of his own organisational unit.

The participants of the observed workshop session consisted of several representatives from the finance department (C, D), in particular the financial governance unit (E), the sales units (B) and the operations planning department (A, F). The workshop was organised and facilitated by a member of the inhouse consulting. All participants were in middle management positions in their respective organisational units and were placed in a layout as shown in figure 19.

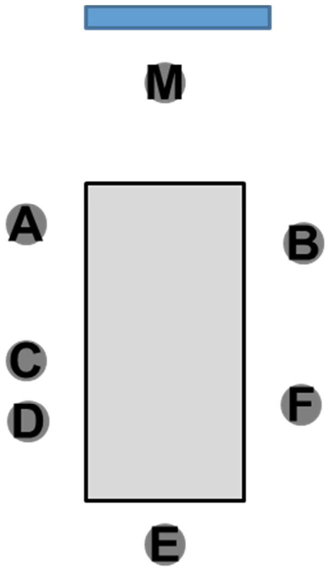


Figure 19: Physical layout of the workshop room in Workshop 2

The setting of the workshop series was in a meeting room in the company offices.

The observed workshop applied a draft version of the conceptual steering framework as an artefact and used further a PowerPoint presentation with slides from an executive board and from previous status meetings for further information. Further a white board was used for documentation of the discussion content.

3.5.2.1.3 Limitations and restrictions of the data collection in Phase 1

The data collection in Phase 1 was limited by several factors. In particular, it proved to be difficult to gain the necessary access to strategic workshops in order to gather data. Over the course of one year, access for data collection was only granted to 5 workshops. Further, in some instances potential workshops where access was granted did not fit into the defined criteria for a strategy workshop. Thus, these workshops were not used as a source of data for this research.

In the initial research study setup, a stronger focus had been set on observational data. The initial idea was thereby to generate original data from the research setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

However, in this approach the research project encountered several set-backs, as it proved to be difficult to gain access to workshops that matched the outlined criteria for strategy workshops as defined for this research project. This can mainly be attributed to two factors:

- First of all, the researcher encountered problems regarding the knowledge and availability of workshops that fulfilled the required criteria. In several instances workshops took place at different locations in Germany and Europe without a possibility for the participant to attend them personally. Likewise, in most instances the researcher did not get knowledge in advance of a workshop or far enough in advance in order to coordinate the required introductions and preparatory discussions with the organisers to secure an observation. In some periods, particularly the first months of the year and the late summer months no workshops took place either. Thereby the self-defined time scope based on the timeline of the DBA program was no sufficient for a larger study based on observations.
- Second, in cases where workshops came to be known with an adequate lead time, it proved to be difficult to gain the permission to observe workshop participants from an external perspective and to record data from the interaction in those workshops. Based on personal dialogues with responsibles and department heads, this was mainly attributed to concerns that the presence of an external observer could have a negative impact on the actual discussions in the workshop and the openness and motivation of the participants to discuss critical issues. Likewise, there were reservations about the participation in a research project as this would require additional preparations and efforts, such as the information of the research participants, without any immediate benefits to the involved projects or work groups.
- Third, unwillingness by the organisers or crucial participants to participate in pre-workshop surveys or to allow a comparable collection of further data, lead to a withdrawal of the data collection approach from two further strategy workshops.

Due to the named obstacles, it proved to be difficult to gain access to further strategy workshops within the desired time frame for this research project. This resulted in a shift in scope for the data collection. On the basis of these constraints, it was decided in 2017 to expand the role of the interviews as a second source of data in order to generate a sound data set. Thereby, the number of observations has been reduced to two workshops and additional complementary data was gathered through interviews with professional experts in the field of strategy from the studied corporation.

This data collection was conducted in Phase 2.

3.5.2.2 Phase 2

3.5.2.2.1 Data collection in Phase 2

Due to the limitations and access restrictions that were encountered during the first phase of the data collection, it was decided to extend the main study with a second approach to the data collection. This decision was taken in order to ensure that the study is provided with a substantial set of data that holds enough significance and depth in order to address the research questions. Therefore the data collection was expanded in 2018 with a series of interviews with professional experts in strategy from the case study company.

3.5.2.2.2 Scope of data collection in Phase 2

The scope of the second phase of the data collection was oriented towards gathering as much additional data as feasible to substantiate the limited outcome from the observations. In order to inform the collected observational data, interviews with a sample size of 16 senior strategizing experts have been conducted.

This has allowed for a further triangulation of the collected and structured findings against existing theory as well as the findings from the observations from Phase 1 (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The triangulation does also counter-balance individual limitations of each data collection method and adds depth and rigor to the research(Miles et al., 2014).

The interviews were conducted to a point where a saturation in the content of the findings was being observed and where a significant contribution could already be derived from the data set (Tracy, 2013). A saturation point with regard to its depth and links between the researched elements was observed after 15 interviews.

3.5.2.2.3 Focus of semi-structured interviews

The interviews in Phase 2 focused on data for the answering of the research questions that was found to be non-addressable by observations. This included information of the rationale of a strategy workshop, the definition of consensus in a strategy workshop and a broader ranking and justification of the relevance of influencing context factors for consensus and the consensus building process. Further, additional personal information was gathered from the interviewees regarding the frequency of participation and the usual role in a strategy workshop. This dataset provided a significant substantiation of the research data, as well as access to further information pools that would not have been available in case of a sole focus on observations (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010).

3.5.2.2.4 Sampling Strategy

The sampling for the interviews applied a reputational case sampling. Interview partners were approached based on their known expertise and experience in the field of strategy or concerning strategy workshops. This occurred in several instances also on the basis of recommendations by colleagues or interview partners. In four instances the selection of interview partners was approached through snowballing. Thereby, further data was collected from interviewees that were recommended by initial interview partners until a point of saturation along the desired scope of the data collection was achieved (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Miles et al., 2014).

The sample for the expert interviews consists of experienced management representatives from different organisations and senior professionals from consulting firms. The sample selection has been conducted through a probability sampling based on a systematic selection (Saunders et al., 2009; Tracy, 2013).

All interview partners have a direct link to the research topic based upon their professional role in organisations, as well as their exposure to and personal experience with strategizing (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The selection was judgemental and largely based on a subjective evaluation of the capacity of the interview partners concerning the research field and their willingness to participate (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

All interview partners are current or former employees of the organisation in which the research has been conducted. Further, through the selection process it was ensured, that all interview partners had sufficient experience in the field of strategy and with strategy workshops. Their professional experience in strategy-related positions was also recorded as part of the interview process.

At the time of the interview, the interview partners held positions either as managers in different entities of the studied organisation or leading functions in the inhouse consulting of the company. Regarding the inhouse consulting, these include roles on a senior project manager/principal level, as well as partner/director level. The diversity in represented functions of the interviewees is shown in figure 20.

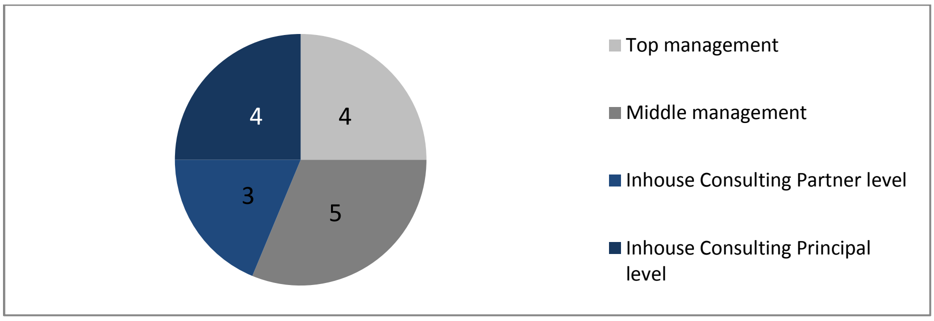


Figure 20: Break-up of expert interviewees by function cluster (own reproduction)

As can be seen in the figure 21, all interview partners had at least 6.5 years of experience in strategy-related functions. These included roles in strategic consulting, functions as team members of corporate development, business development or departments with a comparable scope as well as management functions with exposure to strategy and strategy processes.

IP 01	IP 02	IP 03	IP 04	IP 05	IP 06	IP 07	IP 08	IP 09	IP 10	IP 11	IP 12	IP 13	IP 14	IP 15	IP 16
7	12	13	12	11	10	15	6.5	9	15-20	10	>20	8	10	7.5	7

Figure 21: Overview of the expert interview sample based on current function cluster and years of experience in strategic functions (own reproduction)

3.5.2.2.4.1 Frequency of strategy workshops

All interview partners have relevant previous experience with strategy workshops. However, according to both their role and their position in the organisation, their exposure to strategy workshops proved to be very diverse, as can be seen in figure 22. Despite the fact that all interviewees are employed in the same organisation, the comparison of the number of workshops attended in the last two years differs significantly with a range from 2 to an estimated 30 workshops.

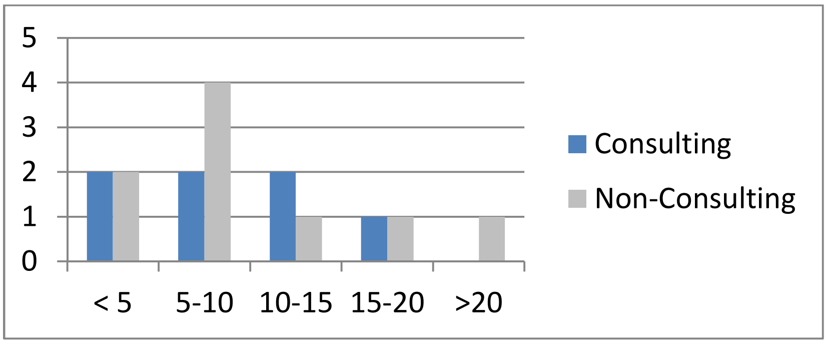


Figure 22: Number of strategy workshops attended by interviewees over the last two years (own reproduction)

Interestingly the vast majority of the interviewees did attend 5 or more workshops over the last two years, with one interviewee having attended a total number of 30 workshops in two years. This underpins the sentiment of the interviewees and of the author that strategy workshops are a widely applied tool. This reflects also in the observations from phase 1, where all the participants appeared to be comfortable and experienced with participating in a strategy workshop.

Nonetheless, several interview partners also reported that the occasion of workshops relates strongly to strategic programs or projects and that this was not constant among the years.

It can be noted, that the non-consulting experts had generally a higher exposure to workshops, while most of the experts from the inhouse consulting attended between 5 to 15 workshops over the last two years.

3.5.2.2.4.2 Role in strategy workshops

The interviewed experts had different roles in those workshops in which they participated. This is presented in figure 23. Most of the interviewees acted regularly as facilitators rather than as participants.

However, 8 interviewees assumed more than one role in those workshops. Most of the inhouse consultants acted both as facilitators and/or responsible for a workshop, while most of the experts from the line organisation were participants in cases when they did not facilitate. Only two experts from the line management stated that they were responsible for the organisation of a workshop.

Interview partner	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Participant				X	X		X			X	X	X	X		X	
Facilitator	X	X	X			X		X	X	X			X	X	X	X
Responsible		X			X	X		X						X	X	

Figure 23: Assumed workshop roles of interview partners (own reproduction)

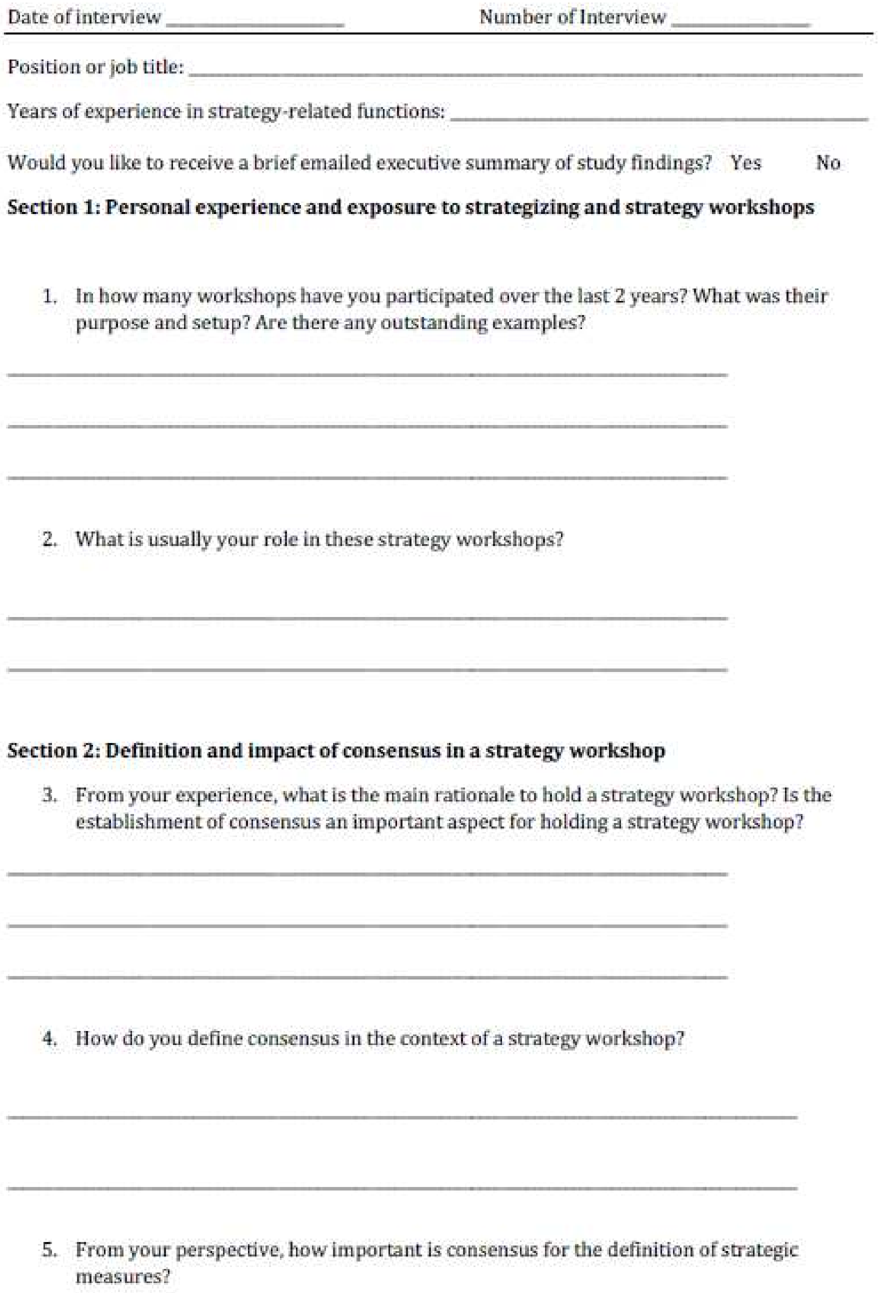
Interestingly, two of the interviewed experts from the inhouse consulting also stated that they attended workshops regularly as invited experts. Likewise, several inhouse consultants also expressed regret that they did not participate in workshops as mere participants or experts.

3.5.2.2.5 Structure and recording of interviews

The interview process took place over a period of 8 months, starting in February 2018.

All interviews were conducted with a planned length of approximately 45 minutes each. As already outlined in chapter 3.5.2.2.3, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner (Bryman & Bell, 2007). They were based on a pre-defined and semi-structured question set with open-ended questions, as well as closed questions and ranking questions. The question set is shown in figures 23 and 24 and can also be found in an exemplary transcript in Appendix V.

The questions are structured along three sections and reflected the research questions of this thesis. The first section addresses the expertise and personal experience of the interviewee with strategy workshops. The second section focuses on the definition of consensus and its role and impact in a strategy workshop. The third and last section of the questionnaire addresses the establishment of consensus and the impact of context factors on strategizing in general and specifically on consensus building.



Date of interview ______________ Number of Interview ____________

Position or job title: ________________________

Years of experience in strategy-related functions: ________________

Would you like to receive a brief emailed executive summary of study findings? Yes No

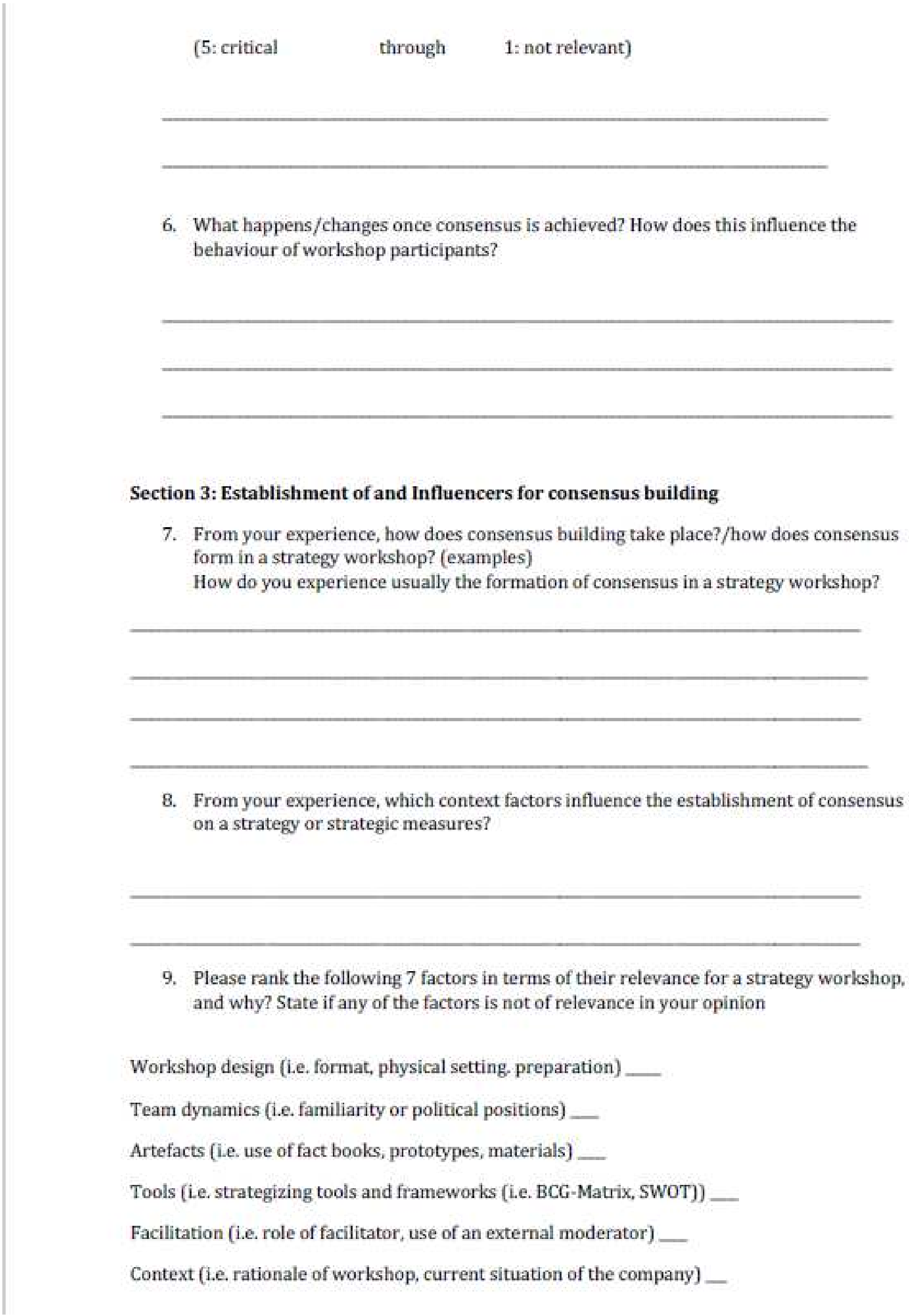
Section 1: Personal experience and exposure to strategizing and strategy workshops

1. In how many workshops have you participated over the last 2 years? What was their purpose and setup? Are there any outstanding examples?
2. What is usually your role in these strategy workshops?

Section 2: Definition and impact of consensus in a strategy workshop

3. From your experience, what is the main rationale to hold a strategy workshop? Is the establishment of consensus an important aspect for holding a strategy workshop?
4. How do you define consensus in the context of a strategy workshop?
5. From your perspective, how important is consensus for the definition of strategic measures?

Figure 24: Draft of interview question catalogue – page 1 (own reproduction)



(5: critical through 1: not relevant)

6. What happens/changes once consensus is achieved? How does this influence the behaviour of workshop participants?

Section 3: Establishment of and Influencers for consensus building

7. From your experience, how does consensus building take place?/how does consensus form in a strategy workshop? (examples)
How do you experience usually the formation of consensus in a strategy workshop?

8. From your experience, which context factors influence the establishment of consensus on a strategy or strategic measures?

9. Please rank the following 7 factors in terms of their relevance for a strategy workshop, and why? State if any of the factors is not of relevance in your opinion

Workshop design (i.e. format, physical setting. preparation) ____
Team dynamics (i.e. familiarity or political positions) ___
Artefacts (i.e. use of fact books, prototypes, materials) ___
Tools (i.e. strategizing tools and frameworks (i.e. BCG-Matrix, SWOT)) ___
Facilitation (i.e. role of facilitator, use of an external moderator) ___
Context (i.e. rationale of workshop, current situation of the company) __

Figure 25: Draft of the interview question catalogue - page 2 (own reproduction)

The question set gave the interviewees an overall guidance on the relevant topics that were to be covered without having a strict approach to the dialogue (Fisher, 2004). This approach has ensured that additional input from the interviewees or initially disregarded topics could be addressed in the analysis. Thereby, the semi-structured interviews allowed for a broader and resulted-focused generation of relevant data (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The interviews were recorded in writing. An additional audio recording has been conducted in case of consent of the interviewee, in order to facilitate the documentation and analysis of the information from the interview. The interviews were directly transcribed after the conduction of the interview from the notes that were made during the interview as well as audio recordings –where possible- to ensure that the data used in the analysis is valid and authentic. Audio recordings were immediately deleted after completion of the transcription. Over the course of the data collection, it was ensured that a transcription was conducted within two days of the interview date.

3.6 Language

As the focus of the study is on a German organisation, all interviewees - as well as the majority of the participants in the observed workshops – were also German. Therefore the issue of language has to be recognised in the context of this research. Due to this international context, the researcher was faced with a language barrier during the collection of the research data.

In order to simplify the data collection process and to capture precise answers within the interviews, all interviews were conducted in German. For the data analysis, all interview transcripts were translated into English by the researcher. This was done with the intention to maintain consistency in the data and to facilitate the coding of the data for the analysis. The author tried to conduct these translations word-for-word and to keep the translations and expressions as close to the original as possible (Albrecht, 2013).

It is acknowledged, that this translation process may result in an “unconscious interpretation” or a diminishing of the quality of the interview data. However, as the researcher has a long experience in the researched organisation, has worked professionally with several of the interview partners and is familiar with the jargon and terminology commonly used in the researched organisation, the impact of the translation is considered to be minimal. In order to minimise any potential distortion from the translation, the researcher has aimed at keeping colloquial phrases in the translated versions of the transcripts by replacing them with their respective English equivalent (Albrecht, 2013).

In order to provide a valid basis for scrutiny one interview transcript has been added as an example to the appendix both in German and in English. These transcripts can be found in Appendix V and VI.

3.7 Data analysis process

3.7.1 Approach to data analysis

In order to ensure an appropriate handling of the collected data of Phase 1, the collected observation notes were transcribed in an individual file for each unit of analysis. The initial transcription was conducted in German and then translated into English. The translated data sets were then reviewed and coded based on the a priori defined coding scheme.

An initial analysis of the primary data was commenced after the first two workshops had been observed. The aim of this initial analysis was to review the data collection approach, as well as to develop the initial frame in which the analysis of the findings was to be conducted. The main part of the analysis, however, took place after the data collection in both stages had been completed. This initial analysis was used to filter the transcribed data and to inform the preparation of the data collection of Phase 2.

Cluster	Subcluster
Experience and perception of consensus	Definition of consensus
	Importance of consensus
	Utilization of consensus
	Hurdles and risk related to consensus
Evolution of consensus	Process of consensus building
	Stages of consensus building
Factors influencing consensus building	Pre-defined factors
	Individually named factors
Factors influencing strategizing	Pre-defined factors
	Individually named factors
Role and relevance of strategy workshops	Format of workshops
	Role of workshops in the strategy process
	Relevance of workshops
Expertise and exposure of interview partners	Strategic experience
	Number of workshops attended in last 2 years

Table 7: Overview of main data clusters of the primary data

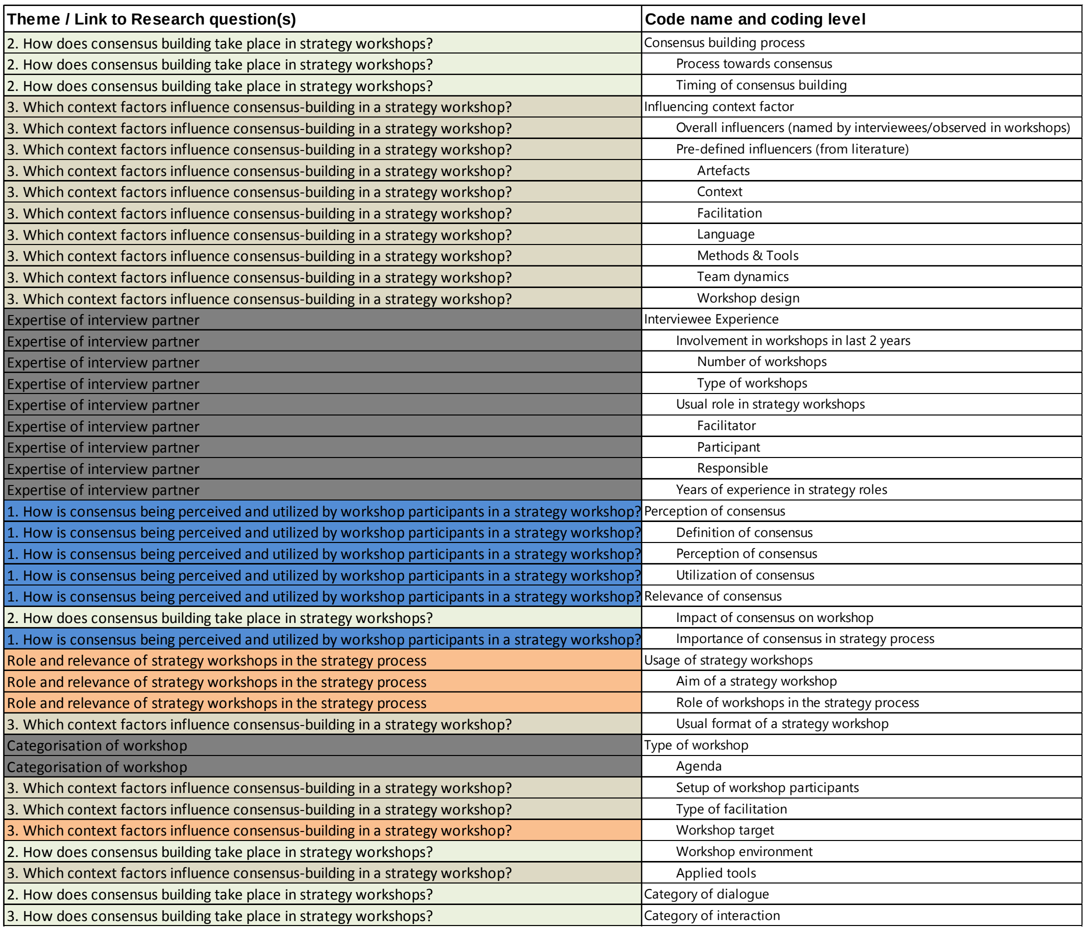
Further the initial analysis provided for a detailed insight into the structure and content of the observed discussions and interactions. These insights were used for a review of the initially developed data clusters for the analysis. The complete list of the revised initial data clusters is presented in Table 7.

The analysis applies a template analysis style based on the research framework which is explained in detail in the following section. For the coding, this research applied the software NVivo. The rationale for the use of nVivo was based on the volume of analysable data from 16 interviews and two strategy workshops (Miles et al., 2014)

3.7.1.1 Initial coding

As already explained in the last section, before the initial data collection a coding structure based on themes relating to the research questions was defined and structured in topic related clusters and hierarchies. Coding is defined as an indexing of existing data according to analytical categories, research goals and the research methodology (Miles et al., 2014). Qualitative research approaches utilise coding as a basis for the analysis in order to consolidate data items that relate to particular themes that have relevance for the empirical study. This is also found to be helpful for the researcher in order to generate an initial concept of potential areas of theory contribution, as well as enhancing data regarding its structure and complexity (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The initial coding of the data was applied in a concept-oriented way. This means that the structure of the nodes and its interrelation were pre-defined top-down by the researcher and did not emerge from the data and the recorded language of the collected data (Miles et al., 2014). The initial coding is shown in figure 26 where the top 2 levels of the coding structure are presented with their link to the research questions and overarching topics.



Theme / Link to Research question(s)	Code name and coding level
2. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Consensus building process
2. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Process towards consensus
2. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Timing of consensus building
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Influencing context factor
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Overall influencers (named by interviewees/observed in workshops)
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Pre-defined influencers (from literature)
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Artefacts
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Context
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Facilitation
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Language
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Methods & Tools
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Team dynamics
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Workshop design
Expertise of interview partner	Interviewee Experience
Expertise of interview partner	Involvement in workshops in last 2 years
Expertise of interview partner	Number of workshops
Expertise of interview partner	Type of workshops
Expertise of interview partner	Usual role in strategy workshops
Expertise of interview partner	Facilitator
Expertise of interview partner	Participant
Expertise of interview partner	Responsible
Expertise of interview partner	Years of experience in strategy roles
1. How is consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?	Perception of consensus
1. How is consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?	Definition of consensus
1. How is consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?	Perception of consensus
1. How is consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?	Utilization of consensus
1. How is consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?	Relevance of consensus
2. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Impact of consensus on workshop
1. How is consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in a strategy workshop?	Importance of consensus in strategy process
Role and relevance of strategy workshops in the strategy process	Usage of strategy workshops
Role and relevance of strategy workshops in the strategy process	Aim of a strategy workshop
Role and relevance of strategy workshops in the strategy process	Role of workshops in the strategy process
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Usual format of a strategy workshop
Categorisation of workshop	Type of workshop
Categorisation of workshop	Agenda
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Setup of workshop participants
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Type of facilitation
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Workshop target
2. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Workshop environment
3. Which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop?	Applied tools
2. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Category of dialogue
3. How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?	Category of interaction

Figure 26: Structure of the analysis based on the link to the research questions and initial coding

The initial coding was utilised to define a virtual template in NVivo which was then applied for the data analysis. The initial coding was refined and further detailed over the course of the analysis stage.

3.7.2 Data analysis of observations and interviews

In the first stage of analysis, data from observations and interview were be structured and evaluated separately to identify the key patterns and findings in each data system. The chosen approach for the data analysis is pictured in figure 27.

This implied that the collected data was reviewed and categorised according to the structure of the initial coding scheme for each set of collected data. During these coding phases, the initially defined codes were revisited. Based upon the granularity of the collected data, the pre-defined coding hierarchy and node structure was detailed further. This was accomplished with further concept-based coding in order to refine the analysis approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This process was initially conducted for the observational data from Phase 1.

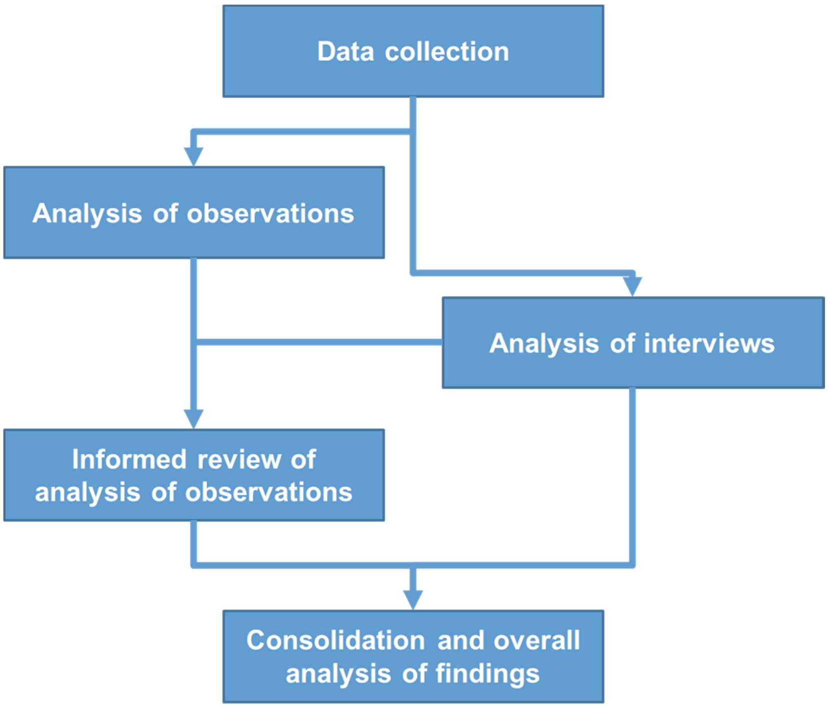

Data collection
Analysis of observations
Analysis of interviews
Informed review of analysis of observations
Consolidation and overall analysis of findings

Figure 27: Design of the data analysis process of this study

In a second step the data sets from the interviews of Phase 2 were analysed on a recurring basis after each completed and transcribed interview. The narrative was coded and clustered according to the initial coding structure (Collis & Hussey, 2003). This iterative approach led to an effective refinement of the node structure of the analysis in NVivo (Miles et al., 2014). At the same time, the revisiting utilised also so called ‘a priori’-coding in order to grasp and integrate the individual knowledge of the data sources into the structuring of the overall data. With the help of a-priori coding the coding structure can be expanded based on themes and clusters that emerge out of the narrative from the respective data source (Miles et al., 2014). This approach was applied after the initial analysis of the observational data and along the analysis of the interview data. The results from the analysis of Phase 2 were fed back into the analysis of the observation in order to inform themes and nodes.

