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ARTICLE

Strategy Implementation as Performative Practice: *Reshaping Organization into Alignment with Strategy*

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ABSTRACT
Much of the existing scholarly work on strategy implementation focuses on factors that either catalyze or obstruct the infusion of strategy into the organization. While this renders valuable knowledge about factors enabling or frustrating implementation, the actual process of strategy implementation is treated as a black box and as a step in the strategy model which is not further explained. To understand this process, this conceptual paper draws from performativity literature in which a strategy is conceptualized as a performative device. This means that a strategy triggers practices which reshape the organization so that the strategy is actualized in the organization. Specifically, we explain the idea of routinization as an instrument for enacting strategy into the organization by means of organizational routines. An illustrative empirical vignette is used to exemplify our conceptual point. Our study contributes to strategy implementation literature by introducing an alternative though complementary lens for studying strategy implementation and offers inspiration for strategy practitioners who aim to develop new implementation strategies.

KEYWORDS
Performativity; routine; strategy; implementation; practice

Introduction

This paper investigates the performativity of strategy by asking how strategy ‘works in practice‘, focusing on the ways in which strategy has implications for organizational reality. This question can be framed slightly different when ‘implementation of strategy‘ is reframed as ‘performing strategy‘. More specifically, we conceptualize the way in which a strategy is implemented into the organization as an attempt of bending organizational life towards that aspired strategy. Our view is based on performativity theory (for instance Callon, 1998, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006), which explains how certain abstract ideas – such as strategies – can become ‘reality’ by influencing the choices and behavior of people in organizations and society as a whole. The concept of performativity contributes to the literature about strategy implementation and can serve as the foundation for an innovative research perspective, complementing traditional research on strategy implementation and offering inspiration for practical implementation strategies (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Ybema et al., 2009). Our paper is primarily conceptual in nature, although we use a rich ethnographic vignette to illustrate the added value of our perspective. We stress that we do not aspire to produce a fully fledged empirical paper. Rich clarifying vignettes such as ours have previously been used within strategy literature (for instance Friesl & Silberzahn, 2012; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2014; Whittle & Mueller, 2010; Wright, 2014).

The literature on strategy implementation is rich and eclectic (e.g. Butler, 2003; Carlon, Downs, Langstrand, & Elg, 2012; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Håkonsson, Burton, Obel, & Lauridsen, 2012; Noble, 1999; Van Rensburg, Davis, & Venter, 2014). However, in this paper we claim that a common assumption can be found behind most studies: strategy is understood as something that is to be inserted, infused or incorporated into an existing organization. Scholars assume that a strategy developed by management will spontaneously permeate the organization if the right conditions are created. Implementation is thus regarded as a dependent variable influenced by various independent variables, and not as a process with its own dynamics.

The actual process of implementation remains invisible and has become a black box: scholars focus on factors that can function as either barriers or catalysts for the implementation of strategy, while the process of implementation is itself not specified and explained. Implementation seems a self-evident step – an undifferentiated whole without internal dynamics, processes or tensions – in a more comprehensive model; when the right conditions are created,

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strategy implementation will presumably take place. The actual process of implementation – the 'how' – is most often not discussed.

In contrast, this paper asks the question 'what happens' if and when the existing organization transforms (in greater or lesser extent) into a new organization with a new strategy, thereby heeding a call for process studies of change in organizations (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). In other words, what happens when a specific strategy is said to be implemented? In this view, implementation is not about *absorption of strategy* into the organization but about *bending and shaping* the organization into alignment with a specific strategy. To conceptualize this practice of 'reshaping' reality in order to align some abstract ideational scheme, we focus on the performative practices that may or may not implement a new strategy into an organization.

The notion that abstract ideas are not only describing but also creating a reality in their image forms the core idea of a particular body of work within performativity theory (e.g. Callon, 1998, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006). Performativity scholars study how abstract ideas such as strategies are actualized, enacting a reality in which such an idea 'works' (Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2015). Previous studies have shown that for instance finance theory (Beunza, Hardie, & MacKenzie, 2006) or management theory (Ghoshal, 2005) can reshape organizational reality in their image. This actualization depends on the everyday practices of actors: if their patterns of actions are inspired by a theory, these actions can shape and transform reality towards that idea. Like market segments (Venter, Wright, & Dibb, 2014), professional standards (Hodgson, 2005) and financial models (Svetlova, 2012), strategy can also be regarded as a performative device (eg. Cabantous, Gond, & Wright, 2018; Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2010; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Van Den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2018; Vásquez, Bencherki, Cooren, & Sergi, 2018). The question then arises how daily practices of organizational members enact a specific strategy by reshaping organizational reality.

