

ACHIEVING STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT: A DECISION-MAKING PERSPECTIVE

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Beyond studies related to the importance of strategic alignment between business strategy and IS strategy as well as establishing a number of enablers and inhibitors, there is a paucity of research on how organizations actually achieve strategic alignment. We conceptualize the process of achieving strategic alignment from a decision-making perspective by deductively drawing upon extant literature on strategic alignment and decision-making. Preliminary data collection from two case studies, out of four theoretically selected research sites, followed by data analysis based on analytic induction uncovers evidence in support of the conceptual framework. New insights reveal that the structure of the decision-making process inherent in achieving strategic alignment is shaped by organizational and decisional factors. In addition, the nature of the IT artifact and the availability of slack resources at the organizational level shape the rigor and the due-diligence associated with achieving strategic alignment, potentially suggesting the existence of additional decision-making routines.

Keywords: Strategic alignment, Mixed methods, Qualitative research, Achieving strategic alignment, Organizational routines, Narrative networks

Introduction

Strategic alignment between business strategy and IS strategy has been a constant focus for academics (Chan et al. 1997; Chan and Reich 2007; Henderson and Venkatraman 1993) and practitioners (Worthen 2007) alike. The reason for this sustained interest is that for an IT investment to help businesses achieve and sustain competitive advantage, not only does the technology have to end up being used (Orlikowski 2000) and used effectively (Burton-Jones and Grange 2012; Marcolin et al. 2000), but its deployment has to enable and to support the business goals and objectives (Oh and Pinsonneault 2007). While research has established the importance of strategic alignment and identified a number of its enablers and inhibitors (e.g. Luftman and Brier 1999; Teo and Ang 1999), one could argue that “[a]lthough there is much emphasis on the importance of achieving alignment [...] there is relatively little close study of how alignment is actually achieved.” (Gerardine DeSanctis as quoted in Sabherwal et al. 2001, pg. 179; emphasis added) In addition to addressing the proverbial literature gap, this research comes to answer calls for additional scrutiny of strategic alignment from a process perspective, with insights emerging based on practitioner input collected during field studies (Ciborra 1998). From a practical perspective, (Langley 1995) points out that “[managers] need to navigate between two deadly extremes: on the one hand, ill-conceived and arbitrary decisions made without systematic study and reflection (“extinction by instinct”) and on the other, a retreat into abstraction and conservatism that relies obsessively on numbers, analyses, and reports (“paralysis by analysis”).” (pg. 63) Understanding how strategic alignment is achieved and essentially mapping out that process should benefit managers trying to strike a balance between the ‘two deadly extremes’.

Guided by the research question of ‘How is strategic alignment between business strategy and IS strategy achieved in an organization?’ this study aims to build upon and to complement the current insights on strategic alignment in extant literature. The objectives of this research are twofold. First, it aims to theorize and to document the process of achieving strategic alignment. Second, it seeks to identify and to underscore the key episodes, events, and decisions associated with achieving strategic alignment in an organization.

The paper adopts a mixed methods approach for its methodology. Qualitative data analysis of case studies will rely on an analytic induction strategy (Patton 2002) to support (or disconfirm) the original conceptualization of achieving strategic alignment as a decision-making process. As previously done in IS extant literature (Lapointe and Rivard 2005; Rivard et al. 2011), this approach is also flexible enough to allow for the emergence of new, data-driven, insights. In order to visualize the organizational routines at play when achieving strategic alignment, the study will then draw upon the key episodes, events, and decisions identified at the qualitative data analysis stage to build narrative network graphs (Pentland and Feldman 2007).¹

In order to inform the study’s conceptualization of achieving strategic as a decision-making process, the paper begins with a synthesis of extant literature on strategic alignment, followed by a theoretical development that draws upon key elements of strategic decision-making. After the presentation of the methodological considerations, including the sampling, data collection and data analysis strategies, the paper highlights some preliminary findings based on two (2) out of four (4) cases, the future steps associated with this research, as well as its contributions to theory and practice.