On this basis the analysis of the observations was revisited and adjusted in order to allow for a merger of the findings from the observations with the findings from the interviews were appropriate in the final stage of the analysis. Likewise themes were reviewed and revised in order to provide for a substantiated link between the original data and the research questions.

In the next stage of the analysis, the diverse findings were consolidated and summarised for each respective node. The resulting structure was then again clustered based on thematic content leading to the final node structure.

Clusters	Responses
Communication	“These workshops are also an important tool for change. With them you can initiate a change process and you provide the managers with something which they can refer to once they have to explain the decisions and changes to their teams.” (IP 05) “Well, the question is, how you attempt to use the smoke-screen of the strategy workshop. … there are certainly also situations, where actually already know, what the result will be and where it is just about conveying that. Then the workshop will be used as a change tool.” (IP 08) “Strategy is in many instances not that content-driven, but rather a commitment, consensus building and motivating of the employees. Strategy is a story which needs to give hope, which motivates and states how things will proceed in the future. It is not just there for the employees, but also for the customers, shareholders, supervisory board and so forth. “ (IP 11) “Thus basically it is about the quality of the content that evolves in the process and at the same time about the initiation of the implementation, because the people want to understand it and go along with it. They want to have a story of their own with it.” (IP 12)
Contribution to the annual strategy process	“Then there was the topic of the strategic position of one of our international subsidiaries. As part of my former role, I was also one of the executies of that entity. Once a year we had a two-day strategy workshop on-site of that entity.” (IP 04) “And then we also had a few workshops with the corporate development from our mother company concerning different trend topics and overarching strategy topics.” (IP 05) “After the sale of the organisation we initiated internally a reorientation strategy and we still do this procedure actually every year within our management team since then.” (IP 10) “Most of them related to our annual strategic management process, where they are a part of our process structure.” (IP 15)

Table 8: Example of coded tables with interview data from Phase 2

To address the major challenges of qualitative data appropriately, several techniques were applied in the approach of the qualitative data analysis. The analysis applied data reduction, data structuring and where relevant a detextualisation of the raw data (Collis & Hussey, 2003). This led to a resulting set of data along an overall structure of 180 nodes. These results were structured in tables as shown in Table 8. Similar data sets are also presented in Appendices VI and VII.

The final node structure was then revisited in the form of an in depth analysis of each consolidated node. The resulting insights were then interpreted based on their relation to the research questions. Further these insides were also interpreted based on the literature review as presented in the discussion section. In the comparison of observation and interview findings, patterns in the data were tested for content reflexivity (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The results of the data analysis are presented in chapter 4.

3.8 Research limitations

As mentioned earlier, the researcher acknowledges the existence of limitations to the proposed research approach. These limitations arise mainly from the qualitative and explorative nature of the research project and the decision for a single case study approach. This choice may limit the transferability of the findings into a different research context (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In a different organisational culture or socio-cultural setting strategizing processes may be conducted in a different way and consensus may be perceived differently.

A further issue is the fact that the researcher has collected data from two workshops in which he was to some extent involved either as part of the organisation team or as part of the overall project in which the researcher participated as an inhouse consultant. Participants in the workshops could have also adjusted their behaviour while being observed. A potential bias due to these circumstances has been considered and acknowledged in the conduction of the analysis and the discussion of the findings.

However, the impact of a researcher or participant behaviour bias due to an active involvement or the observation has been reduced by the additional data collection through the expert interviews. As this data does not show significant discrepancies, any resulting bias from these factors is assumed to be only marginal.

Wright et al. (2013) have critiqued, that most research projects that focus on the application of strategy tools just focus on descriptions and observations of easily collectable behaviour sets, as well as only covering small data sets. In their argumentation, a deeper analysis is needed to uncover the core patterns of strategizing. In reference to this stance, the presented research does also just remain on the “visible and observable layer of practice” (Wright et al., 2013, p. 93). Moreover, the scope of the data collection could be scrutinized, as the observation periods cover only pre-selected parts of a workshop. The selection of these parts has been subjective. Comparable, but larger research projects that cover a workshop as a whole could therefore derive broader data sets for analysis. Thereby, their analysis may be able to provide a deeper analysis of first-hand data from workshops.

In line with the philosophical stance of the author, the analysis does not claim a universal applicability of the findings as these can depend on company culture and the implementation context (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This is already acknowledged in the interpretivist, inductive research methodology and the selected case study approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007). All findings are considered to hold only true in the particular context of the cases. However, based on the context description, it is feasible to derive some general recommendations for management practice in a comparable context (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Structure of findings

The following chapter presents the findings from the data collection and analysis. The findings section integrates the collected and analysed data from Phase 1 and Phase 2. It is structured based upon the focus elements of this study. It begins with the findings on strategy workshops and the role of strategy workshops in the strategy process. This is also presented with the influencing factors that impact the outcome of a strategy workshop. The second section of the findings focuses on the role and evolution of consensus building. These findings are presented based on a structure along the three research questions which are the basis of this research. Due to the nature and scope of the data collection, the findings from the observation have a stronger focus on aspects relating to the research questions 2 and 3, while research question 1 cannot be assessed in depth based on the collected data from observations. The chapter ends with a summary of the key findings of this research.

4.2 Findings on consensus

4.2.1 Role of consensus

4.2.1.1 Definition of consensus

As part of the interview, the interviewees were asked to define consensus in a strategy workshop. The data analysis from the interviewees of Phase 2 found five core themes as to the definition of consensus. These are *common approval, common understanding, connected alignment, common definition* and *commitment to measures or actions*. The majority of the interviewees defined consensus with more than one of these perspectives, describing it as a multidimensional subject.

Common approval: Half of the interviewees referred in their definition of consensus to aspects of common approval. Common approval is linked to consensus as an element of the outcome of consensus building. Based on the collected data, consensus is generated out of common approval among the participants of the discussion's content and outcome. According to the interview partners this outcome can range from individual measures to a whole strategy. "All those that are in the circle of participants, all contributors [...] approve of the objective and the approach" (IP 03). An important aspect is that common approval implies a shared agreement of these outcomes. It requires a discussion up to the stage where no individual is explicitly rejecting the content or pulling out of the process as the person has no further objections to the preferred option or decision of the group based on the previous discussion in the strategy workshop. This is either conveyed through active support which is also shown by a majority of the participants or a silent approval with as part of a formal support. “A non-active nay-saying counts also as approval” (IP 03). Data analysis for the Phase 1 workshop observations support this notion particularly concerning the data from workshop 1. In the first break-out session in Workshop 1 the prioritisation of measures resulted twice in discussions among the participants that were led up unto the point where consenting statements or actions (e.g. head-nodding) were observable. This moment was then used by facilitator and workshop group to come to a decision for this subtopic before the discussion moved on.

Ideally, the participants are convinced up to a point where they are also willing to “talk about it on [their] own” in the end of or after a workshop (IP 11).

Common understanding: Based on the definitions by the interviewees, common understanding is a further element of the consensus definition. Thereby, consensus building establishes a common understanding among the workshop participants regarding the issue, the context, the strategizing process and the solution options. There is clarity among the participants regarding definitions, facts and opinions. It was reported that this is a precondition for consensus and the starting point of consensus building, or as IP 10 explained “From my point of view, consensus starts with having a common understanding of terms and actions.”

Connected alignment: This is closely connected to alignment which has also been mentioned as an element of consensus. This aspect of consensus implies that the discussion in the strategy workshop has led to sensemaking and understanding among the participants. In the case of consensus building this sensemaking and understanding leads to a convergence of the individual opinions into one common picture. This common picture represents both the portfolio of the initially different opinions and the above mentioned common understanding of the issue and the solution options. In this regard it was stated by expert 02 that “…consensus is rather a condensation of individual opinions and less a solution of dissent.” Likewise, this implies also that participants are willing to adjust their own opinion in order to generate an alignment around certain positions. This is also considered as an important step towards the implementation.

Common definition: The outcome of the above described interaction is also regarded as an element of consensus. Seven interviewees mentioned the achievement of a common definition of a strategy or strategic options over the course of a discussion as an element of consensus. This common definition implies an agreement on strategic decisions, as well as a common view regarding the resulting plan of action, as mentioned by IP 02: “Consensus is a consolidation of different opinions and the joint definition of a solution approach out of it”. The participants have the same view on the issue and regard the discussed solution as appropriate and support it, which is described by IP 05 as a “common solution with which all participants can identify”.

Commitment: The aspect of commitment was linked to consensus by five interviewees. According to them, consensus implies that the consenting participants of a workshop commit themselves to the decisions that were made in a workshop and fully support the strategy or strategic measures. Thereby consensus is something upon which workshop participants can refer to a workshop result as something which “…I was part of it and hence I go along with it. I make a commitment to this” (IP 09). This commitment is relevant during the workshop, but is as well regarded as the foundation for the following implementation of the strategy. Therefore it is particularly crucial that commitment as an element of consensus is established among those participants who are responsible for the implementation. According to IP 07 it is crucial that “…the result of the workshop is discussed in such a way that everyone from the management backs it and that those who have to implement the result commit themselves to it.”

4.2.1.2 Forms of consensus

In addition to these established elements of consensus, four interviewees also differentiated between different forms of consensus. Their differentiation encompassed in particular a distinction between “true” and “false” consensus. Based on their differentiation, a false consensus implies that the respective participant agrees openly to a measure, but internally the participant has resigned himself or is opposed to the actual decision. This creates a personal sentiment “where you nod, but you are not really part of it. You are just saying, “Whatever, yes” (IP 12). This can occur in case of external pressure on the participants or the whole workshop setup. “In the instance of such an event, there is always a strong pressure to prevent it from failing. That has also an impact on those, who want to contribute constructively. It is some kind of an obligation that is felt by everyone. No one wants to be noticed as the person who visibly undermines such a common effort.” (IP 09)

In that case the apparent consensus is only used as a cover or in order to end a discussion or a potential conflict on an issue, for example because, “the management wants this to happen […] In that situation I may not find valid arguments against it. Also I don’t want to expose myself as an opponent of the whole thing” (IP 09). Such situations were described as a “formal consensus” (IP 09) or “wannabe-consensus” (IP 08) It can be an outcome of a workshop, but won’t imply actual support for a decision.

To differentiate between true and false consensus is however said to be difficult. An indicator for false consensus appears to be the presence of caveats (IP 09).

True consensus on the other hand is described in the data as a sentiment “in the sense of understanding, willingness and being truly part of it with body and soul” (IP 12). This implies already a higher level of commitment and identification with the issue upon which a consensus is established.

To identify and overcome false consensus, IP 09 and IP 10 referred to symbolism and rituals as useful tools. “Something like “All of us want to implement this, signature”” (IP 09). “Many people underestimate the power of the symbolism of such a contract signing that you are in fact doing in your workshop team. That is a crucial moment. At that point you won’t just say, alright, let’s get back to our jobs and goodbye. It makes sense, to close the workshop together with such symbolism before you return to the day-to-day normality. You know it yourself how everyone will say oh great, that makes a lot of sense and then 24 hours down the road the first ones will shoot at it and say yes, but… That was just a mere proposal and there is no agreement” (IP 10). This notion is also confirmed by some observations in phase 1. In the first workshop, workshop participants had to volunteer during the definition phase of strategic measure to take response for these measures. At a later stage, they were asked to present those measures which they took responsibility in front of the whole workshop group and to announce that they would implement them. Likewise, group pictures were taken at the end of this workshop in front of the accumulated identified measures and their consolidated economic impact figures (O 01).

The definition of a short objection period after the workshop was further identified in phase 2 as a way to overcome false consensus (IP 09). The provision of an option to express concern outside the setting of the workshop is thereby considered “to strengthen those consensual elements” (IP 09). This was closely resembled by the procedures in the second workshop in phase 1, when the participants were given a couple of days to review and revise the defined elements of the steering logic before those were then finally established as a fixed basis for the next workshop (O 02).

Likewise, a disconnection from the organisational hierarchies and power structures can also help to avoid the occurrence of false consensus. IP 06 explained that “hierarchies need to be put down at the entry door. If that is not the case, because for example an executive introduces topics out of his position, then any consensus is only apparently there. The impression of it stems from the hierarchy, but it does not settle in.”

4.2.1.3 Relevance of consensus

4.2.1.3.1 Importance of consensus in a strategy workshop

Besides clarifying the definition of consensus in the context of a strategy workshop, Phase 2 was also used to generate an understanding of how important consensus is for a strategy workshop in practice. The interviewees were therefore asked to rate the importance of consensus for a strategy workshop on a scale from 5-1, 5 being the highest possible score and implying that consensus is a crucial factor.

The outcome of this rating shows a mixed scoring. However, it can be seen that the majority of the interviewees ranks the importance of consensus above 3. Thereby, consensus is regarded as important for a strategy workshop. All results are presented in figure 28.

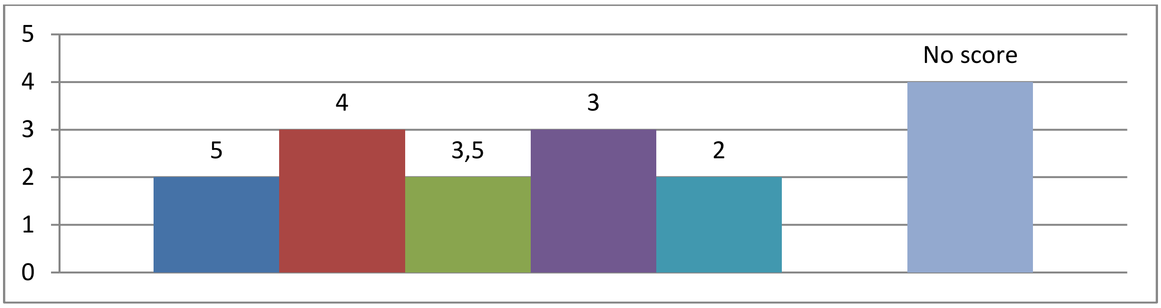


Figure 28: Results of the importance rating of consensus for a strategy workshop from Phase 2

Correspondingly the interviewees explained their choice for the scoring. The rationale for the importance of consensus is particularly closely related to two aspects, which were named in seven instances. These aspects were the provision of a basis for the strategy implementation and the substantiation of a strategy.

Basis for strategy implementation: Consensus is credited with being an enabler of strategy implementation. Accordingly, consensus is regarded as “absolutely critical” (IP 02) and “often underestimated” (IP 08) in its relevance. It is assumed that the commitment, alignment and understanding that are associated with consensus help to provide an environment that allows for a better implementation of a strategy. As IP 12 stated, “Technically, a strategy implementation won’t work without collectively developing, sharpening, adjusting etc. this dialogue of “what does that mean?” You need this process of convergence on the topic.” In this context consensus impacts the prioritisation of measures (IP 16), the clarity of the way forward (IP 06), resource allocation (IP 16) and most of all the energy and intensity with which the implementation is conducted (IP 03, IP 04, IP 13, IP 16). It is argued that “even in hierarchically led organisations you won’t be able to implement measures in the same time-span and intensity, as if you had a consensus. People will do it somehow, but that somehow is enforced and therefore it is even in hierarchical organisations almost decisive for the outcome of the war to establish a consensus" (IP 03). Likewise, a lack of consensus for the implementation is associated with unwillingness or even opposition to an implementation in the middle management (IP 02, IP 03, IP 08, IP 13, IP 16). This is regarded as a critical issue for a successful implementation. "[…] If they don't go along with it, or in the worst case ignore it or even worse if they follow an own agenda that is not aligned, then the implementation becomes complex" (IP 13). Thereby, change or a strategic reorientation is almost impossible, because "when the people do not develop a motivation to implement it, then they will just aim at achieving their personal targets without any significant changes" (IP 02). Likewise, this view was substantiated by IP 11, who proposed that consensus motivates people in case of challenging targets.

Substantiation of a strategy: Substantiation is the second element that determines the importance of consensus according to Phase 1 and 2. The consensus building process provides simultaneously for a sound discussion and exchange of positions and opinions. While this generates consensus, it also adds to the strategy content. With the aspects of common understanding and alignment of positions, as well as the common definition consensus is seen as a "building block for good strategic decision making" (IP 07). It provides "[…] the participants [with] the chance to introduce their ideas and concerns" (IP 05). As was also observed in the first workshop in Phase 1, this strengthens the definition process, as the participants engage more thoroughly in the discussion and attribute more time to the understanding of the issue or the option. This shapes the common understanding and the validity of a strategy (IP 07, IP 10, IP 11, IP 12). Involved participants will express understanding and will contribute to the discussion more openly. Likewise, it was also observed that participants were more willing to confirm proposals or statements once an understanding on something was established (O 01).

Relevance for strategy definition: However, from the data from Phase 2, it can also be derived, that the importance of consensus is mainly associated with its relevance for strategy implementation. In contrast for initiating a strategic debate or the definition of strategic measures, it is "relatively irrelevant" (IP 02) or "rather irrelevant" (IP 04). Thereby, the notion was put forward that "… if you have consensus from the beginning, then you don't actually need the workshop" (IP 13). Even more, it has also been mentioned that an established consensus as a starting point of a strategic debate may have a negative impact on the depth of the discussion and the gathering of differing positions and options.

Nonetheless, the data collection found also that consensus helps to speed up the strategic discourse. The findings from IP 08 support these observations.

4.2.1.3.2 Relevance of consensus among key stakeholders

The data collection provided also insights regarding the role of key stakeholders, such as upper management in relation with consensus and consensus building. In this regard, Phase 2 highlighted that the establishment of consensus or agreement is particularly relevant for those participants that hold the power or the resources to influence the implementation rather than a broad consensus among all participants. The relevance of consensus among key stakeholders extends both towards the allocation of resources, but also to their influence as responsible managers or leaders of the organisation. “If there is no management backing, then I can’t expect the operative level to stand behind it and implement it” (IP 16).

Further, the relevance of consensus in the context of a strategy workshop is also grounded in the role of the strategy itself. The findings from Phase 2 show the notion that “A strategy is also a management agenda and what’s more, this process is needed so that the management team can take ownership of this agenda, whatever that may be then. With such a workshop I will have to keep in mind that I accomplish a closing of ranks of the management so that the strategy can actually be implemented” (IP 12). Therefore, consensus provides the basis upon wish a management can form as a team and align behind a jointly defined strategy. This also informs the relevance of consensus as a basis for the implementation of a strategy.

It can be concluded that consensus building becomes more decisive depending on hierarchy levels and the selection of strategy stakeholders in the setup of the workshop participants. This is also confirmed by the statement of IP 01:“But it is all the more important, the smaller the circle of participants is and the more important the representatives of the organisation are. And it’s more important once those representatives are relevant for the defined strategy” (IP 01).

4.2.1.3.3 Consensus building as a rationale for a strategy workshop

The data collection provided also further information on the relevance of consensus for the decision for strategy workshops. The question whether consensus itself could be a rationale for a strategy workshop, was confirmed in Phase 2 as is shown in Table 9.

Rationale	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Confirmation	X	X	X	(X)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Rejection				(X)										X	X	

Table 9: Assessment of the proposed relevance of consensus for the initiation of a strategy workshop (Phase 2)

According to findings from Phase 2, the need for consensus is a relevant aspect for the initiation of a strategy workshop and also as a desired outcome of a workshop.

In line with the presented findings in the sections 4.2.1.3.1 the findings from Phase 2 suggest a significant relevance of consensus for the strategy formation. This is well described by IP 12 who stated that, “I believe that consensus as a whole - or acceptance or agreement whatever the right word is, buy-in in modern German – is certainly important for the major part of the strategy, at least one to two thirds of it. That is more than half the job. That is why you hold strategy workshops” (IP 12). Further, certain workshop formats such as a syntegration, are said to aim particularly for consensus (IP 03).

As a strategy workshop can provide a format for an open discussion that is removed from the organisational constraints, this contributes to establishing an environment for consensus building. “Everyone has some kind of an idea of what he wants to gain or what he wants to do, and the workshop provides the opportunity to develop a consensus upon that” (IP 01). Likewise the strong correlation of consensus and strategy formation implies also that consensus is a desirable outcome of the strategy process. This would then also apply for a strategy workshop as an element of the strategy process. “Once you don’t exit the strategy process consensual, you have not gained anything with the workshop” (IP 06). Hence, the findings show that consensus is certainly a desired outcome of a strategy workshop. However, the findings do not substantiate a notion, that workshops are held solely with the aim of consensus building. Rather, consensus building can be regarded as a by-product. “Consensus develops out of the fact that you develop a strategy together” (IP 03).

However, two interviewees (IP 14, IP 15) also stated that they do not see consensus as a rationale for a strategy workshop. This rejection was mainly attributed to the fact that strategies are strongly driven by upper management and the workshop context, and that therefore consensus is not necessarily needed for strategic decision making.

4.2.1.4 Utilization of consensus

Further to the general perceptions of consensus, the data collection provided also insights into how consensus can be experienced, how consensus materialises and how the behaviour of participants or the workshop setup are impacted by consensus. The corresponding findings can again be broken down into several clusters. The clustered aspects for which consensus is utilized are team building, motivation, reassurance, easing, simplification of the following discussions, substantiation of a strategy and platform-building for the implementation.

Team building: Firstly, consensus is utilized in order to consolidate the participants as a team around the consensus. According to the findings from Phase 2 the experience of jointly establishing consensus on a strategy has a positive impact on the personal alignment among the workshop participants. “Consensus generates a positive sentiment among participants. This inspires a sense of unity" (IP 13). Team bonds can be generated out of the common understanding of the subject and the solutions. This shared experience can hence also serve as an orientation help for identification as a group, which was also commented on in Phase 2: “As we created a common vision over the course of the individual workshops as well as a strategy for each of the segments, the participants grew together into a team” (IP 05). This was also very tangible in the first workshop in Phase 1, when for example in the 20th minute of the second session the diverse group teamed up to convince the facilitator of a change in the prioritisation of one measure (O 01). On the other hand, this reduces tensions among the group and facilitates interactions, which has also been observed in Phase 1. This in turn is considered to be a critical prerequisite for the success of the following implementation phase. “Once you establish consensus, you achieve naturally a sense of belonging, some kind of team spirit and through that also a commitment both on a factual, but also on an emotional level” (IP 03).

Motivation: Based on the interview responses, consensus is also utilized to raise motivation among the workshop participants. It was reported that with the establishment of consensus a common spirit and a motivating emotional push set it. Consensus is thereby “[…] a sticking point in the course of the workshop, where a momentum forms” (IP 06). Consensus can act as a driver for change based on the individual recognition that some form of a break-through was achieved in the workshop. This push is considered a being important in order to instigate the resulting change or implementation for the defined strategy. “It’s an inspiration of the participants and that is what is needed. That creates the vigour that I need for a transformation” (IP 06). “Going back to that workshop example, that common goal achieved a momentum among the participants. […] Accordingly they were all super motivated to approach those measures and to really get them towards implementation” (IP 16).

Reassurance: In addition to motivation, consensus is also utilized to generate reassurance among workshop participants. This could be observed in both studied workshops in Phase 1. In the first observed session of the first workshop, it was observed that once four participants had started to align on one position, the discussion and decision making process accelerated. Likewise, statements of convincement were made and the atmosphere appeared to be more relaxed and calm. The findings of Phase 2 also show that consensus changes the atmosphere among the workshop participants. The establishment of consensus releases tensions and anxieties. “You do not have that before a consensus. Then you are anxious and insecure. […] That view changes uncertainty into motivation and positive energy. Consensus is critical for that” (IP 06). This in turn supports the previously mentioned establishment of motivation and a general positive sentiment. Such reassurance is considered as being important, because it supports the required spirit that is needed for an implementation. “Consensus generates a positive sentiment among participants. […] We can achieve that. That impression prevails” (IP 13). This also contributes to strategizing and to the establishment of sound decisions.

Easing: In the same regard, the findings show that workshop participants are not only reassured, but they appear to also relax once consensus is achieved. The moment of consensus is said to release the initial pressure to achieve result in the workshop. “It is always the same curve. At first there is a lot of mistrust, a lot of uncertainty. […] And then, when you establish consensus through a discussion, you can see in the body movements of the participants how they relax” (IP 10). This notion was shared by 5 interviewees in Phase 2. Thereby, consensus is in this aspect utilized to generate this calming of the atmosphere which contributes to the discussion and decision-making process in the workshop. “The discussion will change as well. […] It becomes less aggressive, but rather calm” (IP 08). The findings show that this change is particularly strong in cases where the underlying topic is perceived as very critical.

Simplification of following discussions: Consensus is also reported as facilitating the following discussion stages. The findings from Phase 1 indicated that with consensus established, further discussions appear to proceed faster and more focused. This notion was substantiated in Phase 2, as several interviewees confirmed the sentiment. Expert 02 for example stated that after the establishment of consensus “typically then the discussion will proceed faster.” This provides a basis for further discussions and a focused decision making. In the contrary, it was also mentioned that a forced or false consensus would result in “a complete gridlock” (IP 04).

Strategy substantiation: The data collection shows also that consensus building can be utilized to substantiate an existing strategy. According to Phase 2 the process of an open discussion and sharing of divergent positions with the consecutive funnelling towards a common position is beneficial for the content development of the underlying strategy that is being developed or refined in the course of the strategy workshop. “The definition of strategy measures becomes much more substantiated through consensus” (IP 02). The rationale appears to be rooted in the exchange of perspectives and the development of a common understanding in the consensus building process. These clarify the context and the contributions from the participants inform the underlying strategy. This prevents the scenario that “[…] too much room for interpretation is left for the participants”.

However, the observed utilization of consensus for strategy substantiation in Phase 1 was not unilateral. While in workshop 1 a clear tendency was observed to utilize established consensus as a means to close a discussion on a sub-topic and to advance on the workshop goal based on the consensus momentum, this was approached differently in workshop 2. In the second workshop consensus was rather utilized to substantiate parts of the discussion and to define further elements of the steering logic. Likewise, facilitator and participants made little use of the momentum that was present based on established consensus on side-topics and on elements of the underlying model that was being discussed.

Platform-building for the implementation: Based on the aforementioned factors and the definition elements of consensus, consensus is generally utilised to provide a platform that allows for a sound implementation of the strategy. The findings from Phase 2 outlined relatively clearly, that consensus is a necessary pre-requisite for a successful implementation notwithstanding the organisational or leadership culture. In their view, consensus generates the required clarification, understanding, commitment and motivation to enter into the implementation stage and push the implementation of measures forward. Accordingly, consensus is said to gain importance for a strategy workshop as the strategy process is approaching the implementation stage, as it is assumed that “empirically strategies will be more successful during implementation when there is something like consensus” (IP 09). The platform building was closely related to the refinement and exchange process during consensus building. In line with the definition of consensus, this was seen as an important prerequisite for implementation. “I strongly believe that if there had not been this consensus, then the measures would not have been advanced as they were” (IP 16).

However, one expert also highlighted the risk that with consensus building at a late stage in a process or workshop this could also generate “signs of disintegration” (IP 01) among workshop participants. This would counteract the desired utilisation effects of consensus particularly for strategy implementation.

4.2.2 Process of consensus building in a strategy workshop

An important element of the data collection was attributed to the establishment of an understanding of the process of consensus building. This was accomplished both through the observations in Phase 1 and an explicit question to describe the process of consensus building based on own experience in Phase 2.

The findings from both sources were analysed together and can be differentiated into three stages: Pre-consensus, Establishment of consensus and Post-consensus. Based on these clustered, the findings were structured and analysed. The results are presented in the following sections.

4.2.2.1 Pre-consensus

According to the workshop participants consensus evolves out of the discussions and structuring formats of a strategy workshop. Based on the examples and descriptions from the interviewees, a broad structure for the activities from the start of the workshop towards consensus building can be derived.

The process starts at the beginning of the workshop with a clarification and underlining of the workshop scope and the workshop purpose. According to the inteviewees this is required e.g. to ensure that all participants have the same understanding and align with the workshop goal (see e.g. IP 08). The rationale for the workshop is explained and precise goals for the workshop are communicated. A precise goal is found to be "pivotal" (IP 16), because it reduces the likelihood "that I […] run aimlessly into the workshop […] that I don't get any real output from the workshop" (IP 16). In some instances, it can occur that these goals or the rationale are questioned by some participants. In that case, it is important that "people will start to deal with [the topic] substantively" (IP 08). "I have to understand first the goal why I am doing the workshop" (IP 02). The workshop participants also "need to have clarity where you stand as a company.[…] You will have to understand the situation in your market environment" (IP 06).

This is followed by a review of the status quo and the strategic environment with which the workshop participants have to deal with. This again is done to ensure an alignment and understanding by the participants. At this stage the discussion is supposedly already opened for opinions and further ideas by the participants. As several interviewees state, it is an important pre-requisite of consensus building that the workshop participants get the chance to introduce their own position into the discussion. In this regard, it was also found in Phase 2 that it is beneficial for consensus building if this exchange of positions initially generates slight forms of disagreement that can be addressed by the further discussion process. "I believe that such a strategy process or workshop is enhanced through the presence of disagreement in the beginning" (IP 13). Thereby, this disagreement is regarded as a driver for a broader and more concentrated discussion, which in turn will result in an enhanced discussion basis. "In order to get a broad portfolio of measures, it is certainly important that you rub against each other. Hence, that you do not start with consensus straight away" (IP 04).

Accordingly, the initial stages of the discussion appear to be very heterogeneous. "[…] everyone will [for example] give their opinion to each of the topics on the agenda as well as introducing their ideas" (IP 05). While the participants state their positions and ideas, it becomes usually clear that no consensus has been established yet. According to IP 02 this can be done deliberately by individual participants to "differentiate themselves in order to illustrate their ground, their own position or maybe their power".

The findings suggest that it is important for the initial stages of the workshop that the discussion is fact based. "If something is fact based then that will support consensus" (IP 11). At this stage sensemaking is taking place among the participants. Out of the findings of Phase 1 and 2 a number of core questions can be derived that appear to be pivotal for this part of the discussion. These are questions such as "Why I am doing the workshop [?]" (IP 02), "Is this our status quo? (IP 15), "What does that mean…?" (IP 13).

The discussion is then supposed to proceed along the scheme of opening the discussion to input and opinions and then narrowing those down in the discussion. "So it is thinking broad and then tighten it" (IP 04). This allows for a clarification of shared perception and diverging opinions. This takes place step-by-step along the critical elements and sub-clusters of the workshop topic. The findings from Phase 2 highlight that a successful discussion requires objectification.

According to the interviewees this process allows for an evolution of consensus out of the workshop discussion. However, from the observations it is also derived that this build-up of the discussion can occur iteratively in cases where there are several sub-topics that are being discussed. "It is a route with several loops" (IP 11). The findings show clearly that there is not one generalizable process flow in a workshop, but rather that this process is dependent on the format and the topic as well as the participants. Further, the findings show also that there is no automatic attempt for consensus building. The interview with IP 13 for example found that "sometimes it can also be ok, that you leave with a dissent. I would no rush things, because that won't last. […] Partial results are also surely ok."

If the discussion proceeds from this stage in a structured way and in factualised discourse, "then the arguments and positions will start to align" (IP 14) and the setting enters in to the second phase, the establishment of consensus, where the workshop group is supposed to "evaluate commonalities and clusters" (IP 10).

4.2.2.2 Establishment of consensus

From the data collection it can be derived that after the proceeding along the pre-consensus stages, consensus evolves once an alignment among the participants is taking place after the participants have shaped their understanding regarding the relevant information and options. “In the end that will lead to compromise” (IP 11).