In this paper, we suggest one mechanism through which an organization can potentially be transformed so that a specific strategy is accommodated. This mechanism is based on routine literature and especially on the body of knowledge that regards routines as practices that perform the organization (e.g. Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Nicolini, 2012; Pentland & Feldman, 2008). Routines are flexible building blocks of an organization: they are sometimes stable, but they can always change (Feldman, 2003; Howard-Grenville, 2005). Changing routines can potentially enact an organization aligning with the strategy that inspires these routines. However, the change in routines can also be resisted, enacting an organizational reality in which the strategy is not accommodated. From a practitioners' view, this theoretical idea offers alternative practices to improve strategy implementation, namely, implementing by influencing organizational routines.

An empirical vignette – based on an ethnographic study – is used as an illustration to make our conceptual argument tangible and to show the practical merits of implementing the strategy by influencing routine practices. The vignette acts primarily as an illustration for our way of understanding strategy implementation. It shows how a strategy based on New Public Management (NPM) principles was meant to reshape the life-world of a public organization responsible for the operation of the railway network in the Netherlands. We show how employees are triggered to change a routine for handling specific incidents on the tracks. The generation of key performance indicators (KPI's) – one of the backbones of NPM strategy – forms an important aspect of the proposed new routine: measurement is regarded as the key for the continuous improvement of incident management.

The value of our paper lies in offering a lens – based on the performative potential of routine practices – that helps to better understand the process of strategy implementation. Success or failure of implementation is not measured nor tested: this paper attempts to increase our understanding of implementation by studying the ways in which employees do (or don't) change their performative routine practice. This perspective is not worked out in this paper into a fully fledged theoretical model with specific theoretical propositions in order to rival the existing theoretical body of work on strategy implementation. Instead, it offers the starting point or the theoretical ground work for a complementary perspective on strategy implementation. We offer a different way of thinking, a productive antithesis towards the existing thesis in strategy literature, with the purpose to achieve a synthesis in which the performative, practice-based perspective enriches the comprehensive debate on strategy implementation.

We first briefly examine the literature that has treated strategy implementation as a 'black box', followed by studies more sensitive to the actual process of implementation. We then offer our vignette describing a particular process of strategy implementation, which we then analyze as a way to illustrate implementation as an inherently performative practice that is supported by routine dynamics. We end the paper discussing the contributions of our approach.

Research on strategy implementation as the search for relevant catalysts and obstructers

The literature on strategy implementation is an appropriate starting point for conceptualizing the ways in which strategy theories 'work' in organizational practice. There is often a gap between the proposed strategy to be implemented and the actual effects of implementation for organizational reality. This gap between aspiration and implementation has received solid academic attention because strategic management is often regarded as a core competency of organizations (Pryor, Anderson, Toombs, & Humphreys, 2007; Wright, Paroutis, & Blettner, 2013). Most authors studying strategy implementation assume that strategic plans are not incorporated into the organization instantly or without complications (e.g. Freedman, 2003; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Pryor et al., 2007; Ready & Conger, 2008). These scholars focus on the steps from intent towards reality, asking the question for which reasons strategies are actualized in organizational reality with varying success.

For instance, scholars have studied the barriers for implementation of Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) strategy (Olsen & Boxenbaum, 2009) or the importance of corporate culture (Bhasin, 2012) or non-human factors (Carlon et al., 2012) for explaining the successful implementation of lean management strategy. Other examples are critical implementation factors for Customer Relation Management strategy (Payne & Frow, 2006), Total Quality Management (Taylor & Wright, 2003) or, more specifically, the importance of management competencies for successful implementation (Beer, 2003). Others have studied the crucial role of middle-managers for making strategy work (Huy, 2011; Van Rensburg et al., 2014) or the necessity for strategic management to actively ensure the commitment of middle-managers (Birken et al., 2014).

Our point is that a multitude of independent variables has been drawn upon to explain failure and success of the implementation process, ranging from corporate social networks (Kleinbaum & Stuart, 2014), the importance of a team-based approach (Mentzas, 1997) and also integrative models of factors influencing for instance implementation of sustainability practices (Fairfield, Harmon, & Behson, 2011). Especially interesting with regard to the empirical illustration in this paper is also the study concerning New Public Management (NPM) strategy implementation, focusing on the notion of receptivity in order to explain variation in implementation success (Butler, 2003).