Literature Review

Strategic alignment

Conceptually defined as “the degree to which the IT mission, objectives, and plans support and are supported by the business mission, objectives, and plans” (Reich and Benbasat 1996, pg. 56) strategic alignment has been shown, in general, to be associated with improved business performance. Based on the contingency-based view of the strategic value of IT, it has been argued that technology may not add

¹ Given space limitations and the nature of the work associated with *Research-in-progress* submissions, described ‘as yet incomplete, but promising’, this paper will use solely the formerly introduced methodology (i.e. the qualitative, case study approach), with the narrative network graphs being developed subsequently, in the full paper.

significant value to a firm's performance unless it enables and supports the firm's strategic business goals and objectives (Chan et al. 1997; Henderson and Venkatraman 1993; Sabherwal and Chan 2001). Given the bi-directional nature of strategic alignment between business strategy and IS strategy, one of the underlying conclusions of this stream of research underscores the need for business and IT managers to understand the "*dynamic and complementary nature of business strategy and IT strategy*" (Oh and Pinsonneault 2007, pg. 240) in order to ensure that their IT initiatives best suit their organization's goals and objectives.

Given its theoretical importance and practical relevance, a number of key antecedents have been studied, most often in the context of variance-based, cross sectional research. With regards to factors internal to the organization, shared domain knowledge of business and IT decision makers (Bassellier and Benbasat 2004; Bassellier et al. 2001; Luftman and Brier 1999), prior IS success (Chan et al. 2006; Croteau and Bergeron 2001), the management style of the IT unit (Croteau and Bergeron 2001), the organizational size (Chan et al. 2006), the organizational type (Chan et al. 2006), and the degree of CEO/CIO heterogeneity (Gagnon et al. 2006), have been shown empirically to influence strategic alignment. Factors external to the organization, such as the degree of environmental uncertainty (Chan et al. 2006; Croteau and Bergeron 2001) have also been shown to play a role in shaping strategic alignment. In general, this perspective tends to view strategic alignment from a static perspective (Chan et al. 1997; Croteau and Bergeron 2001; Reich and Benbasat 1996), whereby alignment, once achieved, is to be maintained over a period of time (usually 2-to-5 years). To a large extent, this extant literature that focuses on the study of the antecedents to strategic alignment *implicitly* assumes that strategic alignment is achieved in the organization and then proceeds to seek empirical support for various enablers and/or inhibitors of the focal construct.

Strategic alignment has also been considered from a dynamic perspective by means of process-based, longitudinal research (e.g. Luftman and Brier 1999; Sabherwal et al. 2001). These studies conceptualize strategic alignment as a process, evolving over time, which features episodes of alignment, misalignment, and realignment separated by periods of radical transformation. While these studies provide particularly rich, narrative accounts of the impetus for strategic alignment, they do not provide *explicit* theorization paths for the organizational dynamics that lead to achieving strategic alignment.

While the extant literature offers important and revealing insights into the consequences, antecedents, and the different perspectives of strategic alignment (i.e. static vs. dynamic), an important conceptual gap persists: as it stands, essentially we do not know how it is achieved. A common thread running through the extant literature says that strategic alignment is the end result of a regular and on-going decision-making effort that is reflective of the institutionalization of a culture of alignment (Bassellier and Benbasat 2004; Bassellier et al. 2001; Henderson and Venkatraman 1993). Despite that understanding, when it comes to *achieving* strategic alignment, we do not have a holistic picture that accounts for that decision-making effort in its entirety. Or, as Mintzberg et al. (1976) put it, the literature does not "*describe how decision processes flow through organizational structures*" (pg. 274), beginning with the formulation of the business strategy and ending with development of the IS strategy.