This is informed by the findings from Phase 2, which attribute the establishment of consensus to the presence of either or several of three factors. These are opinion-forming individuals, a factual argumentation, and voting schemes or prioritisation formats.

Opinion-forming individuals: According to the interviewees, opinion-forming individuals play a pivotal role in the establishment of consensus. Due to their respected position or power in the organisation, their statement in favour of an option or conclusion can likely be followed by other participants. “I can act upon people who trust me, because I already have a vast experience […] and they trust my judgement” (IP 04). Such a persuasion by opinion-forming individuals is found to help to stimulate the discussion and to provide the participants with a stimulus to articulate their opinion or to adjust their own position. This eases the establishment of consensus.

In the same regard the data collection finds that the positioning of a high-ranking individual stimulates also consensus building, as “after that some people believe that they have something to gain if they get publically enthusiastic about that idea” (IP 02). This was found to generate a momentum in the group that can generate a consensus among the participants. The interviewees cited several examples were consensus was established upon the stimulus by an executive or top manager regarding a specific strategic option (IP 01, IP 02, IP 07, IP 13). Thereby, consensus is built through persuasion and power-relations. However, the data collection does not provide further insights, whether in particular the influencing of consensus building through power-relations may rather stimulate false consensus or whether it helps to build a resilient consensus. Likewise, the statement by IP 01, that a power-inspired consensus “works only partially and such an approach should not be too random”, provides further reasoning that such a approach bears a considerable risk for the establishment of false consensus.

Factual argumentation: Further to trust and persuasion, the establishment of consensus is also closely linked to factual discussions. “Consensus evolves out from a discussion through facts and arguments” (IP 13). These were found to help the distillation and sharpening of positions. This allows participants “to deduce the same perspective. From that usually an agreement emerges” (IP 07). The findings from

Phase 2 indicate that reasoning and clarification of positions help participants to encounter similarities and differences among different options or positions. Thereby, this clarifies options for alignment or persuasion. A clarification can for example be substantiated if “people […] repeat the storyline in order to check if they have understood it” (IP 11). These elements of discussion help to align the participants and to identify where consensus exists.

Voting schemes or prioritisation formats: Based upon these factual discussions, a further consensus building option that was identified in the collected data repeatedly, are prioritisation of voting schemes that are embedded in the applied workshop tools. Such a voting by majority rule appears to be very common and well suited as an indicator and documentation of consensus. The collected data indicates that it is particularly applied once the participants “have defined a relatively large bundle of measures in […] a strategy workshop” (IP 16), as it requires a definition of options beforehand. In line with the statements of IP 10, the application of such formats helps to “prioritise […] aspects and to visualise them”. This can then either be used for a democratic voting process, or as a point of reference for further debate to establish consensus. A successful outcome of such an approach will materialise the established consensus within the group.

The findings from Phase 2 confirm the observations from Workshop 1, where in the first phase, a prioritisation matrix was also applied to generate consensus on the most relevant measures for the alignment of the Asset Management strategies among different international subsidiaries. The findings from this workshop show, that the introduction of this tool accelerated the discussion and provided a point of orientation for the participants, as the referred to the prioritised position of individual measures several times in their argumentation and evaluation of further measures.

A crucial factor for the establishment of consensus according to the findings is that due to a combination of the above mentioned factors, trust, positions of upper management, factual discussions, or democratic prioritisation schemes, the workshop group develops a dynamic towards a common agreement and perspective on particular positions or decisions. The common agreement or perspective has to be shared by at least a significant majority of the participants with no observable opposition to it. Likewise diverging opinions have to understood and accepted by the group in order to move forward from the consensus. This is in line with the findings of this study concerning the definition of consensus and the utilisation of consensus. According to the interviewees this establishment of consensus can also occur in several steps along critical aspects of the workshop topic until an overarching consensus can be achieved.

Likewise, the findings from Phase 1 and 2 provide evidence that consensus building can take place repeatedly during a workshop in an iterative process along the workshop agenda or strategizing elements. The observations from Phase 1 indicate that the participants will discuss various sub-topics in a workshop in accordance with the agenda. Concerning these subtopics the discussion will prevail until consensus is established or a clear sentiment of disagreement or referral to a different setting evolves. This finding is also supported by data from Phase 2. IP 14 provides a graphical example in his description of the discussion process in a workshop: “It’s step by step. You look at the scope. Do we agree that that is what we need to talk about? Fine, consensus, let’s move on. Is this our status quo? Fine consensus, let’s move on. Are those the options, measures, whatever? Fine […] you go step by step and get consensus on the pieces out of the way before you consolidate the whole thing.” This scheme is in line with the findings concerning the utilisation of consensus as a means to ease the atmosphere and to contribute to upcoming discussion.

4.2.2.3 Post-consensus

Findings from Phases 1 and 2 highlight that, once consensus is established, this generates a momentum within the workshop group. In case of remaining issues and decisions that have to be discussed, this momentum is seen as an accelerator for the further discussion processes. “One element is that typically then the discussion will proceed faster” (IP 02). According to findings from Phase 2, the discussion also becomes clearer and more focused, which is e.g. also supported by findings from IP 05 (“The picture becomes clearer.”) and IP 07 (“Consensus makes a discussion clearer. The content is then clearly structured and understandable.”). Due to the established consensus a common understanding of the relevant aspects is present and the participants are aware of it. This also seems to be observable in the behaviour of the participants, which also contributes to a more relaxed and seamless discussion. ”Furthermore in my experience there is something like non-verbal confirmation behaviour. Once people are attuned […], you can commonly see that people will nod affirmatively to any statement that goes into the same direction” (IP 02). This is, however, only partially confirmed by the data from Phase 1. While in the first workshop, a stronger focus and faster decision making were observed in several instances, the observations from workshop 2 do not support this notion.

The post-consensus period is also the stage where decisions are made for the particular issue or sub-topic and a path forward is drafted. The findings from Phase 2 indicate that consensus contributes to this, as it is said to inspire the participants and generates a forward oriented spirit, “that releases the energy that is needed to reach the top” (IP 10). This informs the consensus utilisation as a platform for implementation and the relevance of consensus for strategy definition, as outlined in section 4.2.1.3. As can be seen in Table 10, the resulting momentum from consensus was emphasised by a broad majority of the interviewees in Phase 2. In the only instance, where a momentum for further development out of consensus was rejected, this was attributed to the pressure that is on the participants due to their participation in a strategy workshop. “In the instance of such an event, there is always a strong pressure to prevent it from failing. That has also an impact on those, who want to contribute constructively. It is some kind of an obligation that is felt by everyone” (IP 09). It can be derived from this that the achievement of consensus is then regarded as a mere accomplishment of a pre-set routine.

Significance of consensus momentum	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Confirmation	(X)	X	X		X	X						X	X	(X)	X	X
Rejection	(X)								X					(X)		
Not mentioned				X			X	X		X	X					

Table 10: Evaluation of the significance of a consensus momentum for the further strategizing process according to Phase 2 data

Regarding the closing of the workshop, the data from Phase 2 provides evidence that this stage is utilised to assure the consensus based on this path forward and to document the achieved consensus. One interviewee proposed that this could take place as part of a symbolic act.

However, the settling in of a relaxed atmosphere bears also the risk of disintegration. “In other workshop formats where a consensus building rather takes place at the end, you will rather encounter signs of disintegration. That happens as if one would say, ok we have accomplished that, now let’s go home” (IP 01). A “comfy parting mood settles in”, which contributes to an improved atmosphere, but on the other hand, may result in a loss of focus. Therefore the findings from Phase 2 imply that it is crucial to close the workshop with a consolidation of the results, particularly the established consensus, and some sort of commitment affirmation by the participants in order to preserve a momentum among participants that can be carried over into the implementation.

4.2.3 Context factors influencing consensus building

Based on the accounts and descriptions by the interviewees of the process of consensus building, the relevance of the identified strategy workshop influencing factors for consensus was tested. Therefore, the interview partners were asked to evaluate whether the seven identified influencing factors have relevance for consensus building and according to which rationale they are important. This open dialogue also allowed for the documentation of further factors that were not part of this short-list.

While the context factors that relate to the formulation of a strategy related closely to a few distinct clusters, the responses relating to the critical context factors of consensus building were more diverse.

Factors	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Context	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Workshop Design	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Team Dynamics	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Facilitation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tools	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Artefacts	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Language	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Table 11: Evaluation of the relevance of influencing factors for strategy development on consensus building

There were nonetheless close linkages between the rating of factors regarding their importance for strategy and the relevance for consensus building. This can largely be attributed to the sentiment by interview partners that consensus and strategizing are closely linked. As IP 12 for example stated; “If the factors are relevant for the process of a strategy workshop, then they are also of relevance for consensus, because consensus is an important result of a strategy workshop if not the important result.”

The rationale for the evaluation of the contribution to consensus building by different factors is shown in more detail in the following sections.

4.2.3.1 Context

Context was regarded as the most relevant factors for consensus building. This was closely linked to the explained rationale in the context of the rating of importance for strategizing. Mostly, context is seen as the basis of discussion for a strategy workshop. Context has the ability to provide a common understanding and common basis for discussion for the participants. It informs also the workshop goal, as it represents the setting in which the workshop takes place. In this regard, it also consolidates the issues and the discussion frame for the strategizing activities and defines the frame in which consensus could be developed. Thereby it provides the participants with an understanding of the situation and acts as a pre-requisite for consensus building.

According to the collected data from this study, the impact of context on consensus can be attributed to five aspects. These are the common understanding of the issue that is provided by context, the conveyed urgency, the clarity of scope for the discussion, an objectification of the discussion in general and the definition of the setting of the workshop.

Common understanding of the issue: The generation of a common understanding among workshop participants regarding the underlying issue of the overall workshop or a specific subtopic is found to be relevant, as this defines the rationale of the strategy workshop. The workshop participants “need to have clarity where you stand as a company. What is our mission? […] How successful are we?” (IP 06). Context informs the workshop and its participants with the “motive” (IP 13) for strategizing, and ultimately also for consensus building. Several elements of the data collection highlight that context has to be clarified and commonly understood. Sensemaking and understanding of context are seen as “the fuel in the rocket” (IP 11). Thereby, with a clarified context, “consensus can be established faster; or consensus can only be built because of it” (IP 02).

Urgency: Further, context generates the urgency for a workshop and also for the need to establish consensus. Urgency shows “how critical it is to even reach consensus” (IP 04). This allows the participants to assess the situation and the relevance of their decisions. This is seen as relevant, as it spurs the required attention of the participants. “The higher the urgency for consensus is, the more likely it is that you will establish consensus in the end. There needs to be demand for the topic” (IP 01). Likewise it also generates the pressure on participants to develop a solution (IP 06). Context “implies already a bit that something has to be done. That forces the decision makers to reach an agreement” (IP 16).

On the other hand, “consensus building will become more complicated in the case of tedious strategies or issues that have already been discussed 500 times” (IP 01). Therefore the aspect of urgency in the workshop context contributes to consensus building.

Clarity of scope: Clarity of scope appears to be closely linked to the common understanding of the context. The context informs the workshop participants by providing a clear orientation regarding the scope and the goal of the workshop. According to the findings from phase 2, “it has to become apparent for the people, why they sit there and what the objective is. Then everyone knows the common target and the contributions can be steered in a way that they contribute to the objective” (IP 03).

By providing this framework for the workshop context acts as a “foundation of a consensus oriented discussion” (IP 07).

Objectification: Objectification is a further aspect through which the context shapes the discussions in a workshop towards consensus building. In this regard context ensures that the workshop is grounded on facts and transparent information. Context facts contribute to an objectification of the discussion and reduce bias. “…Facts are crucial when they relate to the context”, according to IP 11. This is regarded as “part of the context” (IP 11).

Setting: According to the collected data, context defines also parts of the setting of the strategy workshop. The situation of the workshop and the connected urgency for strategic actions or decisions are reported to have relevant impact on the discussions in a workshop. It is regarded to be “always easier to build consensus in a positive environment than in a negative one” (IP 04). This defines the flow of the process and it influences the sentiment of the discussion. Thereby, it can be derived from the setting as a sub-aspect of context, in which framing conditions a workshop takes place and how his may shape the flow discussions.

On the other hand, one expert also stated, that context has little relevance to him as it takes place outside of a workshop and can’t be influenced significantly by the individuals (IP 15).

4.2.3.2 Workshop design

The workshop design was referred to be the interviewees as the overall structure of the workshop. In their view, workshop design enables consensus building through several aspects. This study identifies the assurance of a consensus oriented format, the promotion of the workshop goal, preparation and workshop rules.

Consensus oriented format: Firstly, workshop design can ensure that the workshop has a consensus oriented format. Thereby, workshop design sets the boundaries for the possibility to establish consensus in a strategy workshop. This is found to be linked e.g. to the promoted openness of the format. Based on the data “…you need to have a format that comprises candour” (01). In the same regard it can be derived from the findings that the design has to be shaped in a way regarding the allowed time and e.g. iteration steps, so that it supports the process of consensus building. In order to generate consensus in a group, it appears to be relevant that the workshop design underpins this aim. The notion can be put forward that it is “relevant”, “…whether that [design] was drafted for the purpose of promoting consensus” (IP 09).

Further to the consensus oriented format, this study indicates that the structure and the tools which the workshop design applies provide the basis for a consensus oriented dialogue during the workshop. This can be enabled e.g. through an explicitly hierarchy-free discussions or tools that promote an interaction among participants. Based on their selection, they "…contribute positively if done well or negatively if done poorly…" (IP 12).

Promotion of the workshop goal: In the same regard, data from Phase 2 links the success of a workshop and consensus building closely to the aspect, whether the workshop design is suited to the workshop goal or not. Accordingly, a workshop "should have a good format that suits the purpose" (IP 05). This fit is seen as crucial for successful interactions and the resulting alignment towards consensus. In this regard, the workshop design has to provide a clear structure and guidance to the participants.

If an adequate format for the workshop goal is selected, this is reported to generate that "the workshop will run smoothly and so that you can clearly understand where you are and why you are doing that now" (IP 05). This is for example promoted through the choice of methods and the focus of each of the discussion stages. "A lack of familiarity, political conflicts […] can [for example] be clearly restricted or levered out by the appointment of roles through the workshop structure" (IP06). Nonetheless, the findings from Phase 2 acknowledge that this can be a complex task. In case of a good definition of a workshop design "you won't notice a thing" (IP 12). Thereby, the indicator for a good workshop design seems to be rather correlated to any deviations from the plan. However, in line with the collected data, this also implies, that "…I have clearly pre-defined what the goal of the workshop is and with what kind of result or type of result I want to walk out of the workshop" (IP 02).

Further, a notion was identified in the data that links the success of the workshop design also to the credibility and standing of the organiser (IP 09).

Preparation: Moreover, the workshop design covers also the whole preparation of a workshop. In accordance with the data from Phases 1 and 2 an elaborate preparation is regarded as helpful as it promotes a clarification of the context and the options for strategizing (IP 15). This ensures for example that the information basis is "sound" (IP 13). Further, the prepared information helps also the participants in the establishment of their positions and arguments. On the other hand, the findings from both workshops indicate that the discussion benefits from such a preparation. "If you approach a workshop with opinionated participants unprepared, then it is somewhat an illusion that you will walk out of it in the end with a consensus" (IP 08).

Workshop rules: The findings suggest also that workshop design influences the interactions in a workshop through the defined workshop rules. The observations identified the existence and application of specific workshop rules, such as a ban of mobile phones or notebooks during the workshop session. According to the recorded flow of interaction in both workshops, a positive correlation to these rules appears to exist. This notion is further informed by two statements from the expert interviews that similarly outlined the existence of rules that were upheld along the discussions.

A further aspect that was put forward in one expert interview is the relevance of the aspiration of workshop design and workshop goal, as “you need an exciting vision as a framework” (IP 12). In cases where the workshop design lacks this vision, this can lead to false consensus.

Nonetheless, there were also several critics among the interviewees, who only saw a small contribution to consensus building by workshop design. While the acknowledged the impact that workshop design has on the overall workshop and the success of strategizing, the considered its impact on consensus building only to be minimal and overshadowed by other factors.

In general workshop design was credited as an important influencing factor for the success of a strategy workshop. Regarding the setup of a strategy workshop as an offside, however, the interviewees had a very clear and critical notion. While the atmosphere and working environment were deemed as positive influencers for a workshop, offsides or out of office workshops were in five instances explicitly not regarded as relevant contributors. While acknowledging, that an offside in a nice or exclusive location contributes positively to an overall atmosphere, the impact that this has was stated to be negligible. Based on the interviewee’s statements, the important factor in this regard appears to be, that the workshop participants are taken out of their daily schedule and that they provided with a setting that allows for a focused discussion. According to IP 13, a workshop could also “take place in a grey old-fashioned office block. I would not say that by definition that would lead to worse results.” The rationale in particular of four interview partners can be attributed to a concern that the location may undermine the effort and impetus of the workshop or even distract the participants. “It should not become a talking shop. 5 start hotels and having a chat, that won’t lead to anything” (IP 10). In the same regard the interviewees had a clear notion that the focus of the preparation should be on other aspects than the organisation of an away-day. Thereby it was common sense that a nice location “is no precondition for a good workshop. Nor will it help you if the rest of the preparation is very poor” (IP 14).

4.2.3.3 Team dynamics

As in the case of strategy formation, the interviewees reflected also positively on team dynamics as an influencing factor for consensus building. The relevance of this factor was mainly attributed to the quality of interactions, spirit among the group, the familiarity and the setup of the participants.

Quality of interactions: An important element of team dynamics are the interactions among the workshop participants. The findings from both phases of the data collection show that a lot of information can be derived from the way in which the participants deal with each other. According to the data from Phase 2, the quality of interactions is crucial for the discussion of the participants. It is found that “the most important aspect is the chemistry between people” (IP 08). The quality of interactions is relevant, because it defines “how the discussion is conducted” (IP 07). “Once people are unable to talk with each other because they won’t listen to each due to disastrous communication behaviour, then it is quite difficult to achieve consensus and change in such a workshop” (IP 09). It is therefore important for consensus building that there is an open communication among the participant that involves all groups in the workshop. This communication is shaped by the understanding among the groups regarding individual positions, the actual dialogue among participants and the willingness to solve issues through dialogue.

However, it can also be noted that parts of this interaction can be channelled with the help of a good methodological approach to the workshop (IP 13).

Spirit: In line with the quality of interactions this study finds further, that motivation among participants is crucial to the establishment of consensus. According to the findings this refers to the willingness to interact with each other constructively, but also to the motivation for a consensus-oriented result. “Disrespectful behaviours […] would be very counterproductive or same if all the participants are not motivated for the topic” (IP 08). “Motivation is crucial for consensus” (IP 10). The spirit for consensus building includes also “openness for persuasion”. Thereby, the participants must be willing to actively engage in a position-changing dialogue. There has to be “any intention for consensus at all” (IP 04). This is influenced by elements of the workshop, such as the facilitator, but it is shaped by the organisational culture. The findings also show that a consensus-oriented spirit will not be equally distributed in the workshop group. Rather, there will be members who are in a leading role in the discussion towards consensus.

Nonetheless, it is found to be important, that any active approaches to undermine consensus building are addressed by the facilitator and also by the participants themselves.

Familiarity: Thereby, it was considered to facilitate consensus building if the participants know each other and have an awareness regarding the opinions and positions of their counterpart. This is supposed to facilitate the process towards consensus as the respective alignment regarding the participant's views is accelerated. Likewise familiarity was also associated with better functioning interactions among participants. Well-functioning interactions were regarded as pre-condition in order to be able to establish consensus.

Setup: A further dimension through which team dynamics shape consensus has been found to be the setup of the participants. This addresses the structure of the workshop group. Thereby, the findings recommend that to establish consensus, a set of participants is required that act as a "good team" (IP 11). This does not solely address the personal mind-set, as in the deliberate exclusion of "specific pugnacious characters of which I knew that they would not contribute to consensus" (IP 04), but it addresses also the aspect of "bandwidth of the company" (IP 11). This can be addressed through the selection of the participants in the preparation stages of the workshop design. The data finds that the participants should be chosen in a way that "they have the required expertise and that they are actual stakeholders …someone to whom the issue has relevance" (IP 13).

4.2.3.4 Facilitation

In contrast to the role that facilitation plays for strategy development, the data evaluating the the role of facilitation for consensus building was more ambiguous. Both observed workshops in Phase 1 provide no consistent picture regarding the importance of the role of the facilitator. As described in the section on the data collection process, the facilitation of the observed workshops was conducted with distinctive differences. While the facilitator in the first workshop engaged the participants actively and played a leading role in the discussion and the steering of the participants, the facilitator in the second workshop acted mostly as a guide towards the agenda of the discussion and as a consolidator of outcomes. Distinctive differences were also observed in the way that agenda and tools were utilized by both facilitators. No tools were used in Workshop 2. The workshop design included only two artefacts: one Powerpoint presentation and a word document with the current description status of the steering logic. The ambiguity regarding the role of facilitation for consensus building was also reflected in Phase 2.As IP 12 explained regarding facilitation and another factor: "It is a bit more difficult to position them. It is in a way that if they are done well, you won't notice a thing. In that sense they are then important. If they are done very poorly, then they are also absolutely critical, because everything depends on them. It has to be ensured that they are appropriate to the workshop and to its questions." Thereby, facilitation was regarded as having a more implicit role in the consensus building process. This sentiment was also shared by several other interviewees, who attributed the relevance of the facilitator to the assurance of neutrality, the guidance along the workshop format and the consolidation of the outcomes and interim results.

Guidance and steering: According to the data of phase 1 and 2, the implicit relevance of consensus building is rooted mainly in the guidance and steering that is provided through the facilitation.

As observed in workshop 1, an active facilitator provides significant structure and orientation to the workshop setup. This helps to steer the discussion process and to lead the discussions towards a result. For this it is important that the facilitator is “not as focused on the content all the time, but rather on structure, targets and the way forward. He is the architect, the conductor” (IP 11). The role of the facilitator in the steering was found to be particularly relevant for in cases where the discussion stagnates or positions harden. In these instances facilitation “allows you to break up those structures and to guide the participants into this funnel that leads to a solution which the participants can go along with” (IP 14).

On the other hand, it is also important that “any kind of attempt to thwart a consensus oriented discussion is hindered by the facilitator and the participants” (IP 03).

Approach by the facilitator: In line with the steering role of facilitation, the approach by the facilitator is also a crucial to the impact of facilitation. The approach is perceived through different elements of the facilitation. This includes the handling of different stakeholders, the facilitation capabilities by the facilitator and his external image. “If he is skilled and neutral. If he performs in a sympathetic and proficient manner and the participants trust him, then he will be able to achieve a lot” (IP 06). Further, consensus building requires also the facilitator to be able to adjust his role and the steering to the participants. "If that is not in place, there wont be any encouragement for consensus” (IP 11). The relevance of the form of approach becomes blatant in the comparison of the two workshop observations in Phase 1.

A further dimension of the approach by the facilitator is his involvement in the discussion as a participant. The observation from workshop 1 and the findings from two interviews show, that it can be helpful for consensus building, if the facilitator adds his own perspective or opinion to the discussion or is able to provide content or ideas in case of a stagnating moment in the discussion. This does not only enable to facilitator “to summarise the discussion, but also to make an impact” (IP 01). However, particularly in this case, it is crucial that the facilitator is well respected among the workshop participants.

Consolidation of outcomes: The data shows also that the impact of the facilitator is influenced by the ability to consolidate discussion outcomes and decisions. “Facilitation is important because it summarises the results. Through that we always know what we have already achieved and what the next step is” (IP 05). This competence was closely correlated by the expert statements in Phase 2 to the steering of the workshop. “I can summarise the discussion and outline individual positions” (IP 01). This is seen as a driver of consensus building, as “it leads to a common solution” (IP 06).

Neutrality: As mentioned already in the presentation of the aspect of the approach by the facilitator, neutrality is another relevant element to ensure the establishment of consensus on the basis of a proper discussion. Neutrality is a pre-requisite to ensure a discussion that is accepted by all participants. “If you are not being perceived as neutral, you will always be accused of bias” (IP 03). “If there is no neutrality, it will be implied, that you are leading the discussion partisan into one direction” (IP 06). According to the findings from Phase 2, a breach of the neutrality reduces the likelihood of a true consensus, while increasing the risk of a false consensus or even a lack of consensus. This risk was also found to be correlated to an extensive steering by the facilitator towards consensus. IP 13 for example stated clearly that it is “problematic to attempt to generate consensus out of the facilitation. I rather believe that people have to come to terms step by step. And sometimes it can also be ok, that you leave with a dissent. I would no rush things, because that won’t last.” Thereby facilitation has more of a structuring and overseeing role in consensus building and less of a leading function.

4.2.3.5 Tools

The observations showed also a very diverging approach to the application of tools. One workshop applied several tools as part of the format, while workshop 2 did not apply any particular tools and only artefacts. In Workshop 1, three tools were applied. These included a prioritisation grid, an evaluation grid and a brainstorming board. It was observed in Phase 1 that the introduction of these tools provided structure and that the participants utilised them actively in their discussion. Further, the tools provided also an orientation regarding the status of completion of the specific workshop stage. The observations were not directly confirmed by the findings from Phase 2. In this phase of the data collection, the findings do show a link between structure and tools according to the statements of the interviewees. “You need to have solid and well elaborated facts and structures. From that you can derive the tools” (IP 06).

These findings were expanded with further data from Phase 2. Based on the interview data, in addition to the structure aspect two further aspects of contribution to consensus building were identified. These are the support of the workshop design and persuasion.

Support of the workshop design: The interviewees mentioned the support of the workshop setting as an important aspect of tools for consensus building. Thereby, "…all tools that I have […], those factors have to contribute to the setting and the aim of the workshop" (IP 12). In the same regard, "methods and tools support the facilitator in the facilitation towards consensus" (IP 03).

Persuasion: In addition to the contribution of tools to consensus building through structuring and enhancement of the workshop design, tools are also seen as an element that can be used to persuade participants to obtain a certain opinion or position. "With tools I can demonstrate the advantages of one alternative against the other. With that I can create a consistent big picture and a decision basis" (IP 01). This is also achieved through the tangibility of content that is processed through a tool. "Doing a SWOT-analysis or filling in a BCG-matrix would allow me to describe the situation bold and simple. With that no one can blandish or badmouth it. That is very illustrative what the situation looks like and it's very difficult to argue against that" (IP 16). However, the persuasion aspect can apparently also be achieved by fostering uncertainty, as IP 09 describes: "Or if they have applied analyses and tools that I don't even fully understand, that is also very convincing. Then there has to be something behind it" (IP 09).

While several interview partners embraced tools as contributing factors to consensus building, the discussion of this factor showed also the most significant reactions of rejection in case of three interviewees in Phase 2. In these instances, no connection between the application of tools and consensus was identified, as the application of tools does according to them not coincide with consensus building during the workshop timeline. ""For artefacts and tools I would rather say no. Those I would most likely negate, because they come into play earlier. They come into play before the question of consensus" (IP 10). Therefore, the findings show also a reasoning that tools do not contribute to consensus building: "Well, language and tools do not contribute to it in my view. Those are just elements of the workshops, but I do not create a consensus with them. They only transport the content" (IP 05).

4.2.3.6 Artefacts

The review of the importance of artefacts for consensus building showed commonalities to the review of tools. Several interviewees from Phase 2 regarded artefacts as helpful influencing factors on the discussions that provide the basis for consensus building. However, this study was not full able to substantiate these notions with data from Phase 1. While the first workshop in Phase 1 utilised an extensive fact book as a supporting mechanism for the discussion, little evidence was observed during the workshop sessions regarding the application or usefulness of this artefact. The observation found that participants were recurrently reading in the factbook, but it was not actively referred to in the observed discussion.

According to the data from Phase 2 artefacts shape consensus building in two dimensions according to the findings of this study. These are the preparation and information of a discussion and the provision of tangibility of a subject.

Preparation and information: This study found that artefacts inform the participants by providing them with relevant information, such as in the case of fact books, or with insights to the workshop topic. The data shows that this is particularly relevant for the preparation of the workshop. “Before the workshop artefacts can contribute to the establishment of a common perception” (IP 02). Likewise, artefacts can be contributing to the workshop preparation by closing “knowledge gaps” (IP 13) among the participants. This is regarded as important, as otherwise participants with a limited knowledge of the topic “won’t really enter into the discussion and they wont be able to articulate their opinion” because they were unable “to make up their mind because they are lacking the facts” for it (IP 13).

Further, artefacts allow the participants access to further information during the discussion. This can help to inform the discussion and enable the participants to “deal with that very specific” (IP 16) and to “find our focus” (IP 05). This impact on the knowledge and understanding of the participants was reported to be a helpful contribution to consensus building.

Tangibility: In Phase 2, the tangibility of artefacts was also said to support consensus building. According to one expert, a prototype supports the sensemaking of participants regarding a problem or the choice of solution. With this, participants will be able to ground discussions and to derive a specific understanding of an aspect of the topic. This can help for example in cases of a very complex topic.

4.2.3.7 Language

The relevance of language to consensus building was mainly attributed to *tonality, clarity and argumentation*. According to the interviewees, these factors have to be present in an adequate and convincing manner to enable the formation of consensus out of the discussion in a workshop.

Tonality: Tonality was mentioned in Phase 2 as an enabler for consensus. In line with the quote “Its not what you say, but how you say it” (IP 13), six interviewees argued that the tonality can impact the flow of the discussion which allows for consensus building. It was seen as an important pre-requisite, that the tonality fulfils adequate standards and conveys honesty and a positive atmosphere.

Clarity: Clarity in the language was identified as a further aspect in Phase 2. In line with the structuring aspect and fact-orientation of workshop design and interactions, clarity of the language was pointed out as an element that is needed to enable true consensus. “If things are formulated uncertainly and then that can cause confusion and it does not lead to decision-making capabilities” (IP 07).

Argumentation: Findings from Phase 1 and 2 found argumentation to be a critical aspect of language. The relevance of argumentation was identified by observations from Phase 1. In two instances in Workshop 2, arguments were conveyed in an unclear way, this lead to confusion about the content among two participants and resulted in an lengthened debate on a side-topic. This notion was confirmed through the expert interviews in Phase 2. Argumentation was found to be crucial, as “a strategy workshop is about selling and deciding something. That includes also the narrative and the argumentation” (IP 01). As participants attempt to build consensus, argumentation was seen as an important tool that can generate alignment. As “people will be able to deduce a lot from argumentation and the tonality whether that is honestly meant” (IP 11), argumentation becomes particularly relevant “the more critical or important a workshop is” (IP 01).

On an individual level the relevance of a *common language* in an international environment was also put forward as a further factor (IP 12). However, language did not appear to play a major role in both observed workshops, even though the second workshop was held in English in an international setting with non-native speakers. No exceptions could be observed regarding the tonality or spoken interactions among participants based on the language barrier. Despite the international environment and some language barriers a good flow of discussion was ensured by the participants. An impact on the development of consensus was not observed.

Nonetheless, it was also argued that the contribution of language to consensus building is relatively limited as it acts only as a medium for discussion and communication (IP 05). Moreover, it was also argued that even in cases of inadequate language or argumentation, consensus can still be achieved (IP 06). However, also in case of a proper and respectful language usage, consensus is not certain (IP 16).

4.2.3.8 Individually named factors

Before the evaluation of the pre-defined factors, Phase 2 identified also individually named factors that contribute to consensus building. While several of the gathered responses already matched the pre-defined factors that were discussed at a later stage, the interviewees also introduced in Phase 2 further factors which they regarded as positively influencing for consensus building. Seven factors were identified as relevant for the theme of this research. These factors are *concreteness, factualisation, transparency, honesty, removal from organisation structures, representation, and sponsorship*. Several of these factors are correlated to the seven pre-defined factors.

These included in particular the importance of concreteness, factualisation and transparency. The interviewees reported that it is crucial that the discussion takes place on a basis of clarified and validated information. Aligning the findings, the guiding question is thereby, “how do we make this tangible, so that you can take a decision of left or right?” (12). This was attributed as being both relevant to ensure that all participants have the same understanding, but also in order to ensure that the aspects that are being discussed are verified and relevant. “That grounding in something precise is required” (IP 12). This implies also topicality of the workshop topic (IP 11). The concreteness of the content is also linked with the element of transparency both “regarding the own situation and clarity concerning the topic area” (IP 06). Transparency was also found to extend into a sensemaking of context and individual positions of the participants. “With that you can get into a constructive process without unexplained enforcements of positions (IP 10). This transparency also contributes to factualisation of the discussion, which according to the collected data is also important for consensus building. Factualisation can be achieved through the preparation of relevant data, which links this factor also to artefacts. “A good preparation of figures, data, facts is […] needed for the discussion. That will then support good argumentation lines which are also an important factor…” (IP 13). This was seen in Phase 2 to reduce the impact of inaccurate statements on the outcome of the workshop. The relevance of factualisation was also observed in workshop 1 and 2, where the grounding of proposals and decision recommendations with the help of the factbook or a link to known data lead to an ease in the discussion and a fast resolution of the matter. According to IP 11 individual perception, what is needed for consensus building in a strategy workshop is “fact-orientation, concreteness and objectification”.