The examples discussed demonstrate our claim that most studies on strategy implementation have in common a specific epistemic approach and a related basic assumption concerning strategy. Methodologically, the search for obstructers or catalysts explaining success or failure seems based on the assumption that strategy is almost like a stream of water, filling up an organization if barriers are overcome and catalysts are used to make the stream of strategy more forceful and penetrating. Note that these obstructers and catalysts are set apart from the implementation process itself, hence our claim for treating strategy implementation as a 'black box. If strategic managers control these factors and create a suitable context for implementation, a strategy will automatically spread throughout the organization. These studies focus on forces acting upon the strategy implementation process instead of focusing on the process itself, which makes it difficult to study the actual workings of a specific strategy implementation in organizations. It may lead to a narrow understanding of 'what happens' when organizations implement the strategy.

Shaping the organization through performative practice

This outcome-oriented focus on finding enablers and obstructers that influence the implementation process is valuable, but also based on a particular passive view on strategy implementation. The process of implementation remains positioned between the intended and achieved strategy. But how does a strategy spread through the organization and become meaningful by influencing organizational practices? Why do some strategy implementation attempts really influence the workings of an organization while other attempts turn out to have little effect on the organization? Such questions can be addressed by researchers who focus on the actual process of implementation while assuming that strategy is something to be actively performed by organizational actors. 'Making a strategy work' is thus accomplished through practices that attempt to align – or perform – the organization with the aspired strategy.

There are several scholars who have called for an increased focus on the actual workings of implementation. For instance, Hambrick and Cannella (1989) claim that strategic managers should actively sell strategy from the very start of the strategy development process. Davis, Kee, and Newcomer (2010) extend this idea and build an organizational level integrative framework for implementing strategic change; people have to turn their minds towards the strategy and participation of middle managers in the strategic planning process can spur the actual enactment of that strategy (Vilà & Canales, 2008). Antonsen (2014) explains that strategy implementation – in her case the use of Balanced Scorecard technique – is about influencing the reflective learning and commitment of line managers and employees, thereby enabling them to enact the new strategy. Pellegrinelli and Bowman (1994) explain that strategy implementation should be an active process based on project management as one cannot change an organization while being part of that same organization: therefore, the process of implementation should be organized as a project. Ready and Conger (2008) discuss the gap between strategic aspiration and actual implementation and they offer a framework for actively turning bold visions into reality.

A common aspect of these studies above is the idea that strategy must be actively enacted by organizational actors who reshape their organization towards a desired strategy. Instead of studying how strategy becomes part of an organization, these studies consider the ways in which organizational actors transform their organization to create 'fit' with a strategy. Following such reasoning, strategy implementation can be regarded as a form of organizational development (Heracleous, 2000) or a process of organizational becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Our philosophical stance also connects to the work of Weick (e.g. Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) and the notion of sensemaking in organizations. A new strategic vision would then alter the way in which organization members makes sense. This would also alter the way they behave and act to align better with the new strategy

It is not the case that a strategy automatically 'works' itself into an organization: one would rather say that organization is changed in such a way that a strategy can function well. This idea of shaping organizations towards a reality that accommodates a strategy connects strongly with the notion of performativity as it is developed in recent years within management and organization sciences. We will explore this alternative after our vignette.

Vignette: implementing NPM strategy in a public organization

The topic of our vignette concerns the public organization ProRail, the infrastructure manager of the Dutch railways. The illustration is based on in-depth ethnographic research on infrastructure breakdowns in the railway system and is largely based on participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The use of this vignette is not meant to turn this conceptual study into an empirical study for we only want to make our conceptual point clearer. The methodological details of the ethnography on which the current paper is based can be found here (Willems, 2018a). Like many other public organizations, ProRail's strategy is closely aligned with NPM principles (further discussed below), a strategy that has become dominant within public organizations from the end of the 1980s onwards (Hood, 1995; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt, 2001). Our vignette consists of three phases, and in our descriptions of Phase one of the process of strategy implementation, we will discuss some key aspects of NPM strategy to explain how these transform organizational reality in their own image.