Theoretical development

Given that strategic alignment reflects the degree to which the IS strategy supports and is supported by the business strategy, one could argue that the way in which strategic alignment is achieved is similar in nature to a strategic decision-making process. For example, as (Sabherwal et al. 2001) note in one of the cases at the heart of their study on the dynamics of strategic alignment, "*managers incrementally alter strategies [...] to constrain the level of misalignment. [At LEASE,] when the environment shifted with the new tax laws and changing economics of the IS industry, LEASE had to modify its strategic IS profile,*" (pg. 184) by way of the President and the CEO shifting the IS strategy from a nonstrategic to a strategic focus aimed at cutting costs. In light of this argument, we draw upon the extant literature on strategic decision making to uncover the underlying structure of what appears to be an unstructured decision-making process. The key to the theoretical development would be to stress that when it comes to achieving strategic alignment: (1) there is structure in the apparent 'un-structuredness' of the overall process; (2) that routines are often evoked in these decisions; (3) the process tends to a few patterns that combine different routines.

Management research has often viewed strategic decision-making as a source of (sustainable) competitive advantage, primarily for two reasons. First, because it reflects fundamental decisions that are “*important in terms of the actions taken, the resources committed, or the precedents set.*” (Mintzberg et al. 1976, pg. 246). Second, because almost regardless of the nature of the particular decisions made, the way in which strategic decisions are made tends to be ripe with what researchers refer to as *causal ambiguity* and *social complexity*, both of which make the strategic decision-making process be highly context specific and therefore costly to imitate (Mata et al. 1995).

The decision-making process is thought to be composed of discrete phases of problem conceptualization, analysis, and conclusion (Simon 1976; Witte et al. 1972), however evidence suggests no sequential way of describing their relationship. As Mintzberg et al. (1976) highlight, “[w]e find logic in delineating distinct phases of the strategic decision process, but not in postulating a simple sequential relationship between them.” (pg. 252) Proposing a number of so-called routines, Mintzberg et al. (1976) argue that the process through which organizations make decisions is built around a number of primitives, which include the ‘main’ identification, development, and selection routines, supporting routines, and various dynamic factors, such as interrupts and delays that play a role in speeding up or slowing down the overall process.

While most decision-making processes share these elements, the specific path to reaching a decision is shaped by a variety of factors. For instance, the very nature of the issue that triggers the need for a decision shapes events that follow. While an issue identified as an opportunity may afford a longer time frame for reaching a decision, something that is deemed to be a crisis would require a much quicker organizational response, thus increasing the complexity of the decision-making process. The solution type that is available whether it is considered given, ready-made, custom-made, or modified will entail the use of an increasing number of routines and dynamic factors in order to reach a decision. Identified as an important routine in the decision-making process, politics play a crucial role in the decision-making process as actors engage in “*observable, but often covert, actions by which [they] enhance their power to influence a decision.*” (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois III 1988, pg. 738) Whether operating in an environment where the sharing of complete information is done in an above-board fashion (Allison and Zelikow 1999) or having to deal with partial information (Pettigrew 1973), politics shape the decision-making process. In addition, structural and individual factors also contribute to the relative complexity of making a decision (Langley 1995). These would include the extent of participation (which can range from limited to widespread), the distribution of power resulting from authority or expertise (which can be concentrated or diffused in nature), and even the range of opinions displayed (which can be convergent or divergent), all play a role in shaping decision-making. Furthermore, the leadership style of those involved in the decision-making process (which could range essentially from autocratic to consensual/passive) or the cognitive preferences of the various actors (which could be best described as intuitive, analytical or anywhere in between) influence the possible over- and underuse of formal analysis in a given organizational context.

Research has shown that *how* strategic decisions are made, independent of what they happen to be, engenders an organizational impact. For instance, comprehensiveness in making a decision has been shown to positively influence performance in a stable environment, while negatively influencing performance in unstable environments (Fredrickson and Iaquinto 1989). Decision speed too has been shown to affect performance in the context of “*high-velocity environments*” such as those of microcomputer manufacturers (Eisenhardt 1989b; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois III 1988). More particularly, in the context of an IT implementation (Cooper and Zmud 1990; Markus and Tanis 2000), research has shown that time again decision-making processes, such as the decision to buy, to build, or to outsource (Hung and Low 2007), how to address change management (Kotter 1995), or how to manage IT resistance (Rivard and Lapointe 2012), play critical roles in shaping the IT value proposition.