A further factor that was of importance to the interviewees was that a desired consensus is grounded in a transparent and honest discussion. This implies that the workshop is an open platform for the exchange and discussion of opinions and that all the relevant information is on the table. It should be actively signalled by the host that the workshop is “’honest’ and that the participants can co-determine the outcome” (IP 08). Hidden agendas or pre-determined results were regarded as negative to consensus building. “In that instance I cannot expect any consensus” (IP 10).

However, despite the urge for an open discussion, the interviewees recognized a strong relevance of sponsor or opinion leaders. These persons could take “a position for one idea” (IP 02) or “spread” a “message” (IP 08).In the interviews the presence of these persons was regarded as helpful during the establishment of consensus as proposals or impulses from such persons where seen as likely options around which consensus could be built. Five experts in Phase 2 confirmed an observation in this regard that was made in the workshop 2. Thereby, the sponsor would introduce their view, and based upon his rank or credibility, the interviewees regarded it as likely that further participants would align with this view. “Then there are suddenly comments that take that up and that lead into the same direction” (IP 02). This was mentioned as “a good starting point. Then you won’t have any discussion regarding the goal” (IP 13). The resulting momentum was seen as a possibility to build consensus. Findings on workshops

4.2.4 The role of strategy workshops in the strategy process

During the expert interviews, the interviewees were interviewed regarding the role that strategy workshops play in the strategy process. They were asked to describe examples of workshops in which they participated and to explain what the purpose and the setup of these workshops were. In this context they were also asked whether these examples were generalizable and whether there were any particularly outstanding examples. This focused in particular on the rationale to hold a strategy workshop and the usual formats of strategy workshops.

4.2.4.1 Rationale for a strategy workshop

The findings concerning the rationale for a strategy workshop relate mostly to the specific question about the rationale to hold a strategy workshop, which the interviewees were asked. Further, additional aspects concerning the rationale could also be derived from the described examples and out of further statements.

Based on this question the interviewees described several scenarios that can be regarded as an initiator for a strategy workshop. These scenarios range from very specific incidents to more generalizable situations. The rationale clusters are presented in table 12.

Rationale	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	O 01	O 02
Change in management								X			X							
Gathering of input		X		X	X				X			X		X			X	
Generation of buy-in			X							X	X	X					X	
Problem Solving	X	X		X		X											X	X
Status review	X			X			X	X		X			X	X		X		
Strat. Decision making				X										X		X	X	X
Strategy communication				X					X	X		X						

Table 12: Overview of references to the rationale clusters of a strategy workshop in the data collection

The most common rationale for a strategy workshop according to a majority of the interviewees is the review of an existing strategy or the tracking of a running strategy. This is either done on a recurring basis, such as an annual process or triggered by relevant changes in the business environment. Thereby, workshops are used as a setting to discuss and analyse the current environment of an organisation and to compare the assessment with the existing strategy or strategic goals. On this basis, decisions are made or prepared in case of necessary adjustment. In cases where this review is not triggered by a regular process, the strategy workshop was reported to be usually triggered by changes in the business environment.

In similar instances, three interviewees cited changes in the management as triggers for a strategy workshop. According to two interviewees, management uses workshops in these instances as a platform to revise the existing strategy by introducing their own perspective and goals.

Likewise, workshops are also utilized as platforms for strategic problem solving. This is closely related to the process of a strategy review, but it can also be triggered by existing strategic questions or other factors. Based on statements from several interviews, a workshop is a suitable platform for problem solving, as it allows for a gathering of relevant experts in focused setting that concentrates on the particular problem statement. As the workshop is a format to bring together a larger set of people, they allow for an “exchange of ideas” (IP 14) and an amalgamation of “scattered knowledge” (IP 09). Therefore, strategy workshops appear to be also well suited to generate input on a particular strategic problem and thus to enhance problem solving capabilities. This basis is also used for strategic decision making (IP 04, IP 14, IP 16). However, in many it is also just used to prepare decisions which are then made in a separate panel (IP 12, IP 13).

In cases where decisions are made or substantiated, it was reported by the interviewees, that strategy workshops generate a setting that spawns commitment to a strategy or strategic measures. According to several interviewees, the discussions and sessions during a workshop substantiate a feeling of ownership and legitimisation for the strategy which is being discussed. As a workshop allows also for an exchange of information and opinions, this appears to create a buy-in for workshop participants, leading in turn to a stronger bonding among participants and a commitment to a strategy or individual strategic measures.

The commitment and buy-in is also fostered by the communication of a strategy or strategic decisions. In cases where crucial decisions on a strategy were already made beforehand, workshops were also reported to provide a platform for strategy communication. Due to the mentioned gathering of different stakeholders and organisational representatives, strategy workshops are said to be suitable to explain and to market a strategy and its rationale. This does not only generate the afore mentioned buy-in, but according to several interview partners it also generates a legitimisation and reference point for the further communication and implementation of a strategy in an organisation.

The aspect of strategy communication was named as a particular link in cases, where a strategy workshop is held due to changes in the management board or due to major adjustment in the organisational orientation. These factors were also individually named as rationales for a strategy workshop. Thereby, the setting of a workshop is utilised as a strategizing platform.

Interestingly, IP 11 stated that strategy workshops are usually triggered by “incidents”, rather than “an intrinsic cognition that I have to think about by strategy”.

4.2.4.2 Formats of strategy workshops in the strategy process

Concerning the format of the strategy workshops, the interviewees named a wide variety of setups and formats. While the interviews exposed a clear tendency towards strategy review and problem solving as a workshop rationale among participants, the picture regarding the applied format is more diverse.

Based on an analysis of the responses, seven clusters for strategy workshop formats with similar response rates could be aggregated. These clusters address the main underlying activities that were performed during the workshop and which according the statements of the interviews were the focus of the workshop structure and setup. These clusters are communication, contribution to the annual strategy process, contribution to major projects and initiatives, development of a new strategy, review of a strategy, substantiation of a strategy and team building.

Of these clusters the review of a strategy was named by seven interviewees as a regular format. The strategy review took either place as part of a recurring process or due to imminent changes in the business environment. Recurring reviews were in three cases related to the annual strategy process which was also identified as a relevant format cluster.

Likewise the interviewees also named larger strategy projects, programs or strategic initiatives as triggers that lead to strategy workshops, which are initiated to advance or substantiate the strategizing activities in these initiatives.

Strategy workshops are not only used to review strategies, but also to develop new strategies (IP 03, IP 06, IP 08, IP 12, IP 13, IP 14). In this regard the workshop is mainly used as a format to define an overarching vision and broad picture which is then detailed further in follow-up workshops or in the regular organisation processes. However, five interviews described also the substantiation of a strategy as a regular workshop format. Thereby, strategy workshops provide a platform in which underlying aspects of a strategy are clarified, structured and discussed. Further, this discussion is also used to break an overarching vision down into concrete measures, structures or a roadmap. In particular, several interviewees referenced syntegration as a methodology that is applied to substantiate a strategy with measures.

In addition to format characteristics that focus on the strategy itself, strategy workshops were also described as communication formats. In that regard and linking it to strategy communication as a rationale, workshops are utilised as a change element. Through them, strategies or elements of a strategy are communicated and explained to workshop participants. This was named as being particularly relevant, where an overarching strategy is already pre-defined.

In line with the reported relevance of consensus and buy-in as outcomes of a strategy workshop, two interviewees highlighted team building as a format element of strategy workshops. According to them team building is a format feature that is regularly applied in order to contribute to the strategy process.

Among those clusters there are also interlinkages possible, as workshops could cover more than one format. It is for example possible, that a workshop focuses on a review of an existing strategy, while at the same time it is contributing to the annual strategy process (see e.g. IP 04). The structure among the clusters is presented in table 13.

Workshop format	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	Overall
communication					X			X	X		X	X					**5**
contribution to the annual strategy process				X	X					X					X		**4**
contribution to major projects and initiatives	X			X	X	X					X				X	X	**7**
development of a new strategy		X	X			X	X	X				X	X	X			**8**
review of a strategy		X		X	X		X			X	X			X		X	**8**
substantiation of a strategy	X			X			X	X	X								**5**
team building					X					X							**2**

Table 13: Overview of the strategy workshop formats named by the interviewees

4.2.5 Factors impacting the success of a strategy workshop

Concerning strategy workshops in general, influencing factors for the success of a strategy workshop were also inquired. In this regard, the interviewees were asked to name critical factors that in their view have significant influence on the course of a strategy workshop and the definition of a strategy in such a workshop. Further, the interviewees were also confronted with seven pre-defined factors. These pre-defined factors were derived from the review of academic literature. Accordingly the interviewees were supposed to assess these factors and to rank them according to relevance for a strategy workshop. The detailed results of these ratings are shown in table 14.

Factors by rank	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	Overall
Context	1	-	2	7	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	6	5	5	4	**1**
Workshop Design	3	1	3	3	3	4	3	5	3	2	4	3	4	3	2	5	**2**
Team Dynamics	5	4	6	6	2	5	4	3	4	1	1	2	1	1	7	1	**3**
Facilitation	4	2	1	2	4	2	5	2	5	5	3	5	7	2	4	3	**4**
Tools	6	1	5	1	6	6	2	4	6	2	6	4	2	4	1	6	**5**
Artefacts	2	3	7	4	5	3	6	6	7	6	2	6	3	6	3	2	**6**
Language	7	2	4	5	7	7	7	7	1	3	5	7	5	7	6	7	**7**

Table 14: Rating table of context factors that impact a strategy workshop

According to the ratings by the interviewees, context, workshop design and team dynamics are most crucial for ensuring the outcome of a strategy workshop, while language and artefacts appear to be having the least relevance.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

The following chapters present the discussion of the findings of this research in the context of existing academic publications. It focuses on the discussion of the identified research gaps concerning consensus and consensus building in strategy workshops. Further this chapter present the outcome of the discussion and the immediate actions that can be derived for theory and practice.

5.1 Definition of consensus

The definition of consensus from this study confirms to a large extent existing research on consensus in the context of strategy. The notion of Floyd and Wooldridge(1992) that strategy implementation requires an alignment of management is confirmed by the findings of this study. The definitions of the term consensus in Phase 2 outline the relevance of a common understanding and a common position regarding the different elements of a strategy. This echoes most existing definitions of consensus that centre around the common understanding and common agreement aspects (see e.g. S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Kellermanns et al., 2005; Tarakci et al., 2014). However, the findings indicate that consensus among those members of the organisation that are directly involved in the implementation is more relevant than a broader consensus among all participants. This is well described in the statement by IP 01 that "[consensus is] more important once those representatives are relevant for the defined strategy. In case of less important participants, a broad consensus is also less decisive." This informs the concept of strategic consensus mapping, as existing theory models on consensus address e.g. the locus and scope of consensus (see e.g. Markóczy, 2001), but do not differentiate among participants or groups concerning their impact on the strategy execution. Likewise the findings from the data collection regarding the process of consensus building support the dimensional view of consensus that has been elaborated by Wooldridge & Floyd (1989) and Markoczy (2001). This study provided clear evidence regarding the importance of representation of key stakeholders in a strategy workshop and the soundness of a consensus. This confirms the dimensional aspects of locus, scope of consensus as proposed by Markoczy (2001) building upon the earlier model of Wooldridge & Floyd (1989). Further, this study extends existing academic knowledge in this regard, as the findings indicate that locus and scope can be refined not only regarding different stakeholder groups in general, as proposed by Porck et al (2018), but also regarding the relevance of the stakeholders for the implementation process. As described in section 4.2.1.3.2, the relevance of an achieved consensus was found to be evaluated differently based upon the stakeholders among which consensus has been established. This provides significant insights concerning the dynamics in consensus building and helps to inform practitioners regarding their focus in a consensus building process.

The findings from phase 1 and 2 have shown that consensus in the context of a strategy workshop is very complex and has more nuances then is outlined in previous studies (Ateş et al., 2018; Kellermanns et al., 2005; Tarakci et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2013). The existing definitions of strategic consensus, as can be seen in the literature review on p. 21, focus mainly on a measured or assumed degree of cohesion or agreement among the involved individuals. However, the definitions and descriptions of consensus by the interviewees contradict to some extent the proposition of Kellermanns et al. (2011) that strategic consensus only encompasses the result and not the consensus building process. In the description of some interviewees, namely IPs 04, 05, 06, 09, 11, a strong process perspective is conveyed. The findings from Phase 2 suggest that there may not just be one fixed point of consensus, but that the consensus building interactions, such as e.g. the communication of a consensus position by individuals or reasoning for certain position among the group are also part of the established consensus. This would imply that the definition of consensus incorporates both the individually shared position on a subject and the publically communicated agreement on an issue. Such a view of consensus does also help to ground the dimensional model of consensus that was proposed by Markoczy (2001) regarding the dimensions of scope, degree and content of consensus. This goes beyond the current understanding of consensus as it is depicted in existing definitions of strategic consensus, which were presented in section 2.2. For the context of strategy workshops or comparable strategizing episodes, this study proposes to further incorporate the processual dimension of consensus building into the definition of strategic consensus.

In this regard, building on Kellermanns et al (2011) consensus in the context of a strategy workshop could be defined along the lines of *an individually shared and openly supported,* ***evolved*** *understanding and* ***commitment*** *between the majority of the workshop participants on elements of the strategy process*. Thereby the existing definition as proposed by Kellermanns et al (2011, 2005) would be expanded with the process element of consensus building and the outcome factor of commitment through consensus, which were both confirmed by the data of this research.

An incorporation of the final stage of consensus building into the consensus definition would also support the differentiation between pre-decision and post-decision consensus by Priem et al (1995). This differentiation was partially echoed by the findings regarding the process of consensus building. Observations and interviews showed that processes that led to consensus were initiated with a clarification of the goal and scope and with the development of a common view of the problem. This links to some extent to the proposed “pre-decision consensus”. However, only two interviewees identified the common understanding of a problem as a case of consensus itself, while the majority regarded this as a pre-requisite to consensus building. The post-decision consensus of Priem et al. (1995) appears to link closely to the actual consensus upon which the interviewees focused in their descriptions in the interviews.

The notion by Markoczy (2001) and Wooldridge & Floyd (1989) that different forms of consensus exist was also confirmed and extended by some of the findings from the interviews. In this regard this study expands existing academic views on the relationship of commitment and consensus (see e.g. Ateş et al., 2018; Kellermanns et al., 2005; Tarakci et al., 2014) concerning the fact that some of the interviewees differentiated consciously between “true” and “false” consensus based upon the presence of conviction and commitment by the stakeholders. This implied that differences in the grade of consensus exist whether the alignment and consent to a strategic element are made voluntarily and out of conviction, or whether the consensus is a forced result due to the hierarchical pressure, the representation of a minority position, external pressures or a lack of motivation concerning the issue. The notion which is shown by the analysis that false consensus is closely associated with a lack of commitment echoes the findings of Ates et al (2018). However, in contrast to the views of Ates et al (2018) and previous research (Kellermanns et al., 2011, 2005), the data of this study substantiates the rationale of Wooldridge & Floyd (1989) to look upon commitment as an element of strategic consensus. This expands the stance which had been taken on the relationship between consensus and commitment particularly also in S-A-P research on consensus building (Dooley, Fryxell, & Judge, 2000; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Tarakci et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2013).

The study also highlighted that a “false” consensus is less desirable and unreliable in case of a strategy implementation. Taking the notion of “false” consensus, as it has been defined by the interviewees, serious, one could propose to expand the four dimensional model by Wooldridge and Floyd (1989) with a differentiation between true and false consensus. The existing model, which has also been presented in the literature review on page 23, differentiates consensus into four dimensions based on the correlation of shared understanding and commitment. These dimensions are labelled as *strong consensus*, *well-intended, ill informed*, *cynicism/counter effort* and *weak consensus*. When reviewing the findings of this study regarding the existence of false consensus, it can be observed, that the insights of the findings cannot be fully allocated in the existing model. A pretended consensus without any commitment and, however, also without an active intention of counter effort, is not yet represented in this model. This study thereby provides insights into an existing gap in the theory model that could be addressed with a further dimension that lies in between the model dimensions 3 – cynicism/counter effort and 4 – weak consensus.

False consensus would imply a medium or even high level of shared understanding, as the affected participants are able to understand the underlying sentiment for a specific preference of a strategy in the group. In line with cynicism, the commitment to this strategy on the other hand is not developed in the case of false consensus. In the description of the third sector of their multidimensional construct of consensus Wooldridge & Floyd state "When decision-makers understand strategy but are not committed to it, cynicism and 'counter effort' may develop" (1989, p. 299). This provides a slight hint to the conditions that this research define as false consensus, but the notion that low commitment with high understanding may result in mere ignorance or apathy instead of cynicism is not further developed. In contrast to cynicism or counter effort, in the case of false consensus this study does not provide evidence of any active resistance or derogatory action. Rather, participants seem to engage in some sort of "sitting it out" or apathy regarding the strategy implementation. This provides further guidance for future research on strategic decision making and consensus building and would inform existing theories on strategic consensus. In the case of false consensus, it can be assumed that the robustness of the consensus is low. This would imply that in a scenario of false consensus the success of an implementation would be exposed to comparable hurdles as in cases of consensus with a small scope or a locus that does not reflect on crucial stakeholders (see Markóczy, 2001 for further insights into scope and locus of consensus building). These findings may also contribute to the explanation of the findings by Walter et al (2013). Their study on the role of consensus in the context of strategic alignment in an organisation found that in cases of a high level of strategic alignment in the organisation, strategic consensus appeared to be of little relevance. A further study of the occurrence of false consensus, its characteristics and its impact on the strategy process should is recommended to substantiate the initial findings of this study and to draw conclusions on the implications of false consensus for a strategy workshop.

In line with the differentiation between true and false consensus, it can also be derived from the interviewees' statements that consensus is not regarded as a necessary ultimate outcome or as the absolute goal of a workshop. Leaning closely to the restriction by Priem et al (1995) that consensus is an element that is shared by most members of a group, the interviewees acknowledge that consensus is not a "means to an end in a workshop" (IP 06). The analysis found that consensus should not be forced upon the workshop participants. "…sometimes it can also be ok, that you leave with a dissent. I would no rush things, because that won't last" (IP 13). The analysis acknowledges that "… there will always be that part where you don't really progress and where by all means differing opinions will persist" (IP 12). Otherwise, the established consensus may not be resilient, due to a lack of acceptance or grounding in the discussion. This confirms also the notion of Schweiger et al (1989) regarding the role of consensus as a stimulator of team bonds at the expense of the outcome quality. However, based on the analysis, it can be assumed, that the risk of a weaker outcome quality is to some extent mitigated through the role of top management and sponsors. According to the findings a strategic decision in cases where no consensus is directly established "… is normally made by the boss, yes, or at least by a smaller group within that together acts as a leader. And I reckon – and that relates to the overall standing of the leader - that it is important then that this is accepted and is deemed to be ok and good, when he heads left instead of right" (IP 12). This informs also the call for further research by Pork et al (2018) on the need for alignment between strategic consensus and the top management strategy. It confirms the notion by Pork et al (2018) that a complete misalignment of strategic consensus and the overall strategy is unlikely.

The presented findings regarding the definition of consensus contribute to academic efforts to ground the construct of consensus as an element of theory. In this regard this study extends knowledge of consensus building in strategy workshops and among strategy workshop participants and provides clear notions that can help to reduce the noted ambiguity in the general evaluation of consensus in existing academic publications (Kellermanns et al., 2011).

5.2 Role of consensus in a strategy workshop

As this study focuses on consensus building within the scope of strategy workshops, it provides also information on the role which consensus inhibits in a strategy workshop. This addresses both the perceived importance of consensus, as well as the part that consensus plays in the successful completion of a strategy workshop.

As has been presented on 8.2.1.3, this study has uncovered a prevailing sentiment that consensus is important. Thereby, more than half of the interviewed experts rated consensus as an important element of a strategy workshop.

The relevance of consensus as of this study's data is in particular linked to the influence of consensus on the strategy implementation. According to the analysis of Phase 2, consensus is a critical pre-requisite for a successful implementation process. This builds upon the initial claim by Floyd & Wooldridge (1992) that consensus of the management on strategic priorities generates implementation success. As this study shows, the consensus is attributed to support the alignment and common understanding of the workshop participants around the issue and the strategic option. This structures the strategizing process and provides guidance to the strategic initiative. Consensus building generates a momentum among the workshop participants as the data from this study proves. This momentum together with the joint decisions and a common understanding of the strategy establishes the platform upon which a strategic implementation can be executed.

This creates a convergence around the decision and the chosen way forward in the aftermath of the workshop. “The strategy implementation definitely goes smoother with consensus. Once there is consensus that really helps those following steps” (IP 15). This confirms the findings of Kellermanns et al (2011) concerning a link between the level of consensus and the flow of communication within groups.

The study shows further, that the relevance of consensus is also rooted in a substantiation of strategic measures which is achieved by accomplishing the consensus building process. As already described, it has been found that the consensus building process generates a broader discussion process. This process aims at the establishment of a common understanding of the underlying issue, the context and the solution options. Thereby it is supposed to enable sensemaking among the workshop participants and a joint evaluation of the strategy. This process contributes step-by-step to a sounder underpinning of the content of the strategy that is being discussed in the workshop. This again can increase the resilience and validity of the strategy, which in the same regard can increase trust and acceptance for the strategic decisions that have been made by the end of the strategy workshop. As a result, the strategic outcome of the workshop is more robust and should hence also be better positioned for an implementation. This substantiates the findings by Dooley et al (2000) that a consensual decision leads to a higher level of commitment among the participants and thereby to a more positive outcome of the implementation.

Concerning the impact on implementation the findings point to the notion that based upon an established consensus an implementation can be carried out faster and with more vigour (see e.g. IP 03). Furthermore, it can be recognised from the analysis of the findings from Phase 2 that the impact of consensus on the implementation can be further strengthened once the consensus encompasses those management representatives that are responsible for the implementation. According to the data, consensus among implementation responsible or among those who have a strong impact on the implementation process is paramount.

By identifying the relevance of consensus among a wider scope of management and its relevance on implementation success, this study contributes to academic theory by underlining the role of middle management in the strategy processes that was previously outlined e.g. by Schwarz (2009). This addresses the gap in theory that was highlighted by Meadows & O'Brien (2013) and builds upon existing findings on the communicative aspects of strategy adoption (Johnson et al., 2011).

Further, it confirms the notion by Tarakci et al (2014) that the locus of consensus should rather be allocated outside the top management. This contrasts the results by van Aaken et al (2013) who were not able to identify a correlation of workshop success and the depth of the participants.

However, from the data it becomes also clear that consensus is not treated as an ultimate goal or an end-in-itself for a strategy workshop. Likewise, the analysis finds that the strategic impact of consensus in a strategy workshop is mainly oriented towards the implementation. Regarding the role of consensus for the development of a strategy, the notion by Worley et al (2011) cannot be supported by this study. The findings show little evidence of an impact of consensus on the formulation of a strategy. Based on the data from Phase 2 and the observations the impact can only be connected to an alignment on the understanding of the situation and the context and the overall goals of an organisation in general and a strategy workshop in particular.

However, the interview data of Phase 2 indicates also clearly, that professional experts reject the relevance of consensus for the definition stage of a strategy process or workshop. Rather, the findings highlight a perceived relevance of divergence or even disagreement in the early stages of a workshop. Thereby, “different opinions, contrasting views that can stem from different functional units” (IP 13) provide a broader basis for strategizing. It is argued that content-related disagreements or diverging opinions “are in that case certainly conducive for the establishment of a sophisticated discussion” (IP 13). This echoes the concerns that were formulated by Schweiger et al (1989) that an overemphasis of consensus could subdue an active and corrective discourse on options or positions in a decision-making process.

Moreover, the findings suggest that an initial presence of consensus among the participants could even discredit the relevance to conduct a strategy workshop in the eyes of its participants, as consensus on large parts of the strategy appears to be already established.

In assessing the role of consensus in a strategy workshop, it can be derived from the data, that consensus is not only an important element of a strategy workshop. Based on the findings from Phase 2, it can be asserted that consensus itself is regarded as a potential rationale to initiate a strategy workshop. The vast majority of the interviewees supports this notion. As the consensus is seen as a critical pre-requisite for strategy implementation, it appears that the platform of a strategy workshop is deliberately utilized to align a management team (IP 12) and to generate consensus among responsibles. Consensus is hence a desired outcome of a strategy workshop. Nonetheless, as already discussed, consensus is only regarded as a by-product in the strategy formation process. Hence it is assumed for this study that while concensus is a rationale for a strategy workshop, any decision to initiate a strategy workshop will not be made on the sole basis of consensus building.

5.3 Addressing the research questions

5.3.1 Experience of consensus in strategy workshops

The first research question of this study is how consensus is being experienced by workshop participants in a strategy workshop. From the findings that are described in the previous section, the experience of consensus in a strategy workshop can be closely linked to the utilisation of consensus and to the process stages of establishment of consensus and post-consensus. It can be derived that consensus is being experienced on a factual and on an emotional level (see e.g. IP 12).

On a factual level, consensus can be experienced based on its utilisation to *substantiate a strategy* and in its role in the *platform-building for the implementation*. Further this research also proposes that the process of consensus building supports the structuring of the strategic discussion in a form of *simplification*.

The *simplification* of the following discussions once consensus is achieved is manifested in the data which outlines that consensus leads to an increase in focus and speed of the discussion. In that sense once consensus is established this defines the basis for further discussions, as the topics for discussion are already defined and aligned (see e.g. IP 01). The findings substantiate that the establishment of consensus leads to an acceleration and focusing in the strategizing in the form of a "future-oriented" discussion form (IP 15). This is in line with Combe & Carrington (2015) who outlined a connection between consensus and the speed of the strategy process. It is assumed that this correlates to the motivation sentiment that is conveyed based upon a successful establishment of consensus. However, in this regard, the findings from the interviews put the conclusions by Dooley et al (2000) into question. The proposal that a higher level of commitment can lead to a slower implementation process cannot be confirmed according to the gathered data from the experts.

Likewise, consensus can factually be experienced through a *substantiation of the strategy* and the establishment of an argumentative *platform for the implementation of a strategy*. The analysis finds that both aspects are rooted in the intensified exchange of positions and information which takes place in the consensus building process. Participants clarify and discuss different aspects of the underlying strategic goal or concept and refine its elements. Further, facilitator or participants introduce new information or arguments. According to the analysis this process supports sensemaking among participants and an increased understanding of different positions and options. This “mix of perspectives contributes massively to reach a well thought out solution in the end” (IP 02), according to the analysed data. It increases the concreteness of the discussed information and clarifies the content. and avoids “[…] too much room for interpretation” (IP 06). This confirms the notion of Wooldridge and Floyd (1989) that in case of ambiguous strategies, managers may not align on a coordinated implementation process. In the context of the immediate strategy formation activities within the workshop this is found to *substantiate the strategy* content, while on an interpersonal and factual level among the participants it establishes a common basis. In this regard the data from this study substantiates and proofs the proposal by Gonzalez-Benito et al (2012) that consensus leads to an increase in focus regarding the strategic approach. However, existing knowledge regarding cognitive results of a strategy workshop is further expanded as the realisation of substantiation effects was found to depend on the presence of certain context factors such as workshop design and facilitation, which will be explained in more detail in section 5.3.2 and 5.3.3. The findings regarding the link between context factors and workshop results substantiate the theory model on workshop outcome by Healey et al (2015) and operationalise it from a practitioner’s perspective.

This basis provides orientation and a point of referral for the participants in the decision process in the workshop and in the aftermath. Thereby, the experienced iterations in the consensus building process provide a *platform from which the implementation can be initiated*. Thereby, consensus enables another facette of strategy with significance for implementation and strategic change, which was shown by the data from Phase 2: “Strategy is a story which needs to give hope, which motivates and states how things will proceed in the future” (IP 11).

The related findings in this study confirm also the finding of Markoczy (2001) that the scope and the locus of consensus are of relevance for the success of a strategy. Likewise, the importance that is attributed to the inclusion of the middle management and the relevance of commitment to the success of an implementation confirms the proposal by Markoczy (2001) and by Gonzalez-Benito et al (2012) that the locus of strategic consensus should not be solely focused on the top management, but rather expanded to the broader management team. In particular, several findings in Phase 2 provide evidence that a constraining of consensus to the executive board and an exclusion of middle management from the consensus building process are in many instances the source for a failure of strategy implementation. This is well described in one example from Phase 2, where IP 08 describes: “As an example, if McKinsey is brought in somewhere and forms a strategy, then you have a happy executive board all nodding and saying that that is what we will do now. McKinsey then leaves, because you “just” have to implement it and suddenly it is stuck. The reason being that they did not manage to achieve consensus on the middle and lower management levels which are closer to operations or rather, they did not bother about them. I believe it is more critical that those people who will have to do it afterwards sign that with their blood or rather that the pull along, than that you have a united executive board backing it with honesty.” This confirms and builds upon the recommendation of by Gonzalez-Benito et al, that the active participation and involvement of functional-level managers in the strategic planning process would be beneficial” (González-Benito et al., 2012, p. 1709). The recommendation by Gonzalez-Benito et al is expanded, by reviewing their findings regarding validity in the context of strategy workshops. As the findings from this study provide reason to assume that in the context of strategy workshop the inclusion is similarly relevant in strategy workshops, this application is confirmed on a factual level for workshops.

On an emotional level, consensus is experienced in a workshop through four sentiments, which also shape the utilisation of consensus. These are a sense of unity that manifests in *teambuilding*, *a motivational spirit*, a *feeling of reassurance* and a *feeling of relaxation*.

Team building: The analysis shows that consensus is utilized for team building. This is enabled through a “positive sentiment among participants. This inspires a sense of unity” (IP 13). The evolution of such a sense of unity was observed in the first observation, when a group of relatively unfamiliar international department representatives engaged in the discussions in the break-out session. Thereby, it was noted that after approximately 45 minutes and the first two major decisions in the break-out session, that the participants started to actively support each other through questions, statements of support, but also through gestures. Likewise, data from Phase 2 found that “a sense of belonging, some kind of a team spirit” (IP 03) evolves from consensus, which was confirmed by eight further interviewees. The findings support the notion that consensus increases team bonds. This confirms the statements of Galbraith et al (2010) who see consensus as a source of trust and commitment within groups, and by Schweiger et al (1989) who identified a correlation between consensus and the bonding of groups that are involved in this consensus. This informs also these findings by Pork et al (2018) on inter-team consensus in the strategy process. Moreover, these findings provide a link to the theory construct of communitas, which refers to emotional constructs that can be related to team bonding (Johnson et al., 2010). The findings from this study regarding the sentiment of team building relate closely to communitas, which helps to verify the underlying rigour in the construct of the emotional dimension of consensus building. However, while Johnson et al (2010) relate the development of communitas strongly to ritualized workshops and the language, this study concludes that team building develops out of the common experience of discussing and permeating an issue and deriving a consensus on the related decision options.

Feeling of reassurance and *motivational spirit*: On an emotional level, consensus building was also found to reassure and motivate the workshop participants. The analysis finds that the initial stages of a strategy workshop can be affected by uncertainty and insecurity concerning the achievement of results and the implications of the strategy for the individual participants. However, through the structure and substantiation that are established through consensus building on a factual level, “consensus creates a common view of the situation and the goal. That view changes uncertainty into motivation and positive energy” (IP 06). Thereby, the establishment of consensus generates a momentum that can be utilised to fuel the following implementation process as well as further strategizing activities or discussions.

The data implies that this momentum from the consensus is crucial for the implementation process and that a loss of this motivation would negatively impact any further proceedings (see IP 06). In the same regard, the reassurance and motivation support the establishment of resilient and considerate decisions. This is relevant both to a future development of empirical knowledge on strategizing, as well as to practice. First of all this confirms that indeed, consensus is an important prerequisite for a resilient strategy implementation. Secondly, this also helps to guide both theory and practice on strategy implementation and strategic change, as the findings regarding the consensus momentum provide a boundary to action and implementation steering. From the findings it can be derived, that practitioners will be forced to act where a lack of such a momentum can be identified. Likewise, on a theoretical perspective this provides an opportunity to study the developments around implementation under the differentiation of a presence of such a momentum or without this momentum.