Phase one: a new strategy for ProRail, designed by management and based on NPM

Until 1995, the Dutch railway system was managed by the state-owned company *Nederlandse Spoorwegen* (NS). Under European legislation, the company was de-nationalized and split up in several divisions to separate the management of the infrastructure and the exploitation of the railways. NS became an independent passenger railway operator with the Dutch government as the only shareholder. ProRail, a governmental task-oriented organization, became the infrastructure manager concerned with the maintenance of the railways, allocating rail capacity, and traffic control. One of the rationales behind the split up was the conviction that de-nationalizing NS and allowing other operators on the railways would automatically increase competition and, consequently, increase efficiency and the quality of train services in general.

The restructuring of the Dutch railway sector can be regarded as a manifestation of the implementation of NPM strategy. Within the field of public management, the idea that NPM has been influential in society is widely shared. In short, NPM strategy entails that the governance of the public realm should resemble the governance of businesses in the private sector (Broadbent & Laughlin, 1997; Chandler, Barry, & Clark, 2002; Christensen & Laegreid, 2001; Gow & Dufour, 2000). According to Ferlie, Ashburner, Fitzgerald, and Pettigrew (1996), the change in perspective on public management can be summarized by three aspects: managers, markets, and measurement. Managers are replacing administrators and moreover, these managers are operating at arm's length: they are not rowing but steering (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) which entails that they are focused less on 'how' public services are delivered and more on the outcomes that are achieved.

Although both NS and ProRail have been put at a greater distance from the government, the relationships between the state and the companies are still strong. The government aims to control both organizations by means of concessions: a transportation concession for NS and an infrastructure management concession for ProRail. These concessions are a set of demands as formulated by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment in order to protect the interests of passengers. Every demand is accompanied with a set of performance indicators through which the performances of both organizations are measured. If these performances fail to meet the demands, the government fines the organizations with a maximum of 6.5 million Euros for NS and 2.75 million Euros for ProRail. In line with these concessions, the Dutch government elaborated their goals concerning railway transportation in the 'Long Term Rail Agenda'. In turn, both organizations translated and operationalized this agenda in their program 'Better and More', a collective ambition adjusted to the relevant performance indicators.

To function according to market principles – i.e. steered by managers focused on successful performance – it is understandable that measurement of outcomes and efficiency and efficacy of management techniques are crucial principles of NPM. A focus on measurement as a necessary and grounding principle for performation forms the key focus in this vignette about the enactment of NPM strategy into practice. This focus connects to the studies of Callon & Muniesa focused on the calculative character of markets (2005). Organizations are increasingly managed by measurement using key performance indicators (KPI's) that embody a drive towards increased efficiency.

According to Veenswijk (2005), there are three preconditions that are essential to enact an NPM reality based on measurement into an organization: detectability, comparability, and accountability. Firstly, detectability entails the notion that performance must be made detectable within the stream of organizational action. Procedures and systems must be in place in order to retrieve the relevant information needed to measure performance. In other words, the right conditions must be created to generate key performance indicators. Secondly, it is important that measured performances can be compared with each other, thereby increasing the transparency of public management. To follow a business case approach that would be suitable in a market environment, key performance indicators must be made intercomparable (Veenswijk, 2005). To determine whether organizational processes are becoming more efficient and effective, it is crucial to compare KPI's of specific processes continuously. Thirdly, for proper NPM measurement to happens, it is necessary that the performances to be measured can be ascribed to specific agents within an organization. To increase accountability, diverse groups of actors must be recognizable within an organization: groups are involved in a specific organizational process and who can be held accountable for the performance of these specific processes.

If organizational routines are grounded on these preconditions, an NPM strategy based on KPI-orientation can potentially be enacted. The use of KPI's as a strategy tool is probably already a fact in most organizations: however, NPM strategy would make KPI's crucial and actually not a tool but a pillar of the organization. Transparency, measurability, and efficiency are the drivers of the 'Better and More' program and these drivers very much resemble the conceptual frame of NPM (just like the break-up and semi-privatization of the former state-owned NS). The performative actualization of this strategy – shaping the organization towards NPM principles – will be illustrated by zooming in on a particular sub-project of the program. The example shows how routine practices are manipulated by managers who strive for detectability, comparability, and accountability as crucial aspects of NPM strategy.