Given the goal of understanding how organizations achieve strategic alignment, the theoretical development emerges as a result of a two-step process. The first is to draw deductively from extant literature (Webster and Watson 2002) the factors that shape how an organization achieves strategic alignment and then to frame it as a decision-making process. The second is to use the conceptual framework informed by the extant literature as the lens through which to analyze the qualitative data (Lapointe and Rivard 2005). Since in general, strategic alignment is associated with improved business performance (Chan et al. 1997; Oh and Pinsonneault 2007) and a number of antecedents influence its implementation, it stands to reason that an organization will want to take these dimensions into account

when making strategic alignment-related decisions. As a result, one would argue that achieving strategic alignment is essentially a decision-making process, as reflected by Mintzberg et al. (1976)'s theorization. The process begins with the *identification phase*, when key strategic objectives set forth in the formulation of the business strategy or particular cues articulated in the IS strategy are recognized as key markers by relevant decisional IS and business actors. Based on the emerging understanding of the stated business goals and objectives as well as of the IS priorities and direction, during the *development phase*, key executives then craft a number of strategy-related solutions that, when taken in conjunction, come to address most, if not all, of the stated IS and business mission, objectives, and plans. Following the evaluation of competing priorities, which occurs during the *selection phase*, the decision-making process concludes with the selection of an appropriate business strategy and IS strategy that effectively supports one another. Nonetheless, this paper acknowledges that no decision incorporates all of the known parameters, as life in all its complexity is not deterministic in nature. There will be overlooked factors in the decision, and therefore, while the process of how strategic alignment is achieved in an organization can be mapped out by teasing out its constituting routines, identifying if a business strategy and an IS strategy truly bring about strategic alignment can only be measured post decision.²

The theoretical contribution consists in establishing a roadmap for achieving strategic alignment. In doing so the current research aims to help organizations better understand this business process in order to enable them to apply it successfully to their own particular context. In addition, as IT has evolved from primarily stand-alone systems to encompass increasingly networked and enterprise-level applications (McAfee 2006), but also from closed to open-source type applications, it would be intriguing to explore if the very nature of the IT artifact plays a role in shaping the decision-making process associated with achieving strategic alignment. The paper is an example of process-oriented theorizing (Jaccard and Jacoby 2010; Van de Ven and Poole 2005) that aims to explain (Gregor 2006) how strategic alignment is achieved. The boundary of the study is the strategic alignment between business strategy and IS strategy (cf. Henderson and Venkatraman 1993). The main reason for this is that the decision-making perspective itself (Mintzberg et al. 1976) was developed for analyzing business processes unfolding at a strategic level (i.e. business strategy and IS strategy).

Research method

In light of its exploratory nature aimed at documenting, understanding, and explaining how organizations achieve strategic alignment, this study adopted a mixed methods approach. As such, following a comprehensive literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the resulting qualitative data was analyzed using an analytic induction strategy (Patton 2002). Since organizational routines tend to be distributed over time and space and are thus difficult to observe in their entirety, this study will use narrative network graphs (Pentland and Feldman 2007), built from the results of the qualitative data analysis, to visualize how strategic alignment is achieved in an organization.

As shown in **Table 1**, a higher education research-oriented organization, a telecommunications and media company, a teaching hospital, and a privately-held furniture manufacturing company were selected as the sites for this study. The sites and the individual respondents were selected based on theoretical sampling (Patton 2002).

Site	Industry type	Organization type (Mintzberg, 1979)	Ownership structure	Organization size	Role of IT (Dehning et al., 2003)
Case 1	Education	Professional organization	Public (non-profit)	5,060	Informate
Case 2	Telecom/Media	Diversified organization	Public (for profit)	55,250	Transform
Case 3	Healthcare	Professional organization	Public (non-profit)	12,000	Informate
Case 4	Manufacturing	Machine organization	Private (for profit)	500	Automate

² The authors would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this particular insight.