Feeling of relaxation: The feeling of relaxation that is established among participants on an emotional level manifests itself in an easing of the discussions and interactions in the workshop. This is well described by a data piece from one of the interviews from Phase 2: “It is always that same curve. At first there is a lot of mistrust, a lot of uncertainty. You are eyed by your superiors. And then in that moment, when you establish consensus through a discussion, you can see in the body movements of the participants how they relax. The facial expressions ease, the postures become more relaxed. The communication becomes easier” (IP 10). The experience of consensus as a source of relaxation can be closely related to the other factors that convey an emotional perspective to consensus in strategy workshops.

Further, the data concerning this aspect, does also indirectly confirm heterogeneity both in the workshop setting as also in the outcome of a strategy workshops. The findings show an interesting side aspect to the relevance of consensus in strategy workshops. According to IP 14, consensus becomes paramount in a difficult strategizing environment. “That is particularly the case, if the issue upon which you establish the agreement is a really burning one. Then such a moment will cause a lot of relief” (IP 14). Thereby, the perspective of relief as an outcome of consensus comes into play specifically in these instances.

In addressing the question how consensus is experienced in a strategy workshop, this study finds that strategy workshop can also create outcomes that go beyond strategies and which add to social and interpersonal developments. This goes beyond the scope of most existing studies on strategy workshop, particularly in the field of S-A-P. To date, with the exception of Healey et al (2015), Johnson et al (2010) and (Macintosh et al., 2008) these publications have mainly focused on factual results such as an operational improvement in the organisation based on a workshop (Healey et al., 2015; Seidl & Guérard, 2015). With the expansion of the experienced consensus in a strategy workshop to an emotional level this study expands the empirical grasp of consensus in strategy workshops. Further, this discovery also substantiates the proposed theory model of Healey et al (2015) that captures the results of a workshop in three dimensions. The generation of emotional drivers such as reassurance or motivation confirms their notion that the perspective of workshop results has to be extended beyond the common view of organisational performance.

Moreover, this study expands the scope of this model, as Healey et al focused the “softer outcomes” (Healey et al., 2015, p. 18) of their model of workshop outcome nonetheless rather on a factual or measurable perspective. While Healey et al (2015) and Johnson et al (2010) acknowledge the existence of factors that shape teambuilding or understanding, their models do not capture an important aspect that contributes to the establishment of commitment: emotions. When reflecting on the findings from observations and interviews in this study, one can find that team building, motivation and relaxation received more references by the interviewees then e.g. platform building for the implementation. From these findings it can be assumed that the emotional aspects of consensus building hold significance to practitioners. This is not reflected in existing models such the design-outcome framework by Healey et al (2015), which has been discussed in more detail on page 34. Therefore it is proposed either to expand the scope of cognitive outcomes in order to incorporate emotional results on a personal level into the framework, or to expand the theory model with a further outcome category of emotional outcomes. This would expand the theoretic grasp of the design-outcome relation of strategy workshops and would further provide for a comprehensive integration of consensus in the strategy workshop theory model.

The findings regarding the role of emotions substantiate the view on consensus building in strategy workshop and go beyond existing reflections on the emotional perspective of strategy workshops and consensus. MacIntosh et al referred to comparable findings in their study of the relation of strategy workshops and change loosely as a “momentum of the workshops”, quoting a participant regarding its relevance as “the thing that made it work” (Macintosh et al., 2008, p. 28).

The dissection of the emotional level into subcluster expands the understanding of this phenomenon. This knowledge can also help to explain why consensus is regarded as a pre-requisite for a successful implementation. The findings show a strong tendency of a generation of team bonding, motivation and reassurance and relief from consensus building which can all be assumed to be beneficial for a team at the starting point of an implementation or transformation in an organisation. IP 16 explained this relationship very well by stating: “I strongly believe that if there had not been this consensus, then the measures would not have been advanced as they were. Rather you would have had again the issue that it comes to nothing or that it remained as a concept that ends up in the drawers.” This implies a very different setting for strategy implementation in cases where consensus has been established. It can be concluded that through these emotions, consensus establishes the before mentioned implementation basis on factual and emotion levels. This is also well conveyed in a statement by IP 12, who described the emotional impact of an established consensus as follows: “We did not want to be perfect, but we wanted to get into it and then see how far that would take us. Then that is emotionally a different situation. There some kind of a pull forward. At that point it is not a question of if, but of how.”

Further, this knowledge enables also organisers and facilitators of workshops to set a stronger focus on the emotions which they want to convey through a workshop. This informs also the understanding of the role of the facilitator. This research expands the understanding of the role and experiences of the workshop participants. The need to focus stronger on this element of strategizing instead of macro-level topics has already been put forward by MacIntosh et al (2010) and Burgelman et al (2018). However, by actually setting this perspective at one of the centre points of this study, this research project contributes with substantiated findings concerning the perspective of both workshop participants and workshop facilitators. The alignment of these perceptions will assumedly help both entities to adjust their approach to each other during a workshop in a better way in order to ensure a positive impact on consensus building and on the development of relevant outcomes from a strategy workshop.

5.3.2 Process of consensus building

The second research question of this study addresses the issue, how consensus evolves in strategy workshop. As shown in section 4.2.2 the collected data of this research provides several leads to answer this question.

First of all, the analysis indicates clearly, that not one overall process scheme can be derived for consensus building, but rather that the flow of consensus building is dependent upon context factors, such as format, topic or the context, as in the business environment, that are analysed in detail in section 4.2.3. According to the findings of this study, however, the generalizable aspects of the macro-process of consensus building can be divided into three stages: *pre-consensus*, *establishment of consensus* and *post-consensus* (see section 4.2.2).

Pre-consensus defines the stages in the strategy workshop that lead up to consensus building and describes activities that define the context for consensus building in a strategy workshop and that enable the formation of consensus.

As presented in section 4.2.2, the phase of pre-consensus can be characterised by a continuous exchange of input and structuring of content among the workshop participants that are involved in the discussion. This discussion is initiated based upon the pre-defined workshop scope and workshop target, which are usually clarified in the beginning of the workshop session. The aim of the pre-consensus stage was found to be the establishment of a common understanding of workshop goal, workshop context and the competing positions by the workshop participants to address goal and context.

According to the analysis, success factors of this stage of the consensus building process are precision and concreteness in the workshop goal and sub-goals and a substantial discussion about the status quo and individual positions. The study found that a clear understanding needs to be established among the participants in order to establish consensus at a later stage. This confirms the proposed extension of goal setting theory to strategy workshops and underlines the relevance of clearly defined ad communicated goals in strategic episodes (Healey et al., 2015). The relevance of sensemaking as a pre-requisite as proposed by Eden (1992) is reflected in the analysis results. The factualisation is required to enable sensemaking by the participants. This alignment provides also the format for participants to introduce their own positions into the discussion.

The analysis finds this process to be very heterogeneous, as the data even shows a positive perception for disagreement in this stage of the consensus building process. It was also found, that this stage can follow an iterative broadening and condensing of the discussion scope, in order to facilitate the sensemaking among workshop participants.

In the same regard, as the overall consensus building process was not found to be standardized, the stage of pre-consensus does also not follow a linear process flow. Rather, the analysis shows that pre-consensus can occur iteratively depending on the workshop format and workshop components. It is also assumed, that depending on the complexity of the required consensus, the time scope of pre-consensus can differ significantly. This supports the findings by Galbraith et al (2010) that consensus building is time intensive and requires a thorough discussion of positions and information. Further, as the findings continuously outline the relevance of clear goals and structures, it can be assumed that the pre-consensus sub-process does also start significantly before the actual beginning of a workshop. This identifies a close connection between the developments pre-workshop and consensus building. This implies that workshop preparation does not only contribute to a good conduct and a good format for the workshop in general, but that it can also be regarded as a pre-requisite to entering into the consensus building modus in a strategy workshop specifically. This again contributes to existing theory models, such as the model of Healey et al (2015). In contrast to these models the side conditions at which point these theoretical models come into play in the scope of consensus building this research finds evidence, that on the timeline the consensus building process start with the workshop preparation. This will help to develop a solid basis for the establishment of consensus in a strategy workshop, as the boundary conditions which could also be addressed through the general workshop discussion are found to be having to be in place in order to initiate a successful consensus building process.

According to the findings of this study, this process stage has to take place in a fact-oriented discussion format in order to achieve the required alignment among the participants that is needed for a transition into the second stage of consensus building. The transition between pre-consensus and the establishment of consensus is flowing according to the analysis of the data of Phases 1 and 2.

Establishment of consensus describes the actual consensus building. In line with the findings from the analysis of this study that inform the definition of consensus (see 9.1), this stage is not regarded as one defined or scoped moment, but rather as a processual stage on consensus building.

In this stage, the participants start to “evaluate commonalities and clusters” (IP 10), based upon the developed understanding of situation and options. On this basis the participants are assumed to start an alignment. The finding by Galbraith et al (2010) that there is a positive impact on this process if there is a larger number of options to be evaluated was not experienced by this study. In case of the observation in workshop 1, a larger number of options among the different measure clusters were not observed to be handled differently than clusters with a smaller option set for prioritisation. It was found that the alignment can be impacted by opinion-forming individuals, factual argumentation and voting or prioritisation mechanisms. Opinion-forming individuals take influence by convincing other participants of an option based on their own role and reputation. This stimulus has been found to be pivotal for consensus building.

However, the analysis found no clear evidence whether a reliance on opinion-forming individuals bear the risk of false consensus, particulary if those individuals are high-ranking management representatives.

Secondly, consensus was found to be established by factual reasoning. The fact-orientation provides participants both with information guidance as well as with a clear structure. Both aspects help in sensemaking and the development of a common understanding that can create consensus. This picks up the findings of Healey et al (2015) regarding the relevance of stakeholder involvement and cognitive effort.

In this regard, the analysis was also used to test the model of Healey et al (2015). The characteristics of his model were tested against the data from Phase 1 and further enriched with the findings from Phase 2. Both observations fulfil the criteria of goal and purpose, involvement and cognitive effort. However, the elements of routinization were in both instances not fully accomplished. Workshop 1 was removed from the organisation but not serialised, while workshop 2 was serialised, but not removed. The comparison with the data from Phase 1 and Phase 2 shows that the proposed links between characteristic 1 and 3 and the interpersonal outcome in the form of strategic consensus exist. Further, the author proposes an additional soft link between cognitive effort and interpersonal outcome. The rationale for this link is rooted in the findings of this study. As the data proposes a positive correlation between a joint sensemaking and debating and a strategic alignment, it is assumed, that this relation should also be valid for the proposed model. However, it is recognised that this relation holds only true in instances where due to the workshop design the understanding of strategic issues and directions is established jointly as a group. It is hence proposed that this additional link exists where the workshop interactions follow the consensus building process as outlined in this chapter. The resulting refined model is presented in figure 29.

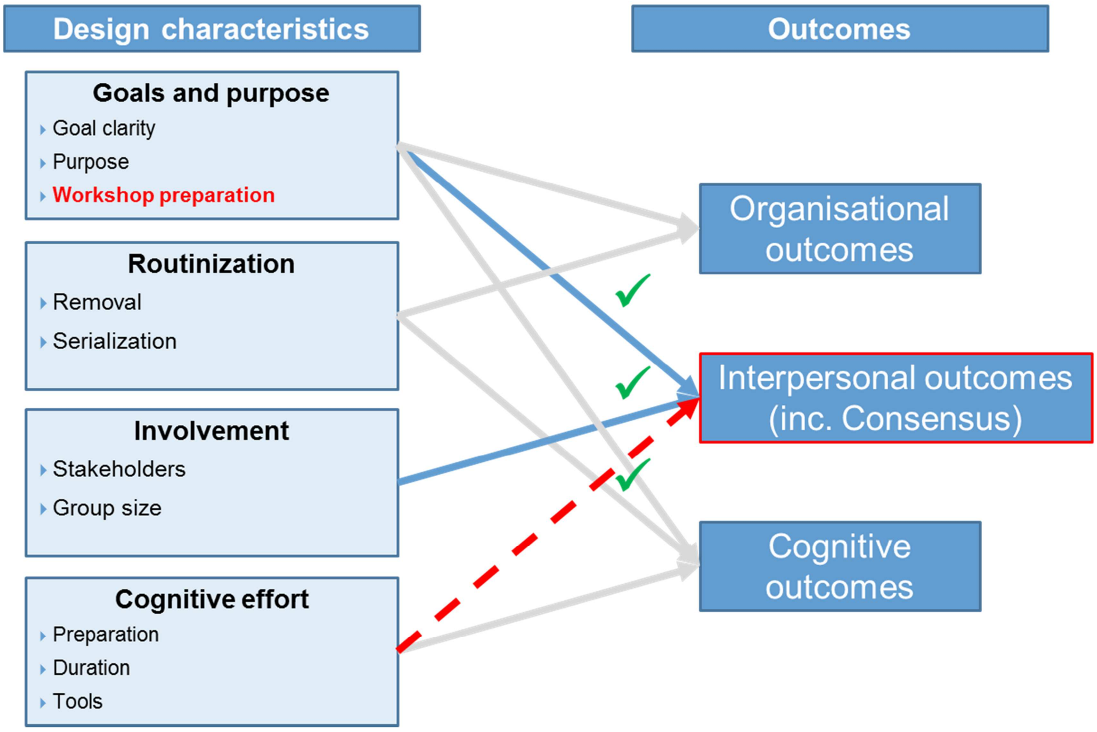

Design characteristics
Outcomes
Goals and purpose
Goal clarity
Purpose
Workshop preparation
Routinization
Removal
Serialization
Involvement
Stakeholders
Group size
Cognitive effort
Preparation
Duration
Tools
Organisational outcomes
Interpersonal outcomes (inc. Consensus)
Cognitive outcomes
✓
✓
✓

Figure 29: Results of the developed model based on Healey et al (2015) for consensus building

It is acknowledged that this analysis and expansion of the model by Healey et al (2015) was solely conducted on a qualitative basis. Nonetheless, the analysis confirms the findings by Healey et al (2015) regarding a multi-dimensional view on workshop outcomes. The perspective that the data from this analysis provides allows for the conclusion that consensus can also be regarded as a workshop outcome. As the concept of consensus is so far not located in the model of Healey et al, it is proposed as mentioned above, to expand the model in the dimension of interpersonal outcomes with the element of consensus. This implies also, that in this specific context a relation between the cognitive design features and the outcome of consensus exist. This notion is grounded in the findings of this research regarding the importance of context factors such as workshop design, context and tools on the process of consensus building. By expanding the scope and content of the theory model as presented in figure 29, this research contributes to a theoretical framing of consensus building which supports the development of new knowledge on the role of consensus in strategy workshop. This represents a contribution to theory.

Furthermore, the study finds that consensus is established through voting and prioritisation. The voting structures help to uncover common positions based on democratic processes, particularly in cases with several options.

According to the scope of the collected data, a combination of these three factors in the consensus building process is possible.

It was found to be crucial that the mentioned enablers create a dynamic for a common agreement on something. The data also finds that the establishment of consensus can occur repetitively in case of several sub-topics in a workshop.

The overall process enters into the stage of post-consensus once consensus is built. This is the stage, where decisions are being made based on the previously established common understanding and common preference of an option.

The analysis shows that post-consensus is characterised by the presence of the previously described momentum and forward-looking orientation that is created by consensus. The momentum was found to be the most significant indicator of the third stage of the consensus building process. This momentum appears to hold similar features to the momentum that is mentioned by MacIntosh et al (2010). While their study did not provide any supplementing explanation for this incident, it can be assumed that this was an observation of the momentum of consensus building. Further, this stage is also utilised to document consensus and resulting decisions and to consolidate outcomes in order to avoid disintegration.

The process of consensus building as it was experienced during the observation in Phase 1 and described by the interviewees in Phase 2 confirms the notions by Kellermanns et al. (2005) regarding the link between structure and content of a workshop and the establishment of consensus. The findings show that consensus evolves mainly out of a structured discussion in a clear context. The observations showed that in case of a well-structured and orchestrated workshop, as in the case of workshop 1, the development of consensus occurred more regularly and clearly. In this regard the notion could even be extended to imply that structure and content do not only impact consensus building, but also the utilisation of established consensus.

As described in the literature review, it has been proposed that the application of a model of generative and collaborative communication behaviour supports knowledge exchange and thereby also consensus building (Tavella & Franco, 2015).

Likewise Tavella and Franco (2015) found that a communication effort of challenging and rectifying does not appear to work if a discussion or a stop of discussion is forced upon the workshop participants by the facilitator. While the observations did not provide any evidence in this regard, some statements from Phase 2 (e.g. IP 13) have provided insights that support this notion.

The observed and recorded findings confirm the notion by Ackermann & Eden (2011) and Stigliani & Ravasi (2012), that consensus requires a common understanding of the individual perceptions regarding the discussed issue and its context. This is manifested in both observations. A suitable example is the discussion on the common target system in Workshop 2. In this instance, the participants took about 12 minutes to discuss the issue and to exchange positions and concern based on their role and experiences. However, once the relevant information had been exchanged and a common understanding of the critical elements of the target system had been established, the group took less than two minutes to come to a common solution regarding the decision on how to proceed in this case. In accordance with the findings from Phase 2, the physical and verbal reactions by the participants to the reciting of the decision by the facilitator provide hints to the establishment of a consensus. This informs the knowledge on strategizing praxis.

The findings from this study inform the research gap outlined by Belmondo & Sargis Roussel (2014) concerning the implementation of strategy practices, in this case a strategy workshop, and how its implementation is influenced by the workshop participants. Further, this study extends mechanisms of consensus building that were described by Markoczy (2001). The findings on the process of consensus building inform also the differentiation of consensus by Priem et al (1995) into pre-decision consensus and outcome consensus. The results from the analysis attribute the term consensus mainly to what Priem et al (1995) call outcome consensus. This reflects particularly on the data from Phase 2, where the interviewees identified consensus mainly with a shared agreement or position on a strategic option that is then to be implemented. Thereby, the definition of outcome consensus is supported. However, several findings can also be linked to the existence of so called pre-decision consensus. The approach to an annual strategy workshop that is described by IP 10 provides evidence for pre-decision consensus: "… it usually happens that we pick out certain topics in order to dissect them in a structured way. […] That follows are systemic coaching logic starting with a consensus on the topic and what it represents." Thereby, pre-decision consensus is established as a means to clarify the workshop topic. The data from Phase 2 provides further examples that can be associated with pre-decision consensus. However, according to the explicit consensus definitions that were provided in Phase 2, it can be assumed that in practice, pre-decision consensus and outcome consensus are weighted differently. This can also be supported by the insights from the observations. While some forms of pre-decision consensus were observable, such as the establishment of theme clusters for the definition of measures in Workshop 1 or the agreement on the agenda in Workshop 2, the observed impact of these situations appeared to be weaker than e.g. the consensus on the definition or prioritisation of a measure in Workshop 1. From the findings it can be assumed that pre-decision consensus is in practice rather experienced as the conclusion of a stage in the workshop process than as crucial decisions which takes also effect outside of the actual workshop.

5.3.3 Context factors influencing consensus building

The third research question of this study attempts to identify which context factors influence consensus-building in a strategy workshop. This extends the view of existing literature on strategy workshops, as the reviewed publications all focused on individual factors or limited sets of the context factors of a strategy workshop (Healey et al., 2015). The data collection approach in this context had a strong focus on seven pre-defined factors based on their reference in existing academic publications. The analysis was nonetheless further informed by data from Phase 2 which extended the pre-defined set of factors to individually added factors that held relevance for the interview partners.

Based upon the findings, fourteen factors were identified in total as influencers for consensus building. While the data from Phase 2 indicates a clear ranking of relevance for the seven pre-defined factors, the individually named factors can only be assessed in their relevance based on the frequency of occurrence in phase 2 and the description of their impact on consensus. The ranking of the pre-defined factors based on the data from Phase 2 is shown in Table 15.

Pre-defined factors	Ranking
Context	**1**
Facilitation	**2**
Team Dynamics	**3**
Workshop Design	**4**
Tools	**5**
Language	**6**
Artefacts	**7**

Table 15: Ranking of the pre-defined context factors based on their evaluation as relevant for consensus building

Interestingly, despite the strong correlation between strategy formation and consensus building that is highlighted in the collected data, the findings from Phase 2 show a discrepancy in the ranking of the seven context factors, when comparing table 15 with the findings from section 4.3.2. Facilitation can be found to be more important for consensus building than for strategy formation, which is indicated by higher ranking of two places. In the same regard, workshop design is considered to be less relevant for consensus building as indicated by a 4th place. Moreover, artefacts are ranked on the last spot regarding their impact on consensus, while in the case of strategy formation, language was be a wide margin considered to be least relevant.

This study expands existing academic knowledge of consensus in a strategy workshop by explaining how it is shaped by 14 identified context factors. This informs existing knowledge of the processes and interactions that take place in a strategy workshop.

The impact and role of each of the identified factors on consensus building is outlined in detail in the following two sections and will be explained in the context of existing theory.

5.3.3.1 Influence of pre-defined factors on consensus building

Context: The study finds context to be the most relevant influencing factor for consensus building, as well as a strategy workshop in general.

Context informs the workshop setting, the workshop goal and also the urgency of the workshop and its outcome to participants. The analysis finds that context provides the frame for the common understanding that is a pre-requisite for consensus building and the clarity of the scope of the workshop that is required for sensemaking and decision-making. In the same regard, context defines also the setting in which the workshop takes place and the related need to achieve results. The urgency that is defined through context provides an indication regarding the need to exit the strategy workshop consensual. This supports the findings of Walter et al (2013) regarding the role of alignment in the strategy process. Further, it extends existing theory by providing more detailed insights into the impact that a critical situation has both upon the outcome of a strategy process, but also upon the actions of its participants. The data informs also the research by Tarakci et al (2014) and Porck et al (2018) on the establishment of consensus within a team and between teams. From the analysis it can be concluded that the contextual situation in which strategizing takes place has relevance to behaviour and cognition of workshop participants and influences consensus building and the establishment of unity around a strategic option. As Porck et al (2018) outline a negative correlation between high group identification and a lower inter-group consensus likelihood and a need to understand behavioural and cognitive dynamics in a team, the data from this research proposes that the context setting hold significant influence on the role of both group identification and inter-group consensus. "[...] in some scenarios it is difficult to get consensus, particularly when this relates to down-sizing or the reorientation of a business model. If there are people in the room, who got something to lose, then it becomes difficult. Most likely you won't achieve a consensus" (IP 14). In line with the data from e.g. IP 04 where it was argued that in case of a crisis the group spirit among affected manager groups who face budget cuts could for example strengthen, while the likelihood of a broad consensus is diminished, this study informs the research of Porck et al (2018) and Ates (2014) regarding the particular question which dynamics impact the development of inter-group consensus and group identification in the strategy process. Likewise it substantiates the idea of Tavella and Franco (2015) that the content of the topic impacts the course of a workshop and the interactions of participants and informs theoretic models by Kauppila et al (2018) regarding the impact of macro-level factors such as the situation of the company on micro-level actions.

Context also provides a factual basis for the discussion. This reduces bias and supports the definition of decisions of higher quality and improves consensus quality. As the literature review found no consistent empirical view on context in a strategy workshop that covers the same scope, this finding constitutes a contribution to theory. Thereby, in a strategy workshop context can be regarded as the most relevant influencing factor on consensus, as it provides the urgency as well as the content scope upon which discussions can be held that can lead to consensus.

Facilitation was identified as the second most important context factor by the analysis. In accordance with the major part of the collected data, this study finds that facilitation can influence consensus building based on the approach by the facilitator and the observance of neutrality with regards to his role exercise, as well as based upon the practical impact that materialises in guidance and steering of the participants, his active involvement and the consolidation of outcomes.

Further, the analysis outlines that the facilitator is actually perceived as a role that can influence team dynamics. This was found to be particularly the case in situations when a discussion stalls or stagnates regarding a relevant issue.

The data confirms the relevance of Tavella's and Franco's proposed focus of communication by the facilitator on "inviting, clarifying, proposing, building, affirming, and deploying authority" (Tavella & Franco, 2015, p. 466). A comparable approach was in particular applied by the facilitator in Workshop 1 of the observation phase and it proved to be successful.

However, the exercise of the role can also differ significantly. The analysis of the data from Phase 1 found a clear indication that the impact of the role of the facilitator is also strongly dependent on the acting individual. This is displayed in the data both regarding the interaction with the participants as well as regarding the utilisation of tools. In the same regard the relevance of a facilitator for consensus building was shown to be also dependent on his adjustment to the participants and to the flow of discussions. Depending on his exercise, he may get actively involved in the discussion or remain in a supervisory role to the workshop group.

Team dynamics: According to the analysis, team dynamics are the third most relevant factor that influences consensus building in a strategy workshop. This supports the notion of Galbraith et al (2010) regarding the improvement of consensus building in case of well-functioning and experienced teams. The data demonstrates that the role of team dynamics for consensus building is defined by the form and *quality of interactions* and the *spirit* of the workshop group.

The quality of interactions and the spirit define whether there is a possibility for consensus building out of the workshop discussion. Accordingly, this study finds that "Motivation is crucial for consensus" (IP 10). The motivation inspires also the quality of interactions, which is also characterised by the way of communication among the participants. For a way of interaction that can inspire consensus building, the data shows that an open communication and a willingness to understand each other and to develop solutions are required.

The spirit is characterized by the willingness and motivation of the participants to engage in an exchange of positions and arguments that can lead to an alignment of the group which could then result in consensus. This is identified by Johnson et al (2010) and Seil & Guerard (2015) as 'communitas'. As explained in the context of the emotional dimensions of consensus, the existence of communitas is supported by the findings of this research. Nonetheless, this research contributes new knowledge to the construct of communitas, as it finds according to the analysed data, that communitas is not solely dependent on liturgy and ritualised workshop series, but also that it can be inspired by other factors as well. These include for example the discussion itself, the inspiration by a sponsor or that can also be positively influenced by a good facilitator.

Nonetheless, this study does not generate evidence concerning an increased likelihood for consensus in a team with higher diversity (Kellermanns et al., 2005). The observations do not provide any insights in this regard, while the findings from Phase 2 contradict Kellermanns et al (2005) as it was perceived that a higher level of familiarity eases consensus building.

Further the *familiarity* and *setup* of the participants were found to impact the consensus building process.

By providing insights into the structures of team dynamics and their influence on consensus building, this research addresses calls by Kellermanns et al (2011), Tarakci et al (2014) and Porck et al (2018) to extend the research on consensus and strategy processes from an intra-team scope to an inter-team scope. The findings concerning the role of team dynamics and the identified utilisation of consensus for team building in the strategy workshop setup show that a consensus building approach in a strategy workshop can inspire team building even among different stakeholder groups. This addresses both intra-group and inter-group consensus. The study provides some insights into the dynamics of this team building process. The identified gap in existing academic knowledge as outlined by Porck et al (2018) is thereby informed by the analysis regarding the role of team dynamics for consensus building in a strategy workshop.

Workshop design was found to structure and define the strategy workshop and thereby the basis for discussion in a workshop. In this regard, it can also set the scope whether a workshop applies a consensus oriented format or not, thus setting the boundaries for the possibility to establish consensus. According to the analysis, this is in particular influenced by the selection of tools that are chosen for the workshop format and the fit of design and tools to the workshop goal. This expands the finding of Galbraith et al (2010) regarding a perceived correlation between the presence of a discussion structure and the success of information exchange. The requirement for this alignment of design and goals was also highlighted by Johnson (2007).

Likewise, the analysis found that the success of consensus building is also linked to the quality of the workshop preparation, such as the provided information and the depth of the prepared content. This is in contrast to findings from the broader study by

Hodgkinson et al (2005) where respondents attributed only limited time to workshop preparation.

From the analysis it can be derived that the aspect of location is seen controversially. This echoes existing literature debates. While the view that a removal of the participants from their direct daily routines is also recommended by this study, this is not linked to a necessity to actually remove the workshop setting from the company's premises. Rather, this study finds that based on clear rules and structures, a removal can also take place onsite for example in an adequate meeting room. This notion was already mentioned by Healey et al (2015). In their study, the notion was backed up with the concern that away-days may limit the ability to reintegrate the workshop results into the organisation. However this study extends the scope of rejection of the relevance of away-days outside the company further. In case of an actual retreat, individual interviewees expressed concern that the retreat location may actually distract the participants. Van Aaken et al (2013) and MacIntosh et al (2010) found similarly no statistical indication for a superiority of away days. Nonetheless their studies did not provide any particular rationale for it, while this study's findings provide a good indication why away-days are not as successful as proposed by existing research. In this regard this study has particularly significance in informing practitioners. Companies tend to attribute significant amounts of resources and budget to the organisation of strategy retreats. Following the recommendations of this study can thereby help to save unnecessary expenses for strategy workshops.

A large proportion of away-days was also reported by Hodgkinson et al (2005). However, strategizing in seclusion was already critiqued by previous academics such as Johnson (2007).

However the notion of a relevance and impact of so called away days has to be questioned on the basis of the expert interviews. With regards to perceived relevance of the different elements of workshop design, the majority perception among the interviewees can be summarised as "Format is a definite yes, location […] less so" (IP 08).

Tools: Despite a widely perceived relevance of tools for strategizing, this research found tools to have a less then assumed impact on consensus building.

The impact of tools is found to be correlated to a support of the workshop design and due the perceived role of tools as a means of persuasion of workshop participants. This assertion coincides with the findings of Healey et al (2015) regarding the relevance of choosing the appropriate tools for the workshop. While van Aaken et al (2013) did not find any proof for their hypothesis that tools and structuring analytical methods contribute to the workshop outcome, this hypothesis is partially confirmed by this study at least for the evolution of consensus. This sheds light on the impact of strategizing tools on the strategy process, with a particular focus on consensus as an element of this process. Thereby, this research addresses the identified research gap that was named by Bowman (2016) and answer to the call by Healey et al (2015) for further analyses on the mechanisms that enable consensus building amongst stakeholders in a strategy workshop.

Regarding the persuasion aspect, the findings of this analysis show that tools help to generate the information and credibility for the argumentation that the can help to persuade participants regarding an adjustment of individual positions. Tools are found to make aspects tangible and hence facilitate a discussion.

However, the relevance of tools for consensus building was not fully confirmed. The data shows that in many instances the perception toward the role of tools in consensus building was reserved. The analysis found that tools do not specifically contribute to consensus and came into play at an earlier stage in the workshop.

Further, with the identification of the relevance of strategy tools on consensus building and their application in the context of the consensus building process, this study contributes to the expansion of the knowledge of application and effectiveness of strategizing tools that has been proposed by Healey et al (2015) and Paroutis et al (2015) by analysing their findings in the specific context of consensus building in strategy workshops. In this regard, this study answers to the specific call for further research by Paroutis et al that “Future work could uncover the importance of visual interactions by relating them to particular workshop outcomes” (Paroutis et al., 2015, p. S64). When relating the findings of Paroutis et al to the specific workshop outcome of strategic consensus their validity for consensus building in a strategy workshop is confirmed. In particular the affordance of tangibility can be well reflected and confirmed based on the identified need for concreteness that was identified during the expert interviews for this study and which will be revisited in more detail in section 5.3.3.2.

Language*:* Language is a further aspect where this research adds to existing theory due to divergences regarding views on several elements through which language influences other workshop aspects. Language influences the flow of discussion based on the tonality and clarity in the dialogue of the participants. Closely aligned with these two aspects, the findings show also that argumentation or rather the qualities of the arguments contribute to consensus building.

However, the notion of Kellermans et al (2011) that language may be a good indicator can be put into question based upon the low relevance that is attributed to this factor in Phase 2 of the data collection. While this study acknowledges that the used language ought to follow certain standards of interaction in a business context, the findings give reason to believe that other factors such as team dynamics or the role of the facilitator may be better indicators to evaluate the role and quality of consensus.

Artefacts: According to the analysis, artefacts were regarded as being least relevant for consensus building among the set of factors. Nonetheless, the analysis provides insides into the role that artefacts play in the course of a strategy workshop. According to the analysis, artefacts can be considered as relevant sources of information and function in a similar way as tools in the context of consensus building. On one hand, it was substantiated in the analysis that artefacts help to prepare participants for a discussion. The conveyed information can provide a platform for consensus-oriented discussions by closing “knowledge gaps” (IP 13) before and during the discussion.

Further artefacts inform the course of a discussion by providing tangibility which facilitates sensemaking for the workshop participants. Similarly to tools, artefacts provide tangibility and concreteness which help the participants to establish clearer positions and an improved understanding of aspects.

In line with the analysis results for tools, this contributes to consensus building.

5.3.3.2 Other factors influencing consensus building

According to the analysis of the findings, seven further factors influence consensus building in addition to the factors that were pre-defined in this study. As presented in section 4.2.3.8 these factors are *concreteness, factualisation, transparency, honesty, removal from organisation structures, representation, and sponsorship*. According to findings and analysis, these contribute similarly to consensus building as the factors that were pre-defined for the data collection based upon the literature research.