Phase two: implementing alternative routines based on core principles of NPM strategy

A specific aspect of the 'Better and More' program is concerned with the management of incidents on the railways. Since multiple organizations and departments have a crucial role during incidents (infrastructure manager, operators, contractors, firefighters, police departments, etc.), information must spread quickly and easily through the network in order to manage incidents effectively. Communication between these different organizations and departments is of vital importance in at least two ways. First, incidents have to be alarmed quickly so that every specific part of the incident management chain can do their tasks that are necessary to manage the incident in time. If information spreads slowly it may not reach crucial actors in time, causing additional or more severe problems. Secondly, the initial information about the nature of the incident (location of train, kind of train, how many passengers, how many casualties, etc.) should be as complete and precise as possible. Any faulty information that is shared spreads through the network and people will not engage in the most effective course of action. Consequently, it is very difficult to change information about an incident once it is alarmed.

To enhance and facilitate this crucial communication, ProRail is building a digital platform, *WebRail*, aimed at decreasing the time and impact of incidents. *WebRail* bundles all information that the different organizations can provide about a certain incident and all organizations have access to this real-time information. In other words, the relevant data needed to manage incidents are gathered in one place and, moreover, all information measuring performance during incident management is made detectable by means of this technical artifact.

Several workshops and training sessions were organized, and the ideas behind *WebRail* were communicated in newsletters to teach operators how to work according to the principles behind the platform. It became clear that *WebRail* is primarily meant to change routine practices of actors in the incident management chain. Closely resembling our understanding of performativity, the strategy was communicated as one of 'future-perfect' (Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, & Rura-Polley, 2003). For instance, the platform that was used before *WebRail* was framed as one lacking structure or clear (hierarchical) division of tasks. The old system was called in disdain a 'chat box', referring to the fact that railway coordinators also shared information through this platform that was not important for the management of incidents. *WebRail*, so it was said, would bring back the structure in incident management, providing access to real-time information with a clear division of functions and standardized, uniform tasks. Crucially, the design of the platform facilitated a system of visibility (detectability), helping to establish an NPM strategy through KPI's by allowing for greater accountability and comparability through the production of information.

The strategists behind *WebRail* started a working-group with representatives from each different functional group, in order to get a broad understanding of existing work practices. More importantly, they realized that *WebRail* would not just standardize and simplify processes on an abstract level but would also change the actual routine practices of the users of this platform. These were the people who had to bring the abstract idea behind *WebRail* into being and, the program team predicted, they had to be carefully managed in realizing the proposed strategy. One manager, for instance, said: 'If we talk about it [the effects of *WebRail*] too honestly, people will jump into a resistance mode before we have even started'.

One specific aspect of *WebRail*, on which we will focus from this point, concerns the initial 'intake' of an incident. The intake is the official notification of an incident, for example, a train driver calling the dispatching post to communicate all the specifics of an incident (s)he encountered (e.g. a person walking next to the tracks). *WebRail* changed this intake process by introducing a digital intake. This replaced what was traditionally done by hand, such as filling in forms during open and unstructured interaction, which too often resulted in idiosyncratic information management during incidents. The transition from the 'messy' to the more structured intake was explained by a program manager as follows:

WebRail benefits the intake process in general. Employees used to write all details on a piece of paper, find out if special procedures applied to this incident, think about whom to inform exactly, and then communicate this to all relevant players. It could take up to 15 minutes before everyone knew about the incident. *WebRail* gathers all information automatically. Speeding up the alarm intake we can inform everyone in seven to eight minutes… Eventually, we will be able to further this down to five minutes or less.

Making the intake more uniform (and thus more detectable) and incorporate it into a system, the NPM strategy was introduced by incrementally changing routine practices of railway employees. Moreover, this could now be translated into KPI's, allowing the comparison of different intake processes and holding specific people or departments accountable. In sum, the new routine aimed to standardize and increase uniformity in how incidents are managed. This, in turn, enabled ProRail to increase transparency and comparability and to better measure and improve the performance of communication during incidents: all these objectives are indeed meant to *enact* an organization in which NPM strategy would function well. *WebRail* strategists implicitly showed that the NPM strategy could not automatically be 'infused' into the organization but that implementation concerned a process aimed at changing the routine practices of employees in order to create the strategy, i.e. a more uniform and manageable incident intake. One saw the change in employees' practices as a matter of moving closer towards this strategic ideal, saying that 'The less freedom people having during the incident intake the better it is!'