First, the aim was to identify organizations that make their own strategic decisions vis-à-vis their business and IS strategies. Second, the organizations were screened so as to ensure areas of similarity and discrepancy across various organizational dimensions. Third, once the organization was identified, the goal became to interview business and IT professionals that were involved and were familiar with achieving strategic alignment.

To enhance the study's degree of internal validity through data triangulation (Yin 2009), three sources of evidence were used: interviews, documentation, and observation. Interviewees from executive and upper management levels were selected, contacted and asked to participate in individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. All participants gave informed written consent. The average interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interview guide, refined and validated in the field through two pilot interviews, consisted of nine questions designed to collect qualitative data on strategic alignment-related issues. Internal reports, white papers, memos, and activity statements were used to uncover and record relevant practices revealed to how the organization approaches strategic alignment. Finally, in Case 1, the principal investigator had the opportunity to observe first-hand efforts aimed at achieving strategic alignment over a five-year period. These additional sources of information were used to support, to complement, and to provide further context to the data gathered in the interviews.

The individual interviews were recorded in their entirety and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The initial coding categories mirrored the interview guide and were derived from the original conceptualization of strategic alignment and decision-making. As a result, they reflected issues related to organizational routines for strategic decision-making, the formulation of the business and the IS strategies, and the factors of influence in how an organization achieves strategic alignment. Subsequent coding categories were created to recognize situations in which the initial coding categories did not adequately represent emergent data-driven insights. The transcripts were coded in NVivo9, with the coding process ending at theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In line with extant literature (Larsson 1993), the validity of the coding process will be enforced through consensus of opinion between two researchers involved in the data coding process. When consensus proves unreachable, a third researcher provides the tie breaking interpretation of the content following a discussion with the original coders.

Analyzing the qualitative data will be done as a two-step process (Eisenhardt 1989a). First, the intra-case analysis will be aimed at revealing the particular patterns of each case and thus will allow for a thorough understanding of the underlying business reality. Second, the inter-case analysis, once completed, will see the emergence of points of commonality across the various cases, as well as their particularities. The data analysis approach, using an analytic induction strategy approach (Patton 2002), will help isolate qualitative data that, first, may come to support theoretical areas of interest that emerged from the literature review, second, may help disprove previous directions of inquiry based on the extant literature, and finally, may allow for the emergence of entirely new perspectives.

As the qualitative data analysis reveals key episodes, events, and decisions on how organizations achieve strategic alignment, in the full paper, these will be aggregated into a sequence of events that could then be turned into a matrix form and visualized in the form of narrative network graphs (Pentland and Feldman 2007). This approach will help visualize the organizational routines associated with achieving strategic alignment as they are enacted in practice (Orlikowski 2000).

With regards to the progress made so far, an initial round of data collection and data analysis was done for Case 1 (4 interviews) and Case 4 (2 interviews) with preliminary findings based on these two cases presented in the following section. Upon a close consideration of the preliminary findings, and a possible, further refinement of the interview guide, additional data collection and data analysis will be conducted for Case 2 and Case 3, along with generating the narrative network graphs for all cases.

Preliminary Findings

Case 1 and Case 4 offer revealing insights related to strategic decision-making processes. In spite of differences in industry sector, relative size, and organization type, they also showed considerable similarities vis-à-vis their approach to achieving strategic alignment. For example, discrepancies in the role that IT plays in the respective organizations become apparent whereby technology's role in Case 1 is to *informate* (e.g. *"In the end, what is this institution about? It is not about the administration, it is*

about teaching, and it is about the research” -Respondent B), while in Case 4 its focus is to automate (e.g. “since 15 minutes downtime translates into a \$25,000 loss” -Respondent J). Nonetheless, in both cases IT enables and supports the business function, although that orientation is much more evident in Case 4 with one of the respondents mentioning that “[IT] is very much a support function, we’re certainly not driving the [business] strategy, we’re responding to the direction that the company goes.” (Case 4, Respondent I) Of particular note is that in both cases, while acknowledging the importance of achieving strategic alignment, there is no formal process for achieving strategic alignment “[The organization does not have] a formal process protocol mandating the way that such [strategic alignment] decisions are supposed to happen” (Case 1, Respondent B). Instead, strategic alignment is achieved in practice via what can be considered to be an informal approach. **Table 2** highlights key takeaways related to achieving strategic alignment, as enacted in practice.