Concreteness and factualisation were found to be relevant for consensus building as they ensure a common understanding among the participants and a verified discussion basis. This confirms the findings of Paroutis et al (2015) regarding their findings on the application of strategy tools. The analysis shows that these aspects are crucial to enable the establishment of true consensus and to provide a resilient basis for the strategy implementation. This links closely to context and the preparation element of the workshop design, that were discussed in the last section.

Further based on the findings this is important to allow for a good flow of discussion in the workshop format. In particular based on the data of Phase 1, it can be concluded that a good flow of discussion and a solid information basis are crucial to advance a workshop. This holds also true regarding an assumed increase in the likelihood for consensus building.

The analysis results regarding the relevance of *concreteness, factualisation* and *transparency* are in line with the findings of Abdallah and Langley (2014). The importance of these three aspects supports the notion that ambiguity in the strategy content reduces the overall credibility of a strategy. However, academic knowledge is hereby expanded as the analysis shows that in contrast to the statements of Abdallah and Langley (2014), ambiguity does not lead to a higher level of inclusion of stakeholders if this references upon the ability to build consensus on the basis of this ambiguity. Rather, this study finds that in order to establish consensus and to generate decisions that find agreement by the majority of the workshop participants, strategic options have to be formulated precisely and with a clear classification. This echoes the proposed design characteristics by Healey et al (2015) which include goal clarity and routinization as important factors. This in turn also implies that a strategy workshop needs an adequate preparation in order to ensure the knowledge basis that is required for the factualisation. Following the proposal of Healey et al (2015), a clear goal would have to be communicated in advance to the workshop. In the same regard, the workshop topic has to be formulated precisely, for example through the form of a guiding question as it has been applied in the first observed workshop. Thus, concreteness, factualisation and transparency support also the role of the facilitator.

Likewise, the data found also that this increases the credibility of the outcomes. In case of more credible and reliable results the data finds that this increases also the desired likelihood of commitment to the strategy.

The credibility of workshop result and a workshop consensus is also impacted by honesty and representation of relevant stakeholders in the workshop processes

The relevance of *honesty* and *representation* for consensus building according to this study requires workshop organisers to ensure that an open and honest discussion takes place during the workshop. In that context, the data highlights that representation implies that participants are “not just someone from the department, but someone to whom the issue has relevance” (IP 13). These findings imply also that the selection process for the workshop participants requires rigour and a respective commitment to the preparation. This in turn underpins the relevance of the role of workshop design and of team dynamics.

The removal from organisation structures links closely to workshop design. The notion of relevance of this aspect can be attributed both to physical boundaries and a removal from daily routines, but also to aspects such as hierarchy. This was highlighted by four experts in Phase 2 and informed the findings from Phase 1. The analysis finds that “Hierarchy and as-is-structures curb a discussion and the creativity of the participants, and thus the consensus is not as valuable in the end” (IP 06). On the other hand, the study finds that a removal from daily routines can inspire “opportunity to think outside the box and to experience colleagues in a different setting” (IP 09). From the data a close connection of these aspects to the appearance of false consensus can be concluded. According to the analysis, a lack of removal from the organisation and the presence of hierarchical influencing of the workshop progress can evoke the generation of false consensus. In this regard, the false consensus would evolve due to the fact that the participants feel bound to the organisational routines and behavioural patterns and are restricted in their ability to discuss openly and to engage in an alignment. This aligns with the analysis results on the role of honesty in the discussion and the provision of open formats to which all participants can contribute equally. As these aspects were found to be crucial to consensus building, it can be concluded that the removal from the organisation structures appears to be a success factor for a strategy workshop. This confirms existing research, which has postulated that strategy workshops should be held as away-days (see e.g. Hodgkinson et al., 2005).

However, when comparing these analysis results to the notions that were found concerning the relevance of location or away-days for consensus building, it can be derived that the aspect of removal comprises ambiguity. The study finds also, that little impact is attributed to an actual physical removal of the participants from the organisation. By linking these findings with the analyses of the elements of workshop design, this study finds that a removal from organisation structures does not necessarily imply the setup of away-days or offsides in e.g. luxurious hotels. While the analysis refers to the beneficial effects of a nice environment for a strategic discussion, it is also found that there is no need for a setup of a strategy workshop outside of the company’s facilities. This informs existing theory MacIntosh et al (2010), where similarly benefits were seen in a removal from the daily business. However, following a similar notion as this study, MacIntosh et al (2010) emphasised the provision of a hierarchy-free setting for the discussion as a relevant focal point for organising.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that *sponsorship* has can play an important role in the stimulation of consensus building. This study finds that in strategy workshops individuals can act as a sponsor “who defines the consensus” (IP 01). As these individuals who are well respected due to their hierarchical role or expertise, take a stance in the discussion, the analysis finds that this can trigger an alignment around their position. This builds upon the notion of Bowman regarding the risk reduction in strategizing by a position commitment from executives. However, as Bowan (1995) does not describe this element in further detail, this study supplements his view. Further the ambiguity of this role in relation of false consensus should not be neglected. As this study finds that false consensus bears a relevant risk and occurs commonly, it is proposed that this can also regularly lead to decisions based on false consensus.

Likewise Galbraith et al (2010) found in their study that consensus appeared to converge around a group of technicians with a high level of technological expertise. The data from this study explains his findings further and integrates them into the construct of sponsorship. This outcome of the analysis is in sharp contrast to the overall sentiment from the data that highlights the criticality of an open and factualised discussion.

However, this finding also informs the risk regarding the generation of false consensus, as “That works only partially and such an approach should not be too random” (IP 01). Based on similar findings from the Phases 1 and 2, it can be deduced that the role of a sponsor can be double-edged and will require a careful interplay with the facilitator or the workshop organiser in order to avoid the occurrence of false consensus. This study finds that a sponsor is very helpful in generating the required impetus to go ahead with a certain topic. Nonetheless, the findings also indicate clearly that the utilisation of sponsors has to be closely monitored by workshop organiser and facilitator. In cases where a sponsor attempts to impose a certain position in a workshop based on an affiliation with the top management, it is the duty of the facilitator to steer the integration of sponsorship and the discussion accordingly.

5.3.3.3 Summarising the influence of context factors on consensus building

By analysing the role of context factors in the process of consensus building, this research adds to previous outlines regarding “what provision should be made in advance to maximize productive outcomes” (Healey et al., 2015, p. 16) from a strategy workshop. While Healey et al refer vaguely to an importance to “attend to multiple features” (2015, p. 18), this study expands this notion by attributing the importance to several specific factors that have to be considered and taken care of in the context of consensus building. These relevant factors consist both of factors that have previously been named in theory, but also new factors that were not found in previous literature according to the literature review.

5.4 Role and Relevance of strategy workshops

Further to addressing the research questions and to extending the understanding of the role of consensus in a strategy workshop, this research provided further insights into the role and relevance of strategy workshops themselves.

5.4.1 Role of strategy workshops in the strategy process

According to the findings of this study and in line with van Aaken et al (2013), the claim of importance of strategy workshops that was substantiated for the UK by Hodgkinson et al (2005) can also be replicated for this study of a German organisation. The data shows that strategy workshops are a widely applied tool in the organisation that was the focus of this case study. In some instances this resulted in a reported attendance of up to 30 workshops over the course of two years according to the interview data from Phase 2.

As already presented in section 4.2.4 the role of strategy workshops in the strategy process can be mostly linked to seven clusters according to the findings. The identified clusters according to this study are *strategy review, the development of a new strategy, the substantiation of a strategy, strategy communication*, a *contribution to the annual strategy process* or to *major strategy projects*, and *team building*. These clusters were identified on the sole basis of the interviewees' statements in Phase 2.

In this regard, the volume of strategy workshops over the last two years upon which the interviewees in Phase 2 reported supports the findings of the broader study by Hodgkinson et al (2005) that in large corporations strategy workshops occur very regularly and more often than just once a year.

Despite the fact that there was no guided reference in the expert interviews regarding the identified formats by Hodgkinson et al (2005), the reported strategy workshop formats show several intersections with the outlined formats from that study, which can be seen in a comparison in Table 16.

Cluster of workshop purpose	Rank according to Hodgkinson et al (2005)	Rank according to this study
Generation of new ideas and solutions / strategy substantiation	1	3
Strategy review	2	1
Formulation of a new strategy / problem-solving	3	2
Contribution with strategic analysis / problem-solving	4	2
Plan implementation	5	-
Strategic communication	6	5
Monitoring of strategy	7	1
Achieve buy-in for strategy	8	4
Examine blocks to implementation	9	-
Skill development	10	-

Table 16: Overview of the ranking of strategy workshop purpose of this study in comparison to the study by Hodgkinson et al (2005)

The setup of strategy workshop as workshop series was found to be most commonly associated with strategy reviews and what this study defines as strategic problem solving.

In deviation from Hodgkinson et al, this study identified team building as a further purpose for strategy workshops. This is in line with the findings of Healey et al (Healey et al., 2015) who emphasised the function of social cohesion building as essential for a strategy workshop. While the assertion of this study is not as strong, it still provides a further intersection of the analysis with existing theory.

However, the collected data does not confirm the findings by Hodgkinson et al (2005) that the participants of strategy workshops are exclusively or mainly top managers or executives.

Nonetheless, based upon the analysis of this study the findings of Hodgkinson et al (2005) regarding the preparation of a strategy workshop have to be questioned. Their study finds that in practice most workshops are prepared with minimal resources and timing. This is not aligned with the findings from this study which attribute relevance to the preparation based on the role that design, format and most important context information play for consensus building. Particularly based on the appreciation that was attributed to factbooks or comparable information collections, a divide to the realized practice that is presented by Hodgkinson et al (2005) is observed. While the authors concluded that for positive outcomes more preparation might be needed, this notion is not fully presented in their study. Following the attributed relevance of these elements, this implies either that the preparation of strategy workshops and the relevance of these events is currently underrepresented in the daily routines and activities of business practitioners or it can be concluded that the workload of the preparation for a strategy workshop is concentrated on individuals or e.g. external consultants. These individuals would then accordingly have to be associated with the 22.8% of that study that reported a workload of >2 work days (Hodgkinson et al., 2005). Nonetheless, according to this mismatch the notion regarding the relevance of preparatory needs that could be concluded from the findings by Hodgkinson et al (2005) has to be corrected based on the findings of this study. Accordingly, in the case of strategy workshops that are to be used for consensus building more significance and resources have to be attributed to the workshop preparation. In this regard, this study contributes to a smaller extent to existing theory, by answering to the outlined need for further research on the preparation-outcome link within strategy workshops (Hodgkinson et al., 2005).

Moreover, the analysis of the role of workshops in the strategy process deviates from existing empirical research in another element. While some studies (Healey et al., 2015; MacIntosh et al., 2010) argue strongly in favour of establishing workshop series, this study did not find substantial arguments for such a serialisation approach. While 4 interviewees mentioned an involvement in recurring strategy workshop formats which e.g. were part of an annual strategy process, none of the interviewees attributed any significance or increased outcome potential to this. This is in line with the findings of an Aaken et al (2013). The proposed contribution to learning (Healey et al., 2015) was not picked up by any of the interviewees. Likewise, no findings suggests any divergence in effectiveness or success between one-off workshops and workshops of a workshop series (MacIntosh et al., 2010). Therefore it can either be concluded, that there or that an existing benefit from such serialisation is not as present in the perspective of practitioners as is assumed by academia. This opens up a field for further research on the role of serialisation in the future.

5.4.2 Rationale for a strategy workshop

The study has found that most common rationale for a strategy workshop is the review of an existing or ongoing strategy. In these instances the workshop is utilised as a platform for discussion and benchmarking of the strategic aim against the current company status or market environment. This does not confirm previous studies from the UK which find that the main rationale of strategy workshops is the formulation of a strategy (Hodgkinson et al., 2005; Schwarz, 2009). As the study by van Aaken et al (2013) does not provide any guidance in this regard, this raises the question whether there are cultural differences to the approach and use of strategy workshops.

Closely linked to the strategy review are also the identified rationales of strategic problem solving and strategic decision making. In this scope, the workshop is utilised in a similar sense as in the case of consensus building. In order to generate sustainable strategic options or decisions, the workshop is used as a platform to exchange knowledge and generate ideas. This follows similar principles as in the described case of consensus building. As workshops allow for an inclusion of different experts that may usually be scattered across the organisation, these episodes provide the opportunity to develop factualised and valid solutions for complex issues (IP 02). In this context the same boundary effects such as the generation of commitment apply. This develops out of an improved understanding and a felt ownership by the participants. Therefore it is substantiated in accordance with existing theory that strategy workshops are a format that is well suited for more complex strategic problems.

Furthermore, the analysis outlines that strategy workshops are also used as a communication and change medium. Thereby, the workshop format is applied to generate buy-in for or to communicate predefined strategies to a wider set of stakeholders. In these instances the format provides a setting that can be used to explain the rationale of a strategy, to substantiate open issues and to dismiss concerns.

In all instances, the format was found to provide a sort of legitimisation to the strategic outcome, as a workshop that fulfils the boundary conditions that are also required for consensus building provides a platform for open discussions. In a further aspect that was derived from the data analysis, this study expands existing theory. According to the findings from individual interviewees in Phase 2 (IP 01, IP 05, IP 11, IP 12) strategy workshops are also utilised as reference points by the middle management. Accordingly involved top or middle management may use a strategy workshop or its narrative as a reference when communicating the strategy or when implementing its measures in their respective entities.

The study substantiates the theory proposal made by Schaefer and Guenther (2016) that the academic view on strategy has to be extended to the middle management. “It does not help, if the top management level decides what the strategy for the next 5 years will look like, but the operative level has a completely different view” (IP 16). As this exemplary quote from Phase 2 clearly shows, that the role of middle management goes beyond the traditionally expected roles that relate to an operational focus

(Wooldridge et al., 2008). This supports the findings of Schaefer and Guenther (2016) that a balance between management levels is needed in a strategy workshop in order for it to generate benefits for strategy formulation and more important implementation.

With a detailing of the academic understanding of strategy workshops this study answers to calls in the S-A-P research stream regarding an expansion of the understanding of micro-practices and praxis of strategy.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This study was initiated to expand academic and practitioner understanding of strategy workshops, due to their presence and relevance in today's business practice. Within the social construct of a strategy workshop, this research addressed specifically the role and formation of consensus and its impact on a strategy workshop. The conclusion chapter summarised the discussed findings and consolidates the results of this study. The results address three research questions which build to overall frame for this research. These research questions are: (a) how does consensus evolve in strategy workshops; (b) how is consensus experienced by participants; and (c) which factors influence consensus building in a strategy workshop.

These questions were answered based on this research in the discussion in chapter 5. The key results of this discussion are presented in a consolidated manner in this chapter. They are structured according to their contribution to practice and theory. The chapter concludes with a perspective of themes for further research.

6.1 Implications for practice

6.1.1 Application of consensus-oriented strategy workshops

The findings of this study provide evidence regarding the successful application of strategy workshops with a resilient impact on an organisation based upon consensus within the strategy workshop.

6.1.1.1 Role and importance of consensus

In line with previous academic publications, this study finds that consensus has particular relevance for the successful implementation of a strategy. Thereby, consensus is regarded as a platform for strategy implementation. This is of particular relevance in cases where the strategy or the situation of a company requires a fast and resilient reaction.

In the same regard, consensus helps also to substantiate a strategy that is being discussed as the framing conditions of consensus building allow for a broad and content-oriented debate that helps to develop e.g. strategic content.

Furthermore consensus building in strategy workshops inhibits also an emotional dimension. This study has found that consensus contributes to motivation and reassurance of participants of a strategy workshop. In line with its factual relevance for strategy implementation, consensus appears also to be a relevant contributor to the change dimension of strategy implementation. Thereby, practitioners have to consider whether they want to stimulate certain emotions among participants through a strategy workshop as well as ensuring a change basis for the implementation of a strategy.

Based on the before-mentioned aspects, the role of consensus in the strategy process requires also a stronger attention. Based on the role that is attributed to consensus according to the findings of this research, the establishment of consensus should be regarded as a valuable outcome of a strategy workshop and in line with more factual results.

6.1.1.2 Preparation of a strategy workshop

Based on the findings, the preparation of a strategy workshop should focus in particular on three elements in order to ensure the success of the workshop and the possibility for consensus building.

Firstly, strategy workshops have to be applied with a clear concept and explicit goal. Ideally, this information is openly communicated before the start of the workshop to allow the workshop participants to mentally prepare themselves for the underlying discussions and requirements.

Secondly, in order to establish consensus the urgency and motivation among participants needs to surface. This can be achieved with a clear explanation of the context, but is also further stipulated by transparency and honesty, as well as factualisation as guiding principles of the workshop format.

Thirdly and in line with the practical implications of the study by Healey et al (2015) the selection of participants and the structure of workshop design and facilitation have to ensure that the relevant stakeholders for the strategy are involved and participate in consensus building. The findings regarding the consensus building process imply that the theory model of workshop design characteristics and outcomes is valid. This informs practice, as the design characteristics and the underlying elements provide a robust guidance for the preparation of a strategy workshop. From a practitioner perspective, this implies that workshop organisers must consider thoroughly how and when a strategy workshop is initiated. Likewise, the selection of a facilitator should reflect the urgency of the workshop and the intention to establish consensus. Due to his steering function in the course of a workshop, this research found that the facilitator has a key role during the workshop for the achievement of consensus building.

While away days are found to be a widely applied approach to strategy workshops, this research found no necessity for such an approach and rather recommends a focus on the aforementioned aspects in order to realise consensus building and to ensure the success of a strategy workshop.

6.1.2 Framework for the establishment of consensus in strategy workshops

Based upon the presented findings from the workshop observations and the interviews and the data analysis, a framework can be derived that can provide guidance for professionals who are organising or facilitating a strategy workshop. This framework is depicted in figure 30.

The framework was developed based upon the findings on the process of consensus building, the ways in which consensus is experienced by workshop participants and the identified relevant context factors that impact consensus building during a strategy workshop. These findings are integrated into one overarching structure that builds upon the general process stages of workshop preparation, discussion in the workshop and decision making and the resulting implementation preparation or actual implementation, which either take place in the final stages of the workshop or in the aftermath. These respective findings that were incorporated into this framework are presented in section 5.3 and its sub-sections. The choice of the selected findings was based upon the identified relevance according to the collected data from observations and interviews.

The developed framework provides guidance by showing the connections between different elements in a generalizable strategy workshop setting. Further, the presented elements act also as boundary objects to the consensus building process. These elements support and inform practitioners in focusing their activities in order to support the establishment of strategic consensus.

The framework describes the process of consensus building from the initial starting points during the preparation of the workshop up towards the implementation of the workshop results. Within this process, the framework describes the different stages (dark blue) with its actors (medium blue), activities (white) and the respective influencing context factors (light blue), as identified in this study. Further, the context factors are assigned to the respective role which in theory is most likely to actively influence them. Context factors that can mainly be addressed by the organiser or facilitator are arranged above the activity stream, while context factors that relate to the role of the participants are placed below it. Therefore, the framework can be viewed by a practitioner from different perspectives depending on the requirements of the situation. These views can either address the role which the practitioner inhibits, or a particular stage as well as the overall end-to-end process of a strategy workshop. Depending on the required view, the structure of the framework supports a fast orientation of a practitioner within the process flow of a strategy workshop.

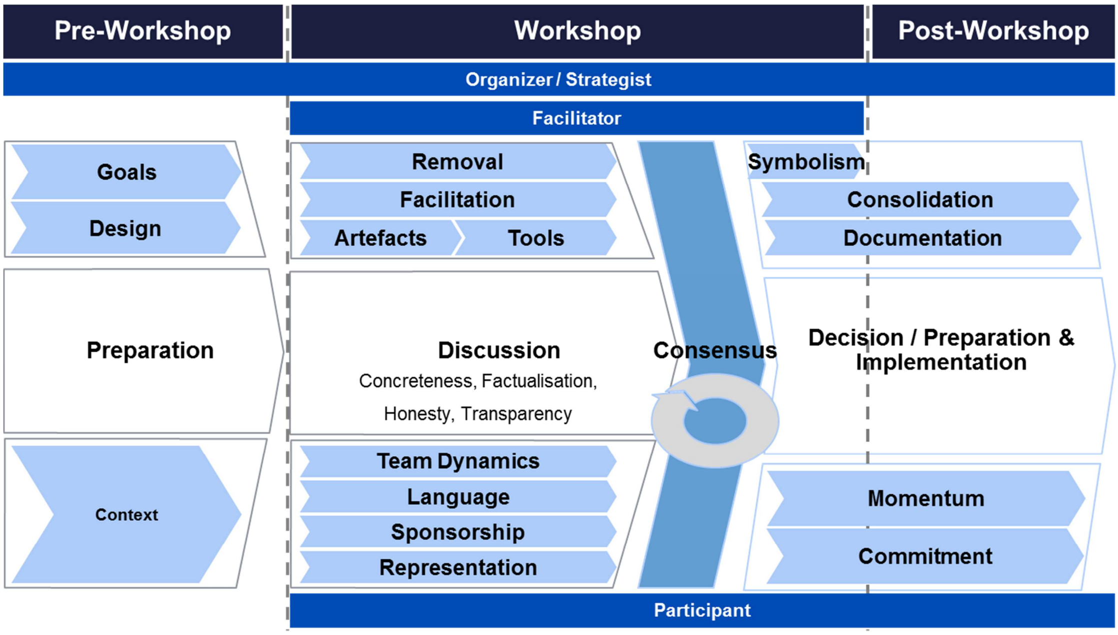

Pre-Workshop
Workshop
Post-Workshop
Organizer / Strategist
Facilitator
Goals
Design
Removal
Facilitation
Artefacts
Tools
Symbolism
Consolidation
Documentation
Preparation
Discussion
Concreteness, Factualisation,
Honesty, Transparency
Consensus
Decision / Preparation & Implementation
Context
Team Dynamics
Language
Sponsorship
Representation
Momentum
Commitment
Participant

Figure 30: Practitioner's guidance framework for strategy workshops

Based upon the findings the pre-workshop stage addresses the preparatory elements for a strategy workshop. These are focused on workshop design, goal setting and the definition or identification of the workshop context. According to the findings of this study, particularly context is a crucial element for consensus building.

The workshop stage can be divided into the phase of pre-consensus, consensus and post-consensus, while the post-consensus phase is to some extent integrated with the post-workshop stage. The phase of pre-consensus during a strategy workshop focuses on the discussion among workshop participants under the guidance of the facilitator. As shown in the findings and discussion chapters, that phase is particularly influenced by facilitation and team dynamics. Nonetheless, the applied artefacts and tools, as well as the used language and the occurrence of sponsorship and representation contribute also to the establishment of the foundations of consensus in this phase. Consensus among participants then evolves out of the interplay of these factors over the course of the discussion. This consensus in turn constitutes the decision making that takes place in the post-consensus phase. This phase is driven by momentum and commitment among workshop participants, while the facilitator can influence the actions in this phase through the consolidation and documentation of the achieved results and the application of symbolism where adequate.

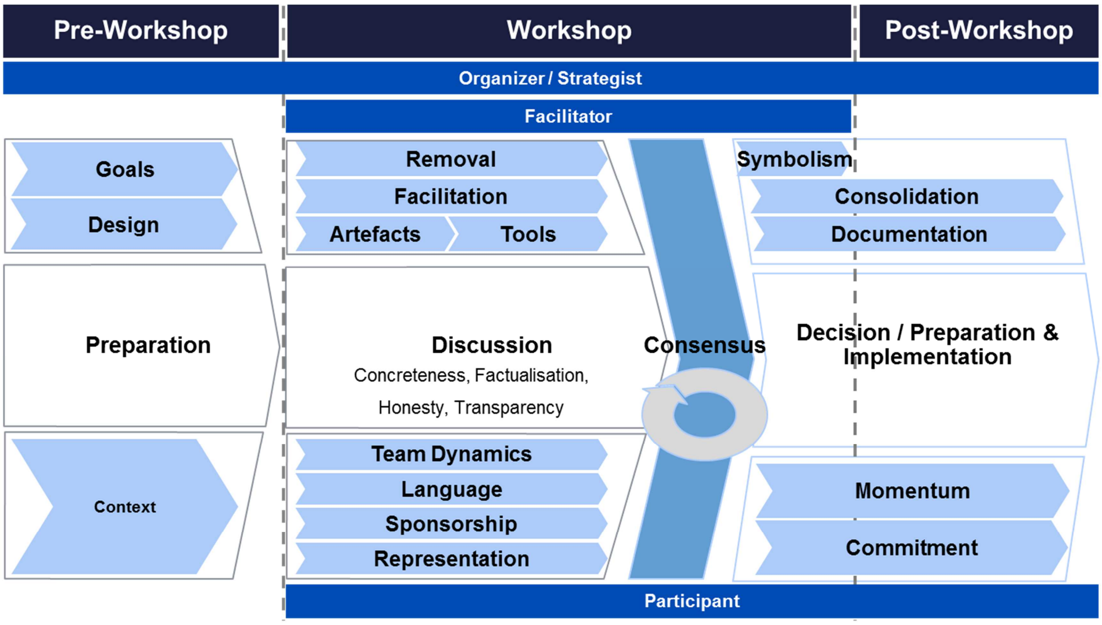
The post workshop stage summarises the activities and context factors that impact the resilience of consensus and the implementation of the strategic decisions that were made in consensus during the workshop. Based upon the findings from the interviews, again the aspects of momentum and commitment deserve particular attention at this stage.

In line with existing literature and according to several findings from the data collection, it is recognised, that this framework does not describe a linear process. During the workshop, an iterative pattern of discussion, consensus building, decision making and implementation preparation can take place. In many instances this pattern may not even cover all four activity elements (see e.g. IP 6, IP 13 and IP 14). Therefore, in practice, practitioners will go through stages such as discussion repetitively until they reach the process stage of consensus. Nonetheless, the elements that the framework depicts are structured in connection to the stages in which they inhibit the highest relevance. Thus, they still provide guidance regarding the focus points of attention that practitioners should have at the respective stage to ensure consensus building and the impact of consensus on the strategy process.

The practitioner information has been further supplemented by a second stage of the guidance framework. Based upon the visual guidance framework in figure 30 and based upon the process of consensus building that was derived from the data analysis, a set of deliverables and guiding questions for each stage has been developed that can serve as a practitioner’s guideline along the stages of the consensus building process for organisers of strategy workshops or facilitators. This expansion is presented in figure 31.

The supplement comprises the most critical elements and pre-conditions for the consensus building process in a strategy workshop according to the findings for this study. These operationalise the visual model into a clear set of stage targets and consideration points, according to which a practitioner can structure himself for consensus building.

While the deliverables shall provide guidance as to progression among the process stages, the guiding questions are supposed to inform the practitioner whether he is still enabling consensus or whether he has to adjust his approach to the workshop. This can be applied both beforehand and during a strategy workshop. Thereby, an organiser or facilitator of a strategy workshop can ensure that he meets the necessary targets for each stage of the workshop, as well as its aftermath.


Pre-Workshop
Workshop
Post-Workshop
Organizer / Strategist
Facilitator
Goals
Design
Removal
Facilitation
Artefacts
Tools
Symbolism
Consolidation
Documentation
Preparation
Discussion
Concreteness, Factualisation, Honesty, Transparency
Consensus
Decision / Preparation & Implementation
Context
Team Dynamics
Language
Sponsorship
Representation
Momentum
Commitment
Participant

Deliverable

- Overview of relevant context
- Clearly defined workshop goals
- Choice of adequate format to adress goals
- Choice of artefacts

Deliverable

- Selection of experienced and suitable facilitator
- Selection of tools based on design and participants
- Evaluation of participants agenda
- Assurance of representation of impacted departments
- Definition of workshop rules

Deliverable

- Summary of outcome and next steps
- Documentation of commitment
- Support of further team-building

Deliverable

- Initiation of implementation
- Assurance of commitment
- Utilization of momentum

Guiding questions

- What is the aim for the workshop?
- In which context does the workshop take place?
- What are the underlying isssues?
- Which design can convey aim and issues best?

Guiding questions

- Do I have the participants that I need for the workshop topic?
- How is the atmosphere in the workshop?
- Do the participants openly engage in knowledge –sharing and sensemaking?
- Are any (potential) sponsors present?
- What am I missing to initiate consensus building?

Guiding questions

- Is consensus evolving from the team?
- Does the consensus bears signals of false consensus?
- How can i materialise the consensus through symbolism?

Guiding questions

- Are actions and preparations for the implementation clearly allocated?
- Is the result including the commitment documented and communicated?
- How can I sustain the momentum?

Figure 31: Expanded guidance framework with deliverables per process stage

As the analysis of the data found that the conclusion of the workshop has significance as it allows e.g. for an assurance of stated consensus and more formalised commitment routine, it was decided to include this stage as well into the checklist in order to provide a comprehensive guidance for consensus in strategy workshops that can ensure a lasting impact from the workshop on to the organisation.

The expansion is deliberately addressing the roles of workshop organiser and facilitator rather than workshop participants, as these former two roles individually are found to exert more impact on the structure and the progress of a strategy workshop. Further, those roles are also more likely to be exercised by business consultants or strategists at which the contribution to practice of this study is targeted, as explained in the introduction to this study in section 1.4.

This framework will also be presented to the team of the inhouse consulting of the organisation from which the data for the analysis was gathered. This was initiated to provide for a testing opportunity of the model in practice, in order to review the practicality of the check-list in a strategy workshop.

6.1.3 Contribution to practice

This study contributes to practice by informing practitioners about the specific dynamics of consensus building that take place within a strategy workshop and by providing them with guidance on enablement of consensus building. Despite the proven practical relevance of strategy workshop, the lack of theoretic processing of these strategizing events may have so far limited practitioners in exploiting the full potential of strategy workshops in the context of their organisation's processes. By analysing and closing respectively the identified research gaps in existing theory of strategic management around micro-practices of strategy workshops, the development and utilization of consensus in a strategy workshop and the comprehensive view on the role of context factors in a strategy workshop, this study provides insights that can be directly transferred to practice. Thereby, this study overcomes the criticism by Carter and Whittle (2018, p. 4) that S-A-P research "is not clear on the practical implications it has for strategists".

The contribution to practice of this study for a DBA comprises two elements:

1. This study has reviewed micro-level processes in strategy workshop that address the establishment of consensus in strategic decision making and has derived recommended practices for the application of strategy workshops from them. These recommendations have been summarised in chapter 6.1.1.

2. The results of this study on consensus building were summarised in a guidance framework for the establishment of consensus. This framework informs practitioners on the development process of consensus in a strategy workshop. Thereby, it can guide their understanding of situations and interactions that occur in the course of a workshop and how those represent or impact consensus building. The information from the framework is two-dimensional: The framework informs organisers of a workshop regarding the points of decision and pitfalls for the organisation of a strategy workshop. Secondly, it informs facilitators regarding the impact from preparation on the workshop and the aspects and drivers of interaction that can be utilised by the facilitator. For both target groups the framework has been operationalised with a set of deliverables for the respective stage. This framework is presented in chapter 6.1.2.

These results of this study will further be presented as part of an internal offside of the inhouse consulting of the employing organisation of the author of this study. This provides for a transfer of the results of this study's analysis into a practitioner's setting which can provide the basis for a testing of the outcomes of this study in practice. This will be of particular relevance for the guiding framework and the checklist.

6.2 Contribution to theory

Due to the practice oriented nature of the DBA, the main aim of this study has been to develop a contribution to strategizing practice. Nonetheless, this research study contributes both to theory and practice. Thereby, it answers to calls by several researchers (Antonacopoulou & Balogun, 2010; Carter & Whittle, 2018) for a bridging of the divide between academia and practitioners and to "communicate back to the practitioner community" (Carter & Whittle, 2018, p. 3). This research had in its approach adopted the notion of the S-A-P stream that strategizing is not the exclusive domain of the top management. According to the findings regarding the setup of the observed workshop or the statements by the interviewees, this notion is reinforced. The findings regarding the role and utilisation of consensus prove that middle management and operations management play a crucial role in the implementation of a strategy. Likewise, the findings recommend an integration of middle management into the strategy development process in order to incorporate their views and concerns into the strategizing process and to ensure their commitment to the outcome of the strategy process. Middle management is hence also the recipient for the contribution to practice. The contribution to practice has been established with a guidance framework on the consensus building process and an accompanying check-list with the dimensions of pre-workshop/pre-consensus and post-consensus.

Further, this study addresses the call by Seidl and Whittington (2014) for flat ontologies, by providing insights into the micro-level praxis of consensus building and how this is shaped by its micro-level context as represented by pre-defined context factors that were selected based on their relevance in existing academic publications.