Table 2. Achieving strategic alignment, as enacted in practice	
Case 1	Case 4
<p>Driving factor(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify business need <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ functionality gap, crisis: “[Strategic alignment] can start with the identification of a functional need,” (Case 1, Respondent A), whereby “concerns [affect] the perception of what needs to be done and where the organization needs to focus resources.” (Case 1, Respondent C) ○ vision: “there been cases in the past when a strategic vision was established that drove the adoption of (information systems). Lot of times, decisions have been made from execs seeing software out there and thinking it will work here.” (Case 1, Respondent C) • Technology end-of-life: “[S]ystems simply get out-of-date and become unusable by eventually reaching their end-of-life, or the lack of vendor support implies an increase in internal maintenance costs” (Case 1, Respondent C) • Emerging technology (i.e. opportunity): “innovation, the need to stay current with technology and IT trends would provide the organization with the means to achieve the major operational goals put forth in the strategic business plans” (Case 1, Respondent C) 	<p>Driving factor(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify business need <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ functionality gap, crisis: IT staff adheres to the principle of “follow, don’t lead” (Case 4, Respondent I)
<p>Degree of consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandated team or steering committee: “project team mandated to advise the administration on an issue of strategic importance” (Case 1, Respondent D) • Retreats and conferences for direct input: “[O]rganizing certain events, such as all day CIO retreats, with the IT directors to discuss elements of the IT strategic plan” (Case 1, Respondent D) • Working documents published by executive business leaders • Authoritative approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ By senior management: “[D]ecisions were made at a fairly high level, with software believed to address current organizational issues being purchased [...] almost on the sole basis.” (Case 1, Respondent B) ○ By users: “[R]esearchers have always operated autonomously in terms of their research projects and that includes whatever IT needs they have. So, that is one problem: there is an entire community out there that is completely divorced from our central IT function.” (Case 1, Respondent D) 	<p>Degree of consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue process: IT goals and objectives, as well as targets and deliverables are established via a “dialogue process” (Case 4, Respondent I) between the owner and the IT managers. • Authoritative approach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ By senior ownership
<p>Evaluation approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “balanced scorecard”: “the evaluation process helps drive business value in IT. It does so by facilitating the fit between the business and the IT strategies, but it also provides us with the performance benchmarks we 	<p>None</p>

<p><i>need to show, year over year, whether we are actually better aligned or not so well aligned.” (Case 1, Respondent D)</i></p>	
<p>Burden of responsibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CIO: “<i>at the CIO level there are efforts made to try to ensure that the IT plans are not separated from the organization’s major goals and objectives. As the CIO reports to the Provost and the Provost plays an important role in shaping the business objectives of the institution, the IT function has to see how it can help enable the overall strategic goals and how it can add value.</i>” (Case 1, Respondent C) 	<p>Burden of responsibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owner

Overall, the qualitative data indicates that achieving strategic alignment does follow the general description of a decision-making process, whereby a business or IS direction is identified, it is then analyzed with an eye towards developing an adequate solution, and finally, what is thought to be the best alternative solution is selected to ensure that “*the IT mission, objectives, and plans support and are supported by the business mission, objectives, and plans.*” (Reich and Benbasat 1996, pg. 56) The evidence, however, does not suggest a deterministic, sequential relationship to achieving strategic alignment. Given that the key to achieving strategic alignment is “*to have [...] your technology leaders and your business leaders working together, in a partnership, at all levels of the organization.*” (Case 1, Respondent C; emphasis added) and that different types and degrees of consultation seem to be part-and-parcel of the decision-making process, is indicative of the fact that achieving strategic alignment is a process of dialogue, negotiation, and mutual adjustment. As shown in **Figure 1**, achieving strategic alignment is thus best represented as iterative cycles of strategic decision making which, over time, evolve toward a state in which business strategy and IS strategy are aligned and effectively support one another.

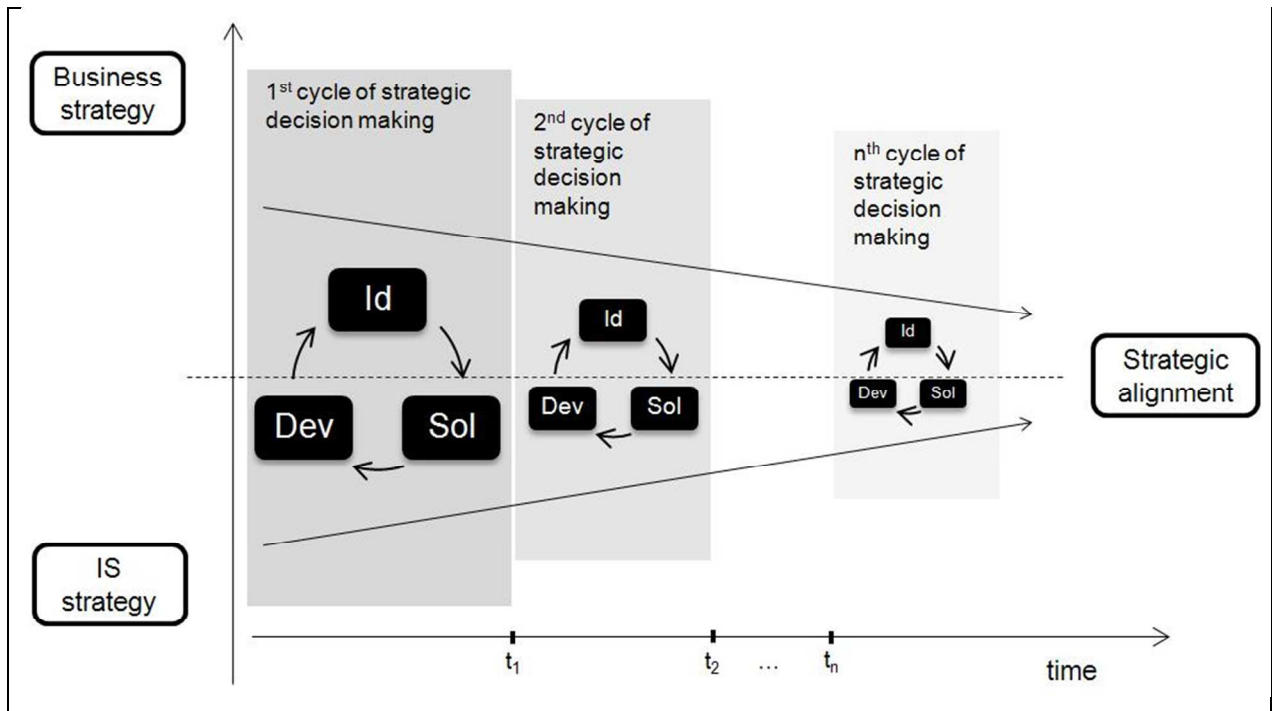


Figure 1. Achieving strategic alignment through cycles of strategic decision-making processes

Every cycle of decision-making reveals that the specific actors and the particular routines through which strategic alignment is achieved are shaped by a number of factors. On the one hand, there are the *organizational factors* such as the organization type, the role that IT plays in the organization, the nature of the consultative process, the ownership structure, and the burden of decisional responsibility. On the other hand, *decisional factors* such as the motivating reason(s) behind the drive towards achieving strategic alignment can shape the process of achieving strategic alignment.