By addressing the role of consensus in the context of strategy workshops and the aspects that shape this role, this study takes on a micro-practice or praxis view on strategy workshops and generates insights into the factors that influence strategy workshops. These factors and the related interactions are to date under-researched and academia has limited knowledge of them (Healey et al., 2015; Seidl & Guérard, 2015). This study makes a contribution to theory, because by shedding light on the processes and interactions that surround consensus in a strategy workshop, this research does exactly what has been called upon by Carter and Whittle (2018, p. 2): to address “new ways of understanding this social ‘‘stuff” other than as an external ‘stakeholder’ to be factored in to the strategy calculation.” In line with Whittington (2007), this study focuses on the specific interactions of practitioners and certain roles such as the facilitator that are performed by practitioners instead of looking at broader links at a macro-level between action and organisational outcome.

Further, this research answers in particular to the call for further research by Walter et al (2013) regarding an enquiry “what processes enhance consensus among decision makers but, at the same time, allow for high levels of decision quality” (Walter et al., 2013, p. 319). In this regard, this study expands existing knowledge by providing detailed insights into the process of consensus building in a strategy workshop and by analysing which context factors in a strategy workshop contribute both to consensus building and to strategy formation.

The contribution to theory by this study can be attributed to three thematic areas, which answer both to propositions for further research in existing empirical publications, as well as expanding existing knowledge through the analysed findings from the data collection. These thematic areas focus on the setting of a strategy workshop and are consolidated in the expansion of the definition of consensus, the establishment of a comprehensive view of context factors for consensus building in a strategy workshop and the engagement with practitioners.

6.2.1 Expansion of the definition and perception of consensus in strategy workshops in academic theory

First of all, based on the findings of this study, it is proposed that consensus is regarded as a construct that inhibits a processual component. This can be conveyed by developing the existing definition of consensus into the form of *an individually shared and openly supported, evolved understanding and commitment between the majority of the workshop participants on elements of the strategy process*. Thereby, this study expands existing definitions and models by Kellermanns et al (2011, 2005)

Secondly, this study contributes to existing academic literature on strategic consensus by introducing the differentiation of true and false consensus. This expansion of the definition of consensus in the context of strategy workshops or comparable strategizing episodes adds to existing theory models of strategic consensus (see e.g. Ateş et al., 2018; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Walter et al., 2013).

Thirdly, as described in section 5.3.1, this research contributes also to theory by expanding the view on consensus in strategy workshops with an emotional perspective. From the findings it can be concluded that consensus building develops also emotional bonds and drivers. As the data finds that these factors substantiate the move towards implementation and that they are perceived as very relevant for strategy implementation and is also integrated into practitioners' behaviour as an example by IP 03 shows: “One of our department heads is then always saying: “Now let's move quickly into the implementation, before that feeling dissolves in the daily routine.” From this reaction it can be concluded that practitioner awareness for this phenomenon does exist. However, this awareness has so far not been reflected by academic theory. By acknowledging the emotional dimension and integrating it into the theory model of Healey et al (2015), this study expands theory and contributes to a reduction in the knowledge gap of academia regarding the role of consensus in a strategy workshop and for strategy implementation. Further it expands the capture of the dynamics and outcomes of a strategy workshop which are represented in the theory model by Healey et al (2015) through a further focus on the pre-workshop stage and with the inclusion of consensus as an outcome element into the model.

6.2.2 Establishing a comprehensive view of the context factors for consensus building

This study informs the scholarship stream of S-A-P, by providing data that helps to conceptualise the relationship of practitioners, i.e. management representatives and consultants and their strategizing practices in the context of the specific praxis of a strategy workshop. While most studies concerning the strategy process have focused on the macro-level, such as the relationship between consensus and organisational performance (Johnson et al., 2010; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Seidl & Guérard, 2015), this study focuses on the micro-level interactions that shape strategizing in a workshop setup. In this regard, the presented research answers to outlines for further research by Concannon & Nordberg (2018) regarding the need to further understand interactions in strategizing activities and the impact that these interactions have regarding value creation for a company. In this regard, this research contributes with a review and expansion of existing theory on the micro-level interactions in a strategy workshop, by providing insights into the structures and processes of an integral element of the strategy process in most organisations, that has so far not been addressed in much detail (Hodgkinson et al., 2005; Mueller, 2018). Thereby, this study found that consensus building in a strategy workshop is embedded in a frame of fourteen context factors which impact the establishment of consensus. These factors are presented and discussed in detail in chapter 5.3.3. Among these factors, the most relevant ones were found to be context, facilitation and team dynamics.

As described in section 5.3 based upon the analysis as has been presented in chapter 4, consensus building can take place in accordance with a high decision quality, once the following structures are in place:

- A clear definition and communication of workshop context and goal before or at the start of the workshop
- A team of workshop participants with a motivation to engage in an open, position-changing discussion
- A facilitator that enables workshop goal and workshop design through his practise.
- An open and exchange oriented discussion that allows for the required formation of understanding and sensemaking which was identified as a prerequisite for consensus
- The elimination of conditions such as a pushing facilitation or hierarchies that force the participants into consensus
- And the capturing of the established consensus, the resulting decisions and the related commitment at the end of the workshop with the help of symbolism.

Based on the analysis, this study provides an original contribution to strategic management theory that answers to the identified gaps in existing theory in the context of strategy formation and strategic decision making.

6.2.3 Orientation towards practitioners

Finally, by consolidating the empirical findings in a framework and check-list that inform practitioners and by presenting these findings to strategy practitioners from an inhouse consulting division, this research addresses the criticism to S-A-P by Antonacopoulou & Balogun (2010), Burgelman et al (2018) and Carter and Whittle (2018) regarding a lack of bridging studies between theory and practice in the field of strategic management. With these activities, this study attempts to bridge this theory-practice divide and to inform practice from a theory position. In doing so, this study contributes to an important aspect of S-A-P research, that is currently criticised as being too removed from praxis and actual practitioners (Carter & Whittle, 2018). Further, this approach can also inform other research projects that are currently evaluating their stance on an interaction between theory and practice.

6.3 Final conclusions and recommendations for further research

Despite the wide application of strategy workshops and the identified relevance of consensus for strategy implementation, these aspects of the strategy process have mostly been overlooked by theory to date. This study holds value for strategic practitioners, in particular organisers and facilitators of strategy workshop regarding the role that interactions, by setting a spotlight on consensus in strategy workshops, its role and the factors that shape its establishment.

The main contribution to theory of this research stems from an expansion of the theory model of workshop design and outcomes by Healey et al (2015) in several dimensions and by expanding the definition scope of consensus.

Besides an expansion on the vertical axis regarding an inclusion of emotional outcomes based on consensus building, this research proposes an expansion of the design elements with the acknowledgement of the relevance of pre-workshop preparations and interactions for strategizing and consensus building. According to the findings, this is particularly attributed to the role of context as an influencing factor on consensus building.

Further this study expands the view on the social construct of consensus with a further dimension of its definition, the dimension of false consensus. The introduction of false consensus leads to a more comprehensive image of consensus in strategy workshops and helps both practitioners and empirical researchers to develop a clear understanding of the relevance of consensus in strategy formation in the particular setting of a strategy workshop.

This research has found that consensus in the context of strategy formation is considered to be particularly relevant for strategy implementation and confirmed existing notions from academic theory. Due to the nature and scope of this research project, no data collection took place during stages of strategy implementation. Thereby, further research may add to the findings of this research by testing the proposed implications to theory and practice from an implementation perspective. This could be addressed either through studies of strategy implementations in different scenarios with or without pre-established consensus, or through longitudinal studies that follow the complete process from strategy formation until the completed strategy implementation.

An expansion of existing models with a differentiation among participants or groups concerning their impact on the strategy execution could provide for more transparency of consensus building processes from an academic perspective as well as improving the utilisation of consensus building tools in practice.

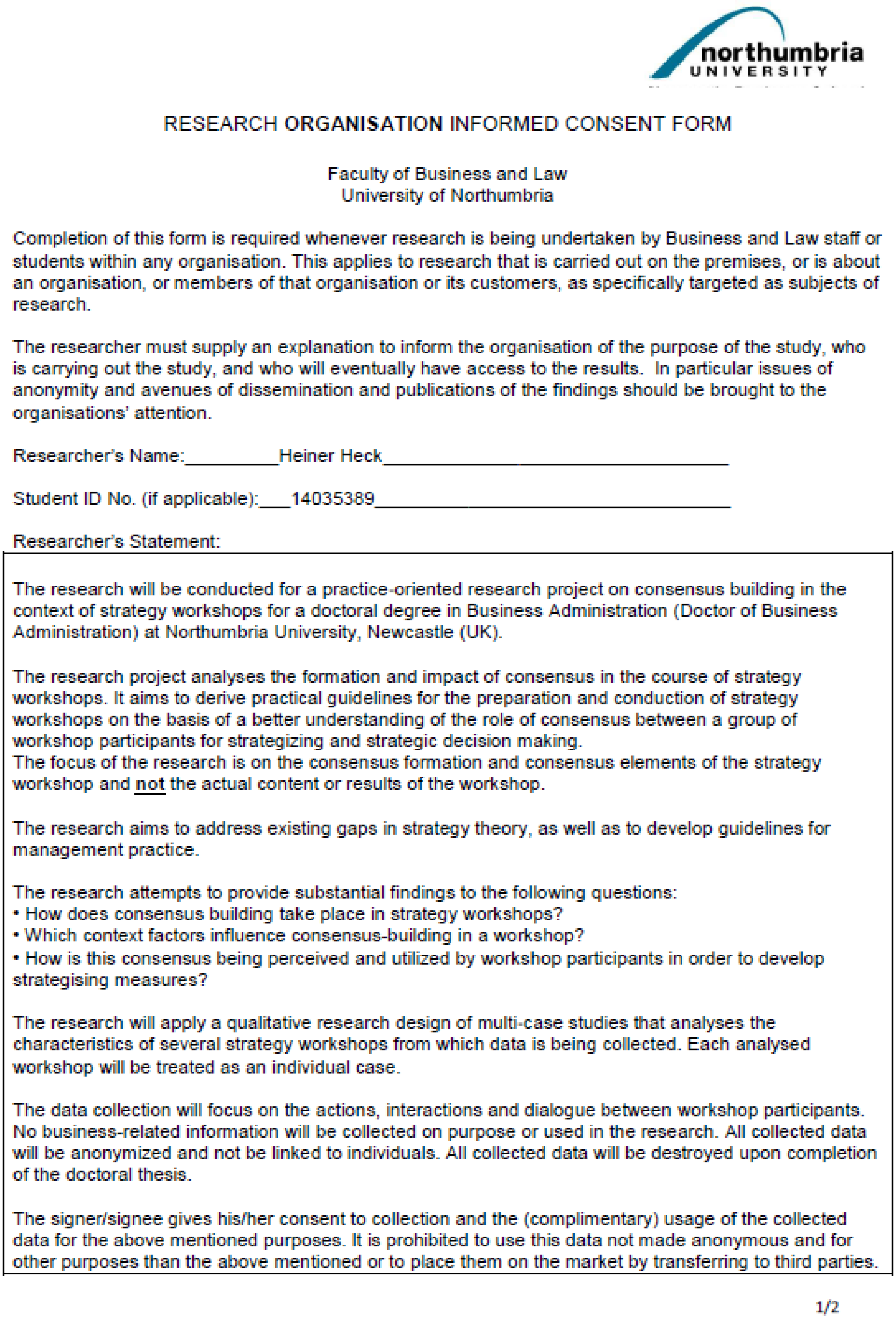
The framework for consensus building in a strategy workshop and the accompanying check-list that were introduced based on the analysis in this study have yet to be tested in practice. Therefore it is recommended that researchers could study the applicability and relevance of the framework in practice in the future.

As outlined in the methodology and in the research limitations section, the researcher accepts that the validity of the findings may not hold true in a different setting or organisational context. This research project has shed light on the role of consensus and its formation in the context of a distinctively German organisation with a relatively national focus of operations and comparably large hierarchy. However, the perceived role of strategy workshops and the relevance of consensus can differ in organisations that have a different organisational or hierarchical setup. Likewise, the handling of strategy workshops and the factors that influence the evolution of consensus may be perceived in different ways in different cultural settings. Based on the findings this study assumes that a cultural difference could exist regarding the use of strategy workshops in the strategy process (see 5.4.2). Therefore, it should be encouraged to extend the research of consensus building in strategy workshops to organisations from different industries and in different countries. Further, it may also be interesting to observe, whether a very international setting in an organisation may result in a different approach than in organisations that are dominated by one cultural heritage. In the same regard, researcher may add also value for practice by studying strategy workshops and processes in SMEs.

The topic of this research can be positioned at the borders between strategic management and business psychology. This research has examined the topic from a purely strategic management perspective. It should therefore be encouraged to extend this view on the topic by studying the psychological implications of consensus evolution and the interactions in strategy workshops more extensively. In particular the proposed introduction of false consensus to academic theory could benefit from a broader understanding of the psychological aspects that impact true and false consensus.

Appendix

Appendix I: Template of the organisational consent form for the workshop observations



RESEARCH ORGANISATION INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Faculty of Business and Law
University of Northumbria

Completion of this form is required whenever research is being undertaken by Business and Law staff or students within any organisation. This applies to research that is carried out on the premises, or is about an organisation, or members of that organisation or its customers, as specifically targeted as subjects of research.

The researcher must supply an explanation to inform the organisation of the purpose of the study, who is carrying out the study, and who will eventually have access to the results. In particular issues of anonymity and avenues of dissemination and publications of the findings should be brought to the organisations' attention.

Researcher's Name:_________Heiner Heck___________________________________

Student ID No. (if applicable):___14035389________________________________

Researcher's Statement:

The research will be conducted for a practice-oriented research project on consensus building in the context of strategy workshops for a doctoral degree in Business Administration (Doctor of Business Administration) at Northumbria University, Newcastle (UK).

The research project analyses the formation and impact of consensus in the course of strategy workshops. It aims to derive practical guidelines for the preparation and conduction of strategy workshops on the basis of a better understanding of the role of consensus between a group of workshop participants for strategizing and strategic decision making.
The focus of the research is on the consensus formation and consensus elements of the strategy workshop and not the actual content or results of the workshop.

The research aims to address existing gaps in strategy theory, as well as to develop guidelines for management practice.

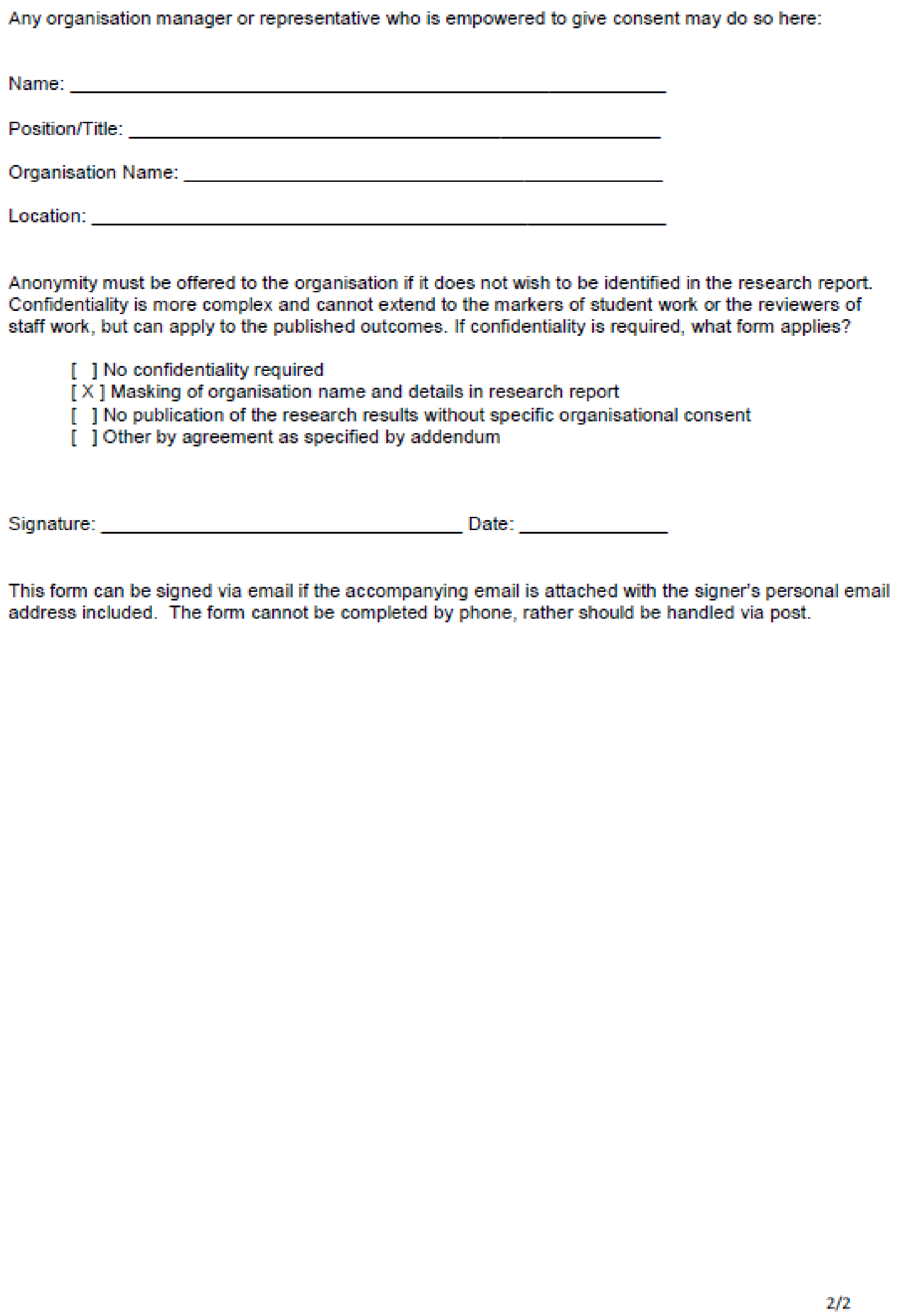
The research attempts to provide substantial findings to the following questions:
- How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops?
- Which context factors influence consensus-building in a workshop?
- How is this consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in order to develop strategising measures?

The research will apply a qualitative research design of multi-case studies that analyses the characteristics of several strategy workshops from which data is being collected. Each analysed workshop will be treated as an individual case.

The data collection will focus on the actions, interactions and dialogue between workshop participants. No business-related information will be collected on purpose or used in the research. All collected data will be anonymized and not be linked to individuals. All collected data will be destroyed upon completion of the doctoral thesis.

The signer/signee gives his/her consent to collection and the (complimentary) usage of the collected data for the above mentioned purposes. It is prohibited to use this data not made anonymous and for other purposes than the above mentioned or to place them on the market by transferring to third parties.

1/2



Any organisation manager or representative who is empowered to give consent may do so here:

Name: ____

Position/Title: ____

Organisation Name: ______________________________________

Location: ____

Anonymity must be offered to the organisation if it does not wish to be identified in the research report. Confidentiality is more complex and cannot extend to the markers of student work or the reviewers of staff work, but can apply to the published outcomes. If confidentiality is required, what form applies?

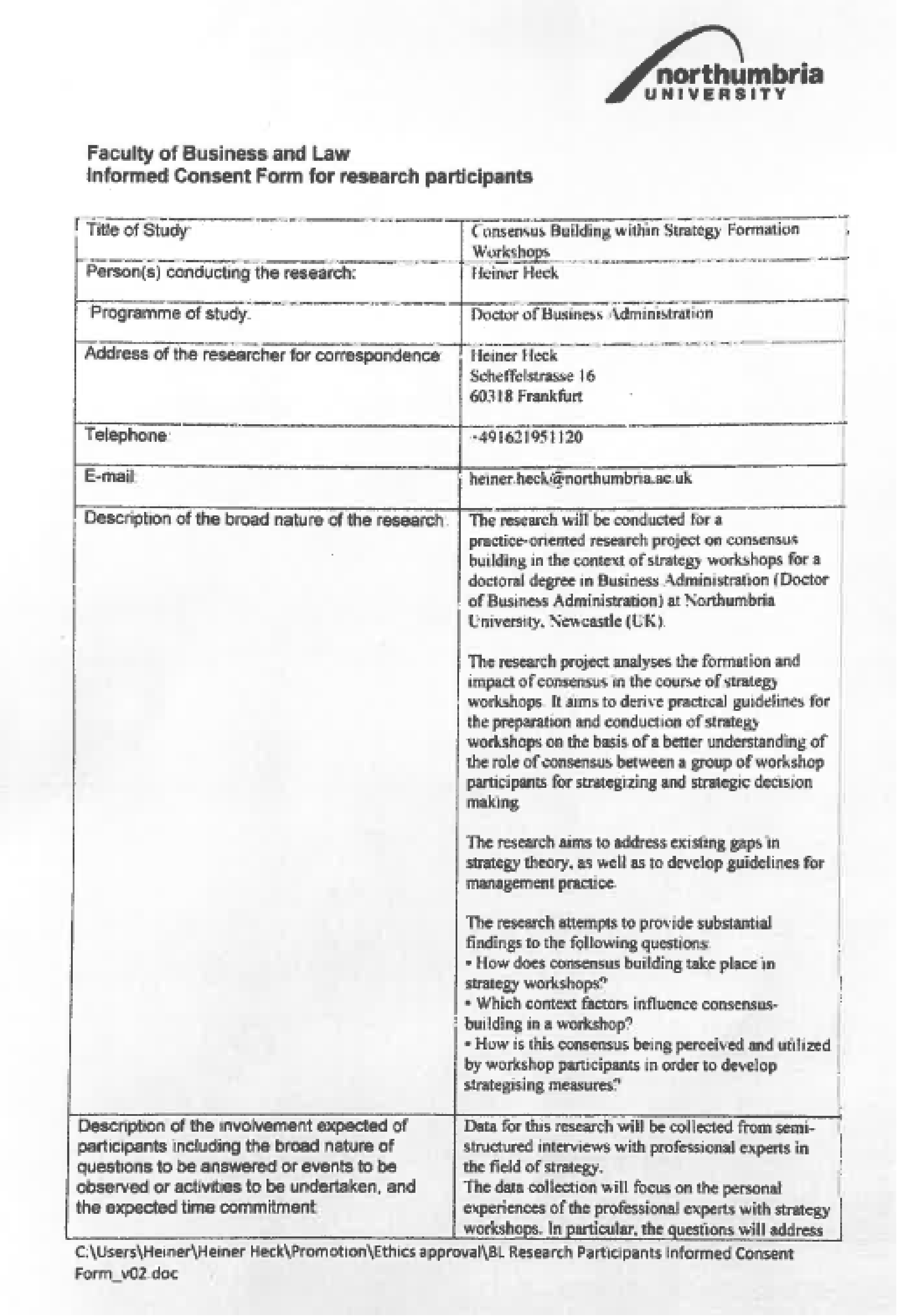
- [ ] No confidentiality required
- [X] Masking of organisation name and details in research report
- [ ] No publication of the research results without specific organisational consent
- [ ] Other by agreement as specified by addendum

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ___________

This form can be signed via email if the accompanying email is attached with the signer's personal email address included. The form cannot be completed by phone, rather should be handled via post.

2/2

Appendix II: Example of a signed individual consent form for the expert interviews



northumbria
UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Business and Law
Informed Consent Form for research participants

Title of Study	Consensus Building within Strategy Formation Workshops
Person(s) conducting the research:	Heiner Heck
Programme of study.	Doctor of Business Administration
Address of the researcher for correspondence	Heiner Heck Scheffelstrasse 16 60318 Frankfurt
Telephone	+491621951120
E-mail	heiner.heck@northumbria.ac.uk
Description of the broad nature of the research.	The research will be conducted for a practice-oriented research project on consensus building in the context of strategy workshops for a doctoral degree in Business Administration (Doctor of Business Administration) at Northumbria University, Newcastle (UK). The research project analyses the formation and impact of consensus in the course of strategy workshops. It aims to derive practical guidelines for the preparation and conduction of strategy workshops on the basis of a better understanding of the role of consensus between a group of workshop participants for strategizing and strategic decision making. The research aims to address existing gaps in strategy theory, as well as to develop guidelines for management practice. The research attempts to provide substantial findings to the following questions: • How does consensus building take place in strategy workshops? • Which context factors influence consensus-building in a workshop? • How is this consensus being perceived and utilized by workshop participants in order to develop strategising measures?
Description of the involvement expected of participants including the broad nature of questions to be answered or events to be observed or activities to be undertaken, and the expected time commitment	Data for this research will be collected from semi-structured interviews with professional experts in the field of strategy. The data collection will focus on the personal experiences of the professional experts with strategy workshops. In particular, the questions will address

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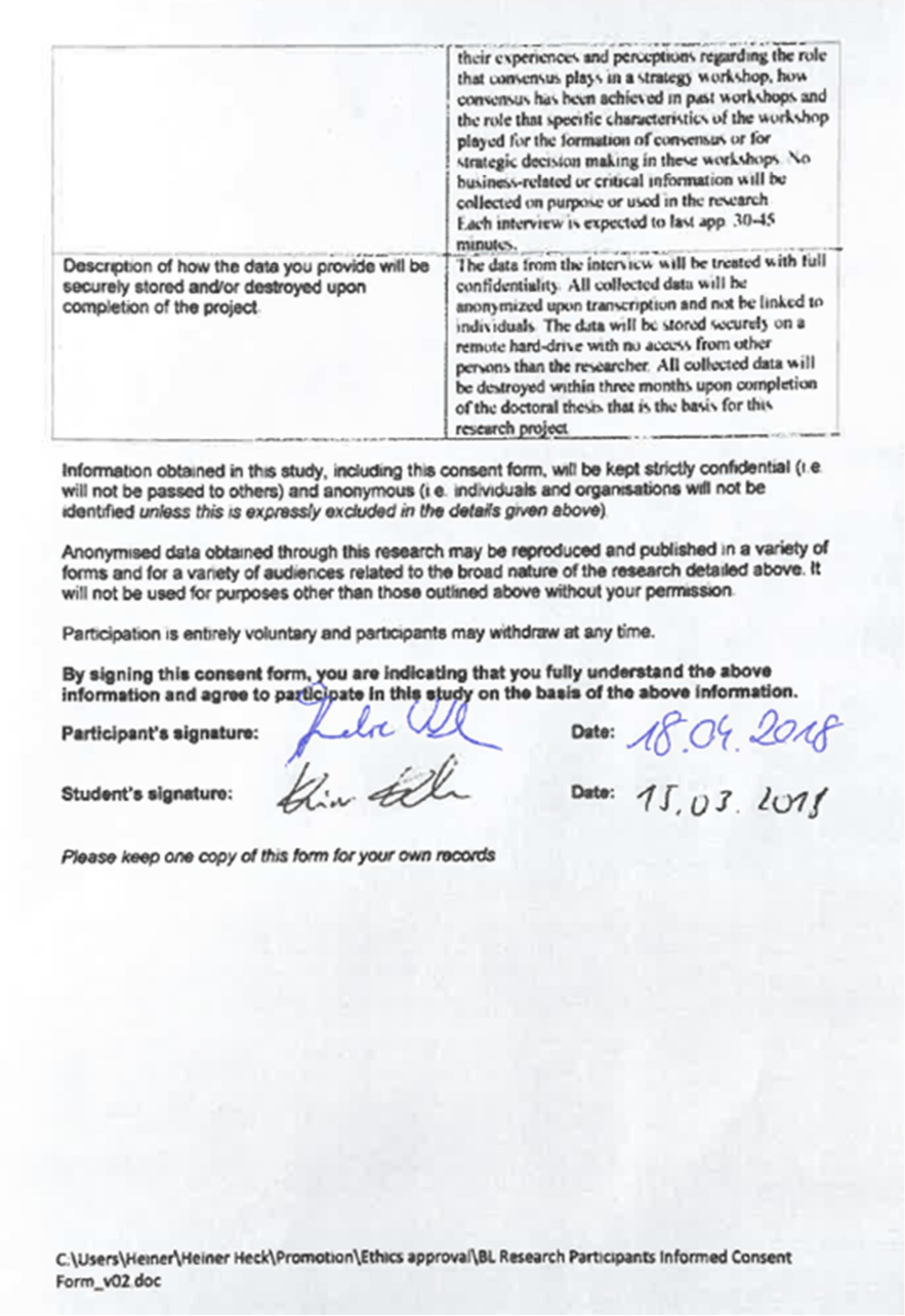

	their experiences and perceptions regarding the role that consensus plays in a strategy workshop, how consensus has been achieved in past workshops and the role that specific characteristics of the workshop played for the formation of consensus or for strategic decision making in these workshops. No business-related or critical information will be collected on purpose or used in the research. Each interview is expected to last app. 30-45 minutes.
Description of how the data you provide will be securely stored and/or destroyed upon completion of the project.	The data from the interview will be treated with full confidentiality. All collected data will be anonymized upon transcription and not be linked to individuals. The data will be stored securely on a remote hard-drive with no access from other persons than the researcher. All collected data will be destroyed within three months upon completion of the doctoral thesis that is the basis for this research project.

Information obtained in this study, including this consent form, will be kept strictly confidential (i.e. will not be passed to others) and anonymous (i.e. individuals and organisations will not be identified *unless this is expressly excluded in the details given above*).

Anonymised data obtained through this research may be reproduced and published in a variety of forms and for a variety of audiences related to the broad nature of the research detailed above. It will not be used for purposes other than those outlined above without your permission.

Participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study on the basis of the above information.