Based on the analysis of the qualitative data from Case 1 and Case 4, this study sees the process of achieving strategic alignment as a set of interconnected routines. During the *identification phase*, interactions describing the *Decision recognition routine* and the *Diagnosis routine* speak to the recognition and the classification of the defining characteristics of the driving factor(s) for achieving strategic alignment: functionality gap, whether immediate in-nature as a crisis, or rather long term as a vision; foreseeing technological obsolescence or technology end-of-life; seizing a business opportunity by identifying an emerging technology that would allow the organization to meet future business goals and objectives. During the *development phase*, the *Search routine* and the *Design routine* reflect the consultation and the negotiation process associated with achieving strategic alignment, whether it is by means of mandated teams or steering committees, retreats and conferences, working documents, or authoritative approaches by senior management or key users. Finally, during the *selection phase*, the *Screen routine* and the *Evaluation-choice routine*, in particular, are performed via measurement tools aimed at assessing the extent to which the IS strategy supports and is supported by the business strategy. The assessment effort is done in a bid to facilitate the *Authorization routine*, which sees one particular actor assuming the burden of responsibility for strategic alignment.

It should be noted that the rigor and due-diligence associated with achieving strategic alignment shown in Case 1 is stronger than it is in Case 4. This observation carries an interesting implication that will have to be explored further as additional qualitative data becomes available from subsequent cases. The implication for achieving strategic alignment is that above and beyond the organizational and decisional factors previously mentioned, the *nature of the IT artifact* and the *availability of slack resources* at the organizational level may shape the decision-making process. As such, the relative size and scope of the foreseen organizational footprint implied in the formulation of business strategy and IS strategy can shape the decision-making process associated with achieving strategic alignment. These emerging insights could help explain not only how strategic alignment between business strategy and IS strategy is achieved but also what drives the degree of formality associated with strategic decision making, above and beyond what is known based on extant literature. They could essentially come to complement extant knowledge (Mintzberg et al. 1976) by suggesting the existence of additional routines and dynamic factors, which shape the overall process.

Future Steps and Contributions to Research and Practice

Given the preliminary nature of our findings, additional work on Case 1 and Case 4 aimed at developing a well-grounded chain-of-evidence (Eisenhardt 1989a; Yin 2009) is yet to be conducted. Leveraging this finer grained understanding, the interview guide will be refined further and additional data collection and data analysis will be conducted for Case 2 and Case 3. If the need arises and there is the requisite permission, follow-up interviews with additional respondents can also be conducted at Case 1 and Case 4. We fully expect this effort to yield additional evidence in support of our conceptualization of achieving strategic alignment as a decision-making process, while at the same time revealing new insights. Having uncovered evidence for the central routines of the decision-making process associated with achieving strategic alignment, qualitative evidence related to supporting routines and dynamic factors, in particular, would be extremely valuable. Once the routines and their sequence become apparent this will enable the generation of the narrative network graphs. This will help bring together the narrative fragments captured in the qualitative data into the overall decisional pattern associated with achieving strategic alignment.

The expected contributions of the study are both academic and practitioner-oriented in nature. By developing a process model of strategic alignment, the paper provides a narrative explanation of how decision processes flow through organizational structures (Mintzberg et al. 1976). We also expect that given the technology's evolution since the mid-1970s to today (McAfee 2006), the decision-making process related to achieving strategic alignment to feature additional routines that would complement the original conceptualization of strategic decision making (Mintzberg et al. 1976). In addition, due to its grounded approach whereby insights emerge and are rooted in the practitioners' input and field-based observations, the paper comes to answer concerns that strategic alignment research is overly mechanistic and that it fails to capture the complexity of the decision-making process inherent in real life (Ciborra 1998). From a practitioner perspective, by underscoring the key episodes, events, and decisions associated with achieving strategic alignment this study aims to present managers with concrete levers for action aimed at helping them achieve strategic alignment in their organizations.

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