Participant's signature: **Date:** 18.04.2018

Student's signature: **Date:** 15.03.2018

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records

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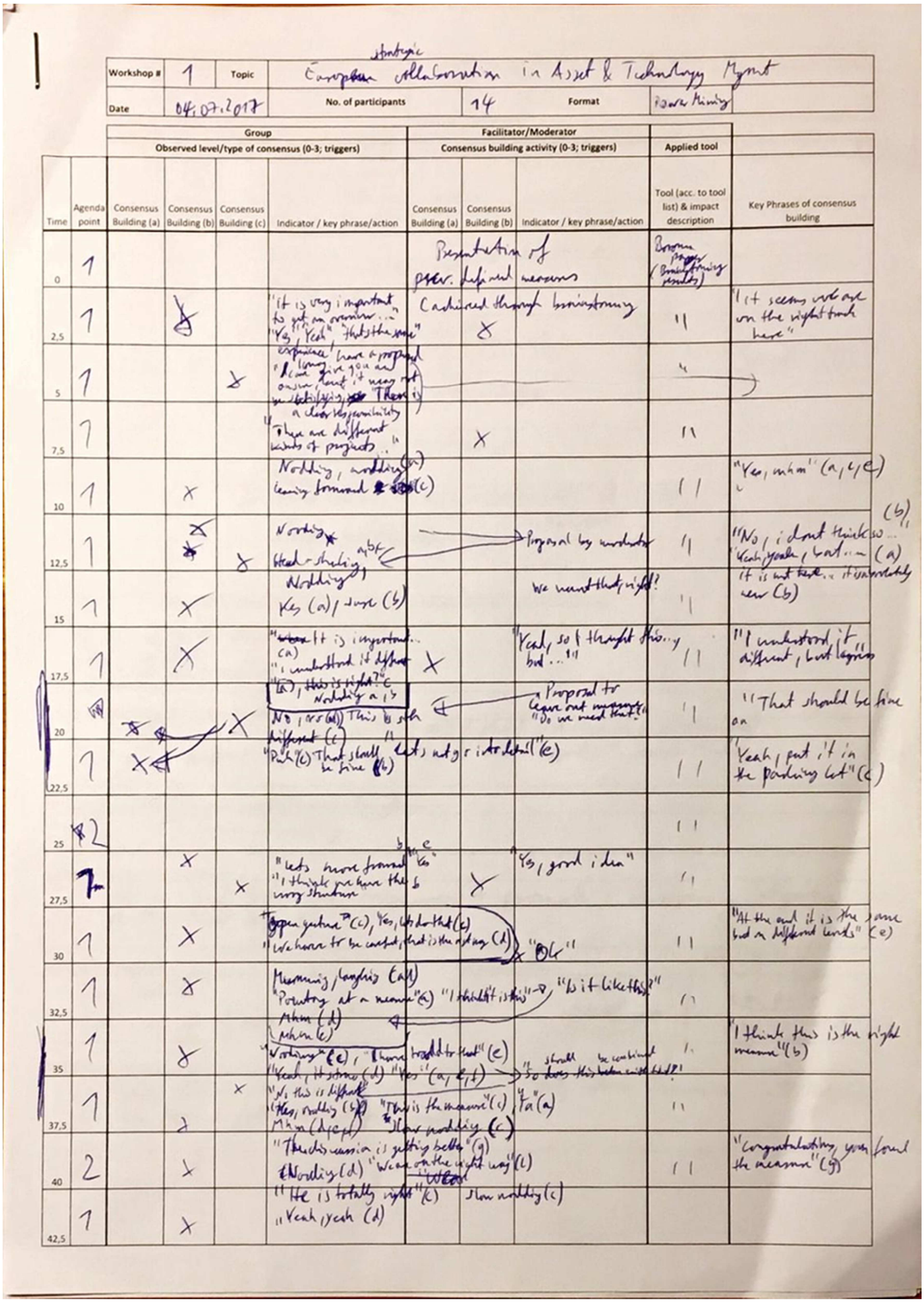
Appendix III: Example page of used observation log of Workshop 1



Workshop #	1	Topic	~~European~~ strategic collaboration in Asset & Technology Mgmt		
Date	04.07.2017	No. of participants	14	Format	Power Mining

		Group				Facilitator/Moderator			Applied tool	
		Observed level/type of consensus (0-3; triggers)				Consensus building activity (0-3; triggers)				
Time	Agenda point	Consensus Building (a)	Consensus Building (b)	Consensus Building (c)	Indicator / key phrase/action	Consensus Building (a)	Consensus Building (b)	Indicator / key phrase/action	Tool (acc. to tool list) & impact description	Key Phrases of consensus building
0	1					Presentation of prev. defined measures			Brown paper (Brainstorming results)	
2,5	1		X		"It is very important to get an overview..." "Yes", "Yeah", "That's the same"	(achieved through brainstorming	X		"	"It seems we are on the right track here"
5	1			X	experience' have a proposal "I can give you an answer, but it was not [illegible] "There is a clear responsibility"				"	
7,5	1				"There are different kinds of projects..."		X		"	
10	1		X		Nodding, nodding (a) leaning forward (c)				"	"Yes, mhm" (a, b, c)
12,5	1		X X	X	Nodding Head-shaking a, b, c			Proposal by moderator	"	"No, I don't think so..." (b) "Yeah, yeah, but..." (a)
15	1		X		Nodding, Yes (a) / sure (b)			We need that, right?	"	it is not [illegible].. it is [illegible] new (b)
17,5	1		X		"It is important... (a) "I understood it different" "(a), this is right?" c	X		"Yeah, so I thought this.., but..."	"	"I understood it different, but [illegible]"
20	[illegible]	X		X	Nodding a, b No, no (d) This is still different (c)			Proposal to leave out measures "Do we need that?"	"	"That should be fine on
22,5	1	X			"Push" (c) That should be fine (b) "Let's not go into detail" (e)				"	"Yeah, put it in the parking lot" (c)
25	2								"	
27,5	1		X	X	"Let's move forward" b, c "Yes" "I think we have the wrong structure"		X	"Yes, good idea"	"	
30	1		X		"Open gesture" (c), Yes, let's do that (c) "We have to be careful, that is the right way (d)			"Ok"	"	"At the end it is the same but on different levels" (e)
32,5	1		X		Murmuring, laughing (all) "Pointing at a measure" (a) "I thought it is this" → "Is it like this?" Mhm (d) mhm (e)				"	
35	1		X		"Nodding" (e), "I have to add to that" (e) "Yeah, it is true (d) "Yes" (a, e, f)			should be combined "So does this belong with that?"	"	"I think this is the right measure" (b)
37,5	1		X	X	"No this is different" (Yes, nodding (b)) "This is the measure" (c) Mhm (b, c, d)			"Ja" (a) Slow nodding (c)	"	
40	2		X		"The discussion is getting better" (g) Nodding (d) "We are on the right way" (c) "Wow"				"	"Congratulations, you found the measure" (g)
42,5	1		X		"He is totally right" (c) "Yeah, yeah (d)		Slow nodding (c)			

Appendix IV: Example transcript of a Phase 2 interview in German

Interview-Datum ____11.04._______ Interview-Nummer ______6_________

Name Interview Partner:__________IP 06 ____

Position: __________Partner ____

Industrie: ______________Inhouse Consulting____________________________

Berufserfahrung in strategischen Funktionen (Jahre): ______10_____________

Möchten Sie eine Zusammenfassung der Studienergebnisse zugesandt bekommen? **Ja** Nein

Abschnitt 1: Persönliche Erfahrung und Bezug zu Strategie und Strategie Workshops

1. An wie vielen Strategieworkshops haben Sie in den letzten 2 Jahren teilgenommen? Was war deren Zielsetzung und Aufbau? Gibt es herausragende Beispiele?

Das müssten ca. 10 Workshops gewesen sein. Wir hatten eine Workshopserie (4 Stück) zum Thema Digitale Kundenschnittstelle. Hier stand die Frage im Fokus, was die Strategie unseres Kunden zur Digitalen Kundenschnittstelle ist. Wie wollen wir dem Kunden begegnen, mit welchen Diensten? Was ist dabei unser Geschäftsmodell?

Wir haben bei einer anderen Gesellschaft letztes Jahr auch mehrere Workshops gemacht, mit dem Fokus wie wir mit welchen Lösungen in einem bestimmten Segment künftig Geschäft machen wollen.

Dann ein Syntegrationsworkshop, bei dem vorab die Strategie mit dem Vorstand entwickelt wurde und diese dann im Workshop ausdetailliert wurde. Hier haben wir die Strategie eines gesamten Unternehmens entwickelt ausgehend von Ziel und Mission der Organisation. Dieses Projekt war für mich auch das wertigste Strategiethema. Festzusetzen, wofür ein Unternehmen steht, womit es Geld verdient, wie es sich positioniert. Das im Rahmen eines Workshops von der grünen Wiese aus zu definieren. Das war besonders.

2. Was ist üblicherweise Ihre Rolle in solchen Strategieworkshops?

Üblicherweise Moderator oder Organisator. Leider nur in den wenigsten Fällen Teilnehmer. Wenn ich auch auf die Beispiele schaue, meistens eher in der Rolle des Zeremonienmeisters oder der inhaltlichen Vorbereitung.

Abschnitt 2: Definition und Einfluss von Konsens in Strategieworkshops

3. Aus Ihrer Erfahrung, was sind die Hauptgründe einen Strategieworkshop abzuhalten? Ist die Konsensfindung ein wichtiger Aspekt für die Durchführung eines Strategieworkshops?

Vom Grundsatz her ist der Hauptgrund eine wahrgenommende Veränderung der Umwelt, der man aus seiner Rolle in der Organisation heraus begegnet. Man kann diese meist nicht greifen und versucht dann mit Vertretern aus seinem Organisationsumfeld die Veränderung zu verstehen und anzugehen. Man nimmt Veränderungen wahr, weiß nicht wie man diesen begegnet und versucht über den Workshop ein Format zu schaffen, in dem man gemeinsam durchdenkt, wie man dem begegnen kann. Im Workshop hat man eine Ebene, die jenseits vom Tagesgeschäft ist, und die es ermöglicht out-of-the-box zu denken.

Konsensfindung sollte dabei am Ende das Produkt sein. Nach der Strategie kommt die Umsetzung. Wenn man aus dem Strategieprozess nicht konsensual herauskommt, hat man mit dem Workshop nichts gewonnen. Das darf man aber nicht verwechseln damit, dass Konsens mittel zum Zweck im Workshop ist. Der Konsens muss aus der Diskussion entstehen. Aber das Produkt, die Strategie, muss im Ergebnis konsensfähig unter den Teilnehmern sein.

4. Wie definieren Sie Konsens im Rahmen eines Strategieworkshops?

Das spielt eng mit dem zusammen, was ich gerade erläutert habe. Für mich ist Konsens eine Form von Produkt, das am Ende eines gemeinsamen Prozesses stehen sollte. Es ist eine gemeinschaftliche Vereinbarung aller Beteiligten auf die Strategie, die man im Workshop definiert hat.

5. Wie wichtig ist Ihrer Meinung nach Konsens für die Definition von Strategie-Maßnahmen?
   (5: entscheidend - 1: irrelevant)

Wenn wir keinen Konsens haben über das, was wir am Ende tun, dann ist die Strategie nicht wirksam. Dann war der Prozess nicht erfolgreich. Ich brauche dieses gemeinsame Verständnis. Wenn ich zum Beispiel sage, ich bin ein interner Dienstleister, dann zahlen alle meine strategischen Maßnahmen auf diese Rolle ein. Wenn zu den Maßnahmen und auch zur grundlegenden Definition meines Geschäfts kein gemeinsames Verständnis besteht, dann haben wir nichts gekonnt.

Deswegen würde ich hier sagen 5. Ich glaube, dass wenn man keinen Konsens zur klaren Definition der Strategie und der Maßnahmen hat, man nach vorne raus nicht umsetzen kann. Wenn über die Definition kein Konsens besteht, dann gibt es zuviel Interpretationsspielraum für die Teilnehmer. Damit kann ich dann meine Strategie nicht erfolgreich umsetzen.

6. Was passiert/verändert sich sobald Konsens erreicht wird? Wie beinflusst dies das Verhalten der Workshop-Teilnehmer?

Absolut, das ist ein Knackpunkt im Workshopablauf, wo ein Momentum entsteht. Sobald dieser Prozess da ist, entsteht bei den Teilnehmern ein Momentum. Das ist eine Beflügelung der Teilnehmer und das braucht es auch. Das schafft die Dynamik, die ich für eine Transformation benötige. Ein gutes Beispiel dafür ist der Dienstleister, bei dem wir den Syntegrationsworkshop hatten. Die haben dieses Momentum verloren. Sie haben intern noch den Konsens über ihre Strategie, aber jetzt nach einem Jahr nicht mehr das Momentum für die Umsetzung. Die Mitarbeiter haben da die Motivation verloren, die Strategie umzusetzen, weil unter den Workshopbeteiligten dieses Momentum für die Transformation verloren ging.
Die Konsensfindung erzeugt eine Aufbruchstimmung, Bewegung und Lust an Veränderung. Die

hat man vor dem Konsens nicht. Da hat man eher Angst und Unsicherheit. Man weiß nicht genau, was auf den eigenen Bereich zukommt. Der Konsens schafft ein gemeinsames Bild der Situation und des Ziels. Dieses Bild tauscht die Unsicherheit ein in Motivation und positive Energie. Dafür ist Konsens wichtig.

Abschnitt 3: Entstehung von Konsens und Einflussfaktoren für die Konsens-Bildung

7. Wie erfolgt nach Ihrer Erfahrung die Konsens-Bildung? Wie entsteht Konsens in einem Strategie-Workshop? (Beispiele)

Mitunter ist es ein langer iterativer Prozess, der viel mit Transparen zu tun hat. Transparenz über die eigene Situation und Klarheit über das Themenfeld. Du musst zunächst erstmal als Basis für die Konsensbildung eine Klarheit haben, wo du dich als Unternehmen befindest. Was ist unsere Mission? Womit verdienen wir Geld? Wie erfolgreich sind wir? Du musst deine Situation im Marktumfeld verstehen. Auf dieser Basis steigt man in die Diskussion ein.

Dann braucht es jemand Neutralen, der die Teilnehmer moderiert und der die Argumente der verschiedenen Gruppen so sachlich zusammenführt, dass man zu einer gemeinsamen Lösung kommt. Du hast eingefahrene Positionen und Meinungen. Da brauchst du einen der dich in deinen Positionen hinterfragt und dich auf einer sachlichen Faktenbasis moderiert. Wenn du keine Neutralität hast, wird dir unterstellt, dass du die Diskussion voreingenommen in eine Richtung lenkst.

8. Welche Rahmenbedingungen beinflussen Ihrer Meinung nach die Entstehung von Konsens zu einer Strategie bzw. Zu strategischen Maßnahmen?

Der Prozess zur Strategieentwicklung und zum Konsens erfordert eine Herauslösung aus dem Organisations-Alltag.
Für so einen Workshop müssen Hierarchien am Eingang abgelegt werden. Wenn das nicht der Fall ist, weil zum Beispiel der Vorstand aus seiner Rolle heraus Themen einbringt, dann ist Konsens nur augenscheinlich da. Dieser Eindruck entsteht aus der Hierarchie, aber er verfängt nicht.
Man muss auch einen räumlichen Rahmen schaffen, der mit dem Alltag nichts zu tun hat. Und auch in der Moderation muss man einen Rahmen schaffen, der es ermöglicht völlig frei und offen zu diskutieren. So abstrus das auch klingt.
Ansonsten fällt man in gewohnte Muster und vertritt Positionen, die man aus seinem Alltag in der Organisationsstruktur einnimmt. Dies beeinträchtigt Konsens, weil du dich nicht neutral mit einer Sicht von außen dem Problem widmest. Du sieht das Problem dann immer aus deiner Position in der Organisation und dir fehlt der Blick des Dritten. Hierarchie und Ist-Strukturen bremsen die Diskussion und die Kreativität der Teilnehmer und damit ist der Konsens am Ende auch nicht mehr so viel wert. Man verändert nichts mehr.

9. Bitte ordnen Sie die folgenden 7 Faktoren nach Ihrer Bedeutung für einen Strategie-Workshop und begründen Sie die Entscheidung. Bitte benennen Sie Faktoren, die Ihrer Meinung nach keine Relevanz haben.

Workshop Design (z.B. Format, Ort und Umgebung, Vorbereitung) __4__

Zusammenspiel der Teilnehmer (z.B. Vertrautheit oder politische Positionen) __5_

Artefakte (z.B. Factbooks, Prototypen, Materialien) _3_

Methoden & Tools (z.B. BCG-Matrix, SWOT) _6__

Moderation (z.B. Rolle des Moderators, Einsatz eines externen Moderators) __2_

Kontext (z.B. Beweggründe für den Workshop, aktuelle Situation des Unternehmens) _1_

Sprache (z.B. Ton und Art der Argumentation, Dialektik) _7_

Die Faktoren haben alle Relevanz, aber nicht auf einer Ebene. Sie wirken unterschiedlich stark auf den Strategieprozess im Workshop und den Konsens.

Besonders wichtig ist aus meiner Sicht der Druckpunkt, dass ich mich hin zu einem Konsens entwickele. Zum Beispiel das mir die Situation meines Geschäfts zeigt, dass ich mich entwickeln muss. Kontext finde ich deshalb absolut wichtig für das was am Ende dabei herauskommt und in welcher Geschwindigkeit. Du brauchst eine Ausgangssituation, die Awareness schafft für den Bedarf eines Workshops.

Dann glaube ich ganz stark an die Rolle des Moderators. Der kann sehr viel auch schlechte Tools, Konflikte zwischen den Teilnehmer ausbügeln, wenn er kompetent und neutral ist. Wenn der Moderator sympathisch und kompetent auftritt und ihm die Teilnehmer vertrauen, kann er viel ausrichten.

Workshop Design und Artefakte sind die Basis auf der ich die Strategie entwickele. Beides definiere ich ja vorab. Das müssen solide und gut herausgearbeitete Fakten und Strukturen sein. Daraus kann ich dann auch Mehtoden und Tools ableiten. Gleichzeitig kann ich mit dem Design auch vieles heilen. Zum Beispiel beim Zusammenspiel der Teilnehmer. Fehlende Vertrautheit, politische Kämpfe, solche Dinge kann ich z.B. klar einschränken und aushebeln, in dem ich in der Workshopstruktur Rollen zuweise. So machen wir das ja auch bei der Syntegration. Ohne das funktioniert auch ein Workshop nicht.

Man kann aber konsensfähig werden ohne Vertrautheit und saubere Rhetorik. Das ist oftmals sogar gegenläufig.

10. Welche dieser Faktoren tragen Ihrer Meinung nach zur Entstehung von Konsens bei und warum?

Workshop Design (z.B. Format, Ort und Umgebung, Vorbereitung) (Ja)/Nein

Zusammenspiel der Teilnehmer (z.B. Vertrautheit oder politische Positionen) (Ja)/Nein

Artefakte (z.B. Factbooks, Prototypen, Materialien) **Ja**/Nein

Methoden & Tools (z.B. BCG-Matrix, SWOT) **Ja**/Nein

Moderation (z.B. Rolle des Moderators, Einsatz eines externen Moderators) **Ja**/Nein

Kontext (z.B. Beweggründe für den Workshop, aktuelle Situation des Unternehmens) **Ja**/Nein

Sprache (z.B. Ton und Art der Argumentation, Dialektik) (Ja)/Nein

Hier ist es ähnlich wie bei Frage 9. Wichtig für die Konsensfindung sind für mich Artefakte, Methoden und Moderation, sowie der Kontext. Kontext ist für mich eher Auslöser, hält aber auch den Druck im Workshop hoch, zu einem Konsens zu finden. Das alles gibt der Diskussion die Struktur und die Basis.

Sprache, Design und Teilnehmer sind eher nachgelagert. Man darf das nicht unterschätzen, diese Faktoren sind aber eher zweitrangig zum Rest.

Appendix V: Example transcript of the translated version of a Phase 2 interview

Date of interview ______11.04.________________ Number of Interview _______6___________

Name of Interview Partner:_________IP 06___________________________________

Position or job title: _________Partner____

Industry affiliation: ________________Inhouse Consulting______________________

Years of experience in strategy-related functions: ______________10________

Would you like to receive a brief emailed executive summary of study findings? **Yes** No

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Section 1: Personal experience and exposure to strategizing and strategy workshops

11. In how many workshops have you participated over the last 2 years? What was their purpose and setup? Are there any outstanding examples?

That must have been about ten workshops. We had one series of workshops, 4 by number, relating to the subject of the digitised interface to the customer. Here, the focus was on the question, what the strategy of our client concerning the digitised customer interface is. How do we want to approach the customer, with which services? In that, what is our business model?

At a different company we also held several workshops last year with a focus on with which service solutions in a particular logistics segment they should do their business in the future.

Then one syntegration workshop, where the strategy had already been pre-developed by the executive board and it was detailed over the course of the workshop. Here we developed the strategy of a whole entity based on the goal and the mission of the organisation. That project was also the most significant strategy topic for me. To define, what an organisation will stand for, how it will make money, how it will position itself. To define something like that green-field over the course of a workshop. That was special.

12. What is usually your role in these strategy workshops?

Usually facilitator or organiser. Unfortunately, I was only in the exceedingly few cases a participant. If I look at those examples, then my usual role was that of a master of ceremony or the responsible for the preparation of the content.

Section 2: Definition and impact of consensus in a strategy workshop

13. From your experience, what is the main rationale to hold a strategy workshop? Is the establishment of consensus an important aspect for holding a strategy workshop?

In principle, the main rationale is a perceived change in the business environment, which you are facing from your role within the organisation. Mostly, you cannot grasp this and thus you attempt to understand and address this change with representatives from your organisation.

You perceive changes, you don’t know how you confront them and through the workshop you attempt to establish a format, in which you can jointly think through how you could address it. In the workshop you reach a level which is beyond the daily business and which allows you to think out-of-the-box.

Consensus building should hereby be the resulting product. Subsequent to the strategy comes the implementation. Once you don’t exit the strategy process consensual, you have not gained anything with the workshop. One should not confuse that with a consensus that is a means to an end in a workshop. Consensus needs to evolve out of a discussion, but the product, the strategy, that needs to be ultimately consensual between the participants.

14. How do you define consensus in the context of a strategy workshop?

That links closely to what I just explained. To me, consensus is a type of product that should be the outcome of a joint process. It is a collaborative agreement of all participants on the strategy which they have defined during the workshop.

15. From your perspective, how important is consensus for the definition of strategic measures?
    (5: critical through 1: not relevant)

Once we do not have a consensus on that, what we will do in the end, then the strategy is futile. Then the process was not successful. I need that common understanding.

For example, if I say, I am an internal service provider, then all my strategic measures have to pay into that role. If there is no common understanding of these measures and also of the fundamental definition of my business, then we have not achieved anything.

Therefore I would say 5. I believe that once you do not have a consensus on a clearly definition of a strategy and ist measures, then you are from then on not able to implement. If there is no consensus on the definition, then too much room for interpretation is left for the participants. With that I cannot implement my strategy successfully.

16. What happens/changes once consensus is achieved? How does this influence the behaviour of workshop participants?

Absolutely, that is a sticking point in the course of the workshop, where a momentum forms. Once you have got that process, a momentum forms among the participants. It’s an inspiration of the participants and that is what is needed. That creates the vigour that I need for a transformation. A good example is the supplier where we held the syntegration workshop. They have lost that momentum. I spoke with them recently. Internally, they still have a consensus concerning their strategy, but now one year later, they do not have that momentum for the implementation. The employees have lost the motivation to implement the strategy, because among the workshop participants that momentum for transformation had faded away.

Consensus building generates an atmosphere of departure, movement and lust for change. You do not have that before a consensus. Then you are anxious and insecure. You are uncertain what your department will face. Consensus creates a common view of the situation and the goal. That view changes uncertainty into motivation and positive energy. Consensus is critical for that.

Section 3: Establishment of and Influencers for consensus building

17. From your experience, how does consensus building take place?/how does consensus form in a strategy workshop? (examples)
    How do you experience usually the formation of consensus in a strategy workshop?

Sometimes it is a long iterative process that is strongly linked to transparency. Transparency regarding the own situation and clarity concerning the topic area. First of all, as a basis for consensus building you need to have clarity where you stand as a company. What is our mission? How do we earn money? How successful are we? You will have to understand the situation in your market environment. You enter into the discussion on that basis.

Further, you will need someone neutral, who facilitates the participants and who consolidates the arguments of the different groups in such an objective way, that it leads to a common solution. You are facing gridlocked positions and opinions. For that you need someone who challenges you in your positions and who facilitates you towards an objective factual basis. If there is no neutrality, it will implied that you are leading the discussion partisan into one direction.

18. From your experience, which context factors influence the establishment of consensus on a strategy or strategic measures?

The process of strategy formation and consensus building requires a disengagement form the organisation’s daily business.

For such a workshop, hierarchies need to be put down at the entry door. If that is not the case, because for example an executive introduces topics out of his position, then any consensus is only apparently there. The impression of it stems from the hierarchy, but it does not settle in.

You need to create a physical context that is not related to the daily business. And even in the facilitation you need to create a context which allows for a free and open discussion, as bizarre as that may sound.

Otherwise you fall back into familiar patterns and you will represent position that you take on in your daily business based on the organisational structure. That impairs consensus, because you will not pursue the problem with an outside view. You will always reflect upon the problem out of your position within the organisation and you will lack the view of a third person. Hierarchy and as-is-structures curb a discussion and the creativity of the participants, and thus the consensus is not as valuable in the end. You won’t change a thing anymore.

19. Please rank the following 7 factors in terms of their relevance for a strategy workshop, and why? State if any of the factors is not of relevance in your opinion

Workshop design (i.e. format, physical setting. preparation) _4____

Team dynamics (i.e. familiarity or political positions) __5__

Artefacts (i.e. use of fact books, prototypes, materials) __3__

Tools (i.e. strategizing tools and frameworks (i.e. BCG-Matrix, SWOT)) __6__

Facilitation (i.e. role of facilitator, use of an external moderator) _2___

Context (i.e. rationale of workshop, current situation of the company) _1__

Language (i.e. argumentation, narrative) _7___

All the factors are of relevance, but not on one level. They impact the strategy process in a workshop and the consensus to a different degree.

Particularly relevant is in my view the pressure point that leads me to the formation of consensus. For example if the situation of my business shows me that I have to progress. That is why I regards consensus as absolutely vital for the outcome and its speed. You need a baseline situation that generates the awareness for the need for a workshop.

I also believe strongly in the role of the facilitator. He can iron out a lot of things, even bad tools or conflicts between participants, if he is skilled and neutral. If he performs in a sympathetic and proficient manner and the participants trust him, then he will be able to achieve a lot.

Workshop design and artefacts are the foundation upon which I am developing the strategy. I define both up-front. You need to have solid and well elaborated facts and structures. From that you can derive the tools. At the same time the design can heal a lot of issues, for example concerning the team dynamics. A lack of familiarity, political conflicts, such things can be clearly restricted or levered out by the appointment of roles through the workshop structure. That is how we even do it in the syntegration format. Without that a workshop won’t work.

However, you can build consensus without familarity or a clean rhetoric. Often that is even counteractive.

20. In your opinion, which of these factors contribute to consensus building and why?

Workshop design (i.e. format, physical setting. Preparation) **(Yes)**/No

Team dynamics (i.e. familiarity or political positions) **(Yes)**/No

Artefacts (i.e. use of fact books, prototypes, materials) **Yes**/No

Tools (i.e. strategizing tools and frameworks (i.e. BCG-Matrix, SWOT)) **Yes**/No

Facilitation **Yes**/No

Context (i.e. rationale of workshop, current situation of the company) **Yes**/No

Language (i.e. argumentation, narrative) **(Yes)**/No

That is similar to question 9. Important for consensus building – to me – are artefacts, tools, facilitation, as well as context. Context in my view is rather a trigger, but it maintains the pressure on the workshop to build consensus. That is what provides structure and basis for the discussion.

Language, design and participants are rather downstream. You must not underestimate them, but in comparison to the other factors they are rather subordinate.

Appendix VI: Example of a coding table for the analysis interview data of the influencing factor - node “Context”

	Responses from inhouse consulting	Responses from management
Common understanding of the issue	“A common understanding of the context definitely contributes to consensus. Because, thus, consensus can be established faster; or consensus can only be built because of it. I need to understand beforehand what the trigger is and why I need this workshop.” (IP 02) “First of all, as a basis for consensus building you need to have clarity where you stand as a company. What is our mission? How do we earn money? How successful are we? You will have to understand the situation in your market environment.” (IP 06)	“It has to become apparent for the people, why they sit there and what the objective is. Then everyone knows the common target and the contributions can be steered in a way that they contribute to the objective.” (IP 03) “The context has to be clear.” (IP 10) “Context represents the common understanding of the issue. Why do we do this? Sensemaking and call to action drive all that. That is the fuel in the rocket” (IP 11) “Context is also relevant. Motives are surely also an aspect of the target. So regarding the purpose it is crucial that that is clear.” (IP 13)
Urgency	“I need to understand beforehand what the trigger is…” (IP 02) “Particularly relevant is in my view the pressure point that leads me to the formation of consensus. For example if the situation of my business shows me that I have to progress.” “Context in my view is rather a trigger, but it maintains the pressure on the workshop to build consensus.“ (IP 06) “And there is the question how intense the fire is in the respective department of the participant.” “Contentwise the context is important, as in how big is the crisis.“ (IP 08) “The situation of the company is always the context in which you operate. If you are in dire straits financially, and you are in a restructuring or you are just starting it,…” (IP 13) “The current situation of the company or the rationale of the workshop implies already a bit that something has to be done. That forces the decisions makers to reach an agreement. For example, if the company is financially in a bad state. Then you are forced to change something and you are forced to walk out united with a common view. Otherwise the thing will hit the wall.” (IP 16)	“That is definitely the most important thing. The higher the urgency for consensus is and the more popular a topic is, the more likely it is that you will establish consensus in the end. There needs to be demand for the topic. The topic needs to be interesting, so to speak. […] Consensus building will become more complicated in the case of tedious strategies or issues that have already been discussed 500 times.” (IP 01) “Without a common understanding of the problem, it is difficult to deduce a strategic solution, because the urgency is not clear.” (IP 03) “The pressure, how critical it is to even reach a consensus.” (IP 04) “With that I can create the pressure so that we deliver a strategy for our company from the workshop.” (IP 05)
Clarity of scope	“The context has to be clearly defined; questions have to be	“It has to become apparent for the people, why they sit there and what

	clearly defined. The answers have to pay tribute to the questions and have to comply with them” (IP 12) “Holding a strategy meeting just for the sake of a strategy meeting is mmmmm semi-attractive, particularly, if you really want to do something with impact.” “So, I need a clear goal, a clear basis, so that I can inform the participants in advance somehow what we are planning to do and why.” (IP 13)	the objective is. Then everyone knows the common target and the contributions can be steered in a way that they contribute to the objective.” (IP 03) “Context does that also. That is the actual purpose.” (IP 05) “The most crucial aspect is context. I explained that before. That is the foundation of a consensus oriented discussion.” (IP 07)
Objectification	“I feel that the question is how big the leap is that I want to make and how potent the staff is that has to define the process and how potent the team is which participates in the workshop. That can be defined from the context in which I want to hold the workshop. How serious is the issue? Do I need a view from outside? How far do I want to leap?” (IP 12)	“They ensure that there is a clear discussion and that consensus can evolve structurally. Those to me are the most important factors.” (IP 07) “Certainly, facts are crucial when they relate to the context, I believe. That is what I meant earlier, when mentioning the fact basis. I would put that up there. To me that is part of the context. It is important because it provides objectification.” (IP 11)
Setting	“The situation of the company is always the context in which you operate. If you are in dire straits financially, and you are in a restructuring or you are just starting it, then that is a different story as if you are considering that you have a great revenue base and you attempt to come up with something where we could invest all the money that we have. That rubs off on the discussion. There needs to be match.” (IP 13)	“I believe that it is always easier to build consensus in a positive environment, then in a negative one. What do I mean by that? It is naturally more difficult, in cases where you got a cost issue or where you are a shrinking company, as if you are on some kind of growth track and you got money to distribute.” “For that, what I said earlier is of importance. In a company, that is facing problems, it is always more difficult to establish consensus then in one that runs smoothly.” (IP 04) “It also depends on the business climate or the context in which the workshop takes place. In some cases the CEO or CFO will have to set a scope in the beginning or during the discussion and he will have to make specifications, in particular where it affects the company results.” (IP 05)

Appendix VII: Example of a coding table for the analysis interview data of the influencing factor - node “Facilitation”

	Responses from inhouse consulting	Responses from management
Guidance and steering	“As well as the design, the facilitation can also help to set the focus in the workshop interactions and to build consensus. You can let the facilitation go or you can try to establish breakpoints in order to scrutinise positions or gaps between the parties. […] The facilitator can do a lot of things.” (IP 02) “If that is not the case and groups insist on their position, then the discussion becomes difficult. To some extent a good facilitator can work on that. That is also why facilitation is crucial. Facilitation allows you to break up those structures and to guide the participants into this funnel that leads to a solution which the participants can go along with.” (IP 14) “The facilitator has certainly a huge influence on the participants and through different methods and argumentation lines or questioning techniques he can get the participants towards consensus.” (IP 16)	“It is critical that any kind of attempt to thwart a consensus oriented discussion is hindered by the facilitator and the participants.” (IP 03) “Facilitation is important. The question is here, whether you got someone who moderates in the direction towards consensus…” (IP 04) “To that facilitation can contribute by bridging groups and hierarchies and by ensuring rigour in the design. A good facilitator needs to control structure and methodology. He has to decide where he interrupts and where he makes an impact in order to lead the discussion to a good conclusion. With that he contributes to consensus building.” (IP 07) “He has to form clusters, to consolidate, to do the time keeping and all that.” “He is the one who is guiding the team through the process. In some instances he will have to ensure that the discussion does not drift off, but that it stays focused on the topic.” (IP 10) “You steer all that with the help of the facilitator who is not as focused on the content all the time, but rather on structure, targets and the way forward. He is the architect, the conductor.” (IP 11)
Approach by facilitator	“I also believe strongly in the role of the facilitator. He can iron out a lot of things, even bad tools or conflicts between participants, if he is skilled and neutral. If he performs in a sympathetic and proficient manner and the participants trust him, then he will be able to achieve a lot.” (IP 06) “It is rather helpful, if the one who is facilitating, has at least one solution option up his sleeve.” (IP 08) “Well, if you have got someone that drives the whole thing against the wall, then it will hit the wall. And you will also have to be able to deal with different hierarchy levels and the whole organisational culture. That is a challenging task. But there should also be some competence. I think that makes the difference.” (IP 13)	“Also, as a moderator I am able to participate with my own opinion. Well, that will only work, if I, as a facilitator, am respected by the participants. But in that case, that allows me to not only summarise the discussion, but also to make an impact.” (IP 01) “Further, you need to have the openness of the workshop leader to make adjustments. Do you remain in transmission mode or is there any willingness to make adjustments based on the perceptions of the participants. If that is not in place, than there won’t be any encouragement for consensus.” (IP 11)

Consolidation of outcomes	“Further, you will need someone neutral, who facilitates the participants and who consolidates the arguments of the different groups in such an objective way, that it leads to a common solution.” (IP 06)	“I would classify facilitation also as very important because I can steer the whole thing better with it. I can summarise the discussion and outline individual positions.” (IP 01) “Facilitation is important, because it summarises the results. Through that we always know what we have already achieved and what the next step is.” (IP 05) “He has to form clusters, to consolidate, to do the time keeping and all that.” (IP 10)
Neutrality	“Further, you will need someone neutral, who facilitates the participants and who consolidates the arguments of the different groups in such an objective way, that it leads to a common solution.” “If there is no neutrality, it will implied that you are leading the discussion partisan into one direction.” (IP 06)	“And you need a neutral, external facilitator, who guides the discussion. The neutrality of the moderator and a clear objective are important for achieving a result.” “If you are not being perceived as neutral, you will always be accused of bias. That creates a bad atmosphere.” (IP 03)

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