Phase three: adoption or resistance of alternative routines explaining strategy implementation

Yet, changing routines are not an unproblematic strategic process. As can be expected from the above, changing routines also implied changing roles, tasks, and responsibilities of the actors involved in the intake process. Different groups of actors have been made accountable for different aspects of the routine, which is meant to increase the accountability necessary for measurement according to NPM strategy. For instance, for back-office employees, the digitalization of the intake process – a change in artifacts sustaining the routine – profoundly changed their routine practices. They became more like controllers of the system than being actively involved in the management of incidents. During an alarm intake, we observed, an employee showed us how the structure and order in which information is registered are controlled by the system. For example, he cannot finish an intake before all the necessary information is registered. Also, the order of the intake is controlled: after filling in one field in the system, it automatically jumps to the next relevant field; all fields that still have to be filled in have an orange border, an indicator for the back-office employee of what still needs to be registered. After finishing the intake, the employee points to his screen and says: ‘Four minutes and 36 seconds, the time between picking up the phone and registering the alarm. Good job’. Ironically, although this employee realizes his routines have been significantly changed, he is indeed performing and thereby producing an intake process based on NPM strategy.

Not all employees were content with this KPI-based organizational reality that became constituted through these routines: ‘The process has become more thorough and complex, but you need increasingly less knowledge’. What he means to say is that the intake process has become more uniform; it needs to be done more precisely and is less flexible than it was before. He used to be able to jot down some keywords and abbreviations which were enough for him to combine the incident into a coherent story, ‘but now the system forces me to write in a certain format and what I write also becomes part of the information announcements’. However, such incidents are often quite specific and not uniform at all, and employees in control centers must often draw on their experience in assessing what is the best way to respond to idiosyncratic situations (e.g. Willems, 2018b). The forced format was conceived as inflexible, not affording an opportunity to capture the full understanding of the incident like the coherent improvised story would have. Moreover, as the *WebRail* system automatically gathers all information, the knowledge needed to act to specific situations may vanish. The so-called craftsmanship of organizational members is eroded through the enactment of NPM strategy and not all employees regarded this as a desirable effect.

The changes in employees’ routines and the ways in which they resisted these changes became most apparent during incidents with casualties. Dispatchers sometimes have an emotional talk with the train driver who, for instance, literally just saw how someone jumped in front of or against the train. After finishing such emotional conversations dispatchers must notify the back-office, but back-office employees were not always in the same emotive state as the dispatcher. One dispatcher mentioned he started the alarm call quickly by providing the back-office with as much relevant information as possible. This employee had responded as follows: ‘Just a second, I need to start the system first’ and a little bit later: ‘Please answer this question first before you tell me the rest of the story’. The uniform and fixed order of the alarm intake – necessary for the generation of KPI’s – did not correspond with the sensemaking of the dispatcher. The dispatcher’s reality is focused on real-time, chaotic events and the structured routines of standardized measurement are not easily adopted at this level of the organization.

New procedures and systems meant to orchestrate routine practices in some instances indeed changed the repetitive and performative everyday actions. In other instances, traditional routines were not easily changed because the people performing these routines were not convinced of the new way of working. The gap between horrifying suicidal experience and rationalized measurement and control might not be bridged. The success of implementation as routinization depends on the willingness or resistance of employees to alter their routine practices, thereby performing an organizational reality which makes a specific strategy meaningful: in this case, a reality based on detectability, comparability, and accountability which are necessary for an NPM strategy based on measurement. How the extent to which implementation of the strategy has been successful, then, can be explained by studying the performation of strategy through practices within the organization, rather than testing effects of external factors affecting implementation ‘from the outside’. We will now discuss this alternative understanding of strategy implementation by drawing on performativity and routine dynamics.

Performativity: reshaping organizational reality

The notion of performativity, which lies at the heart of our vignette, explains how abstract ideas of reality can trigger practices that shape reality in such a way that the abstract idea ‘works‘ (Merkus & Veenswijk, 2017; Beunza et al., 2006; Cabantous, Gond, & Johnson-Cramer, 2010; MacKenzie, 2006). A crucial idea of performativity is well explained by Callon (1998, 2007)), pointing out that performativity entails that theories are not *proven* to be valid but *made* to be functional by influencing reality: when social practices are inspired by a specific theory they can ‘bend’ social reality more and more into resemblance with that theory.

For instance, in his seminal study MacKenzie (2006) shows how the increasing use of stock exchange practices, which are based on finance theory, creates a financial reality that comes to resembles the – highly unrealistic – assumed reality behind finance theory. In such a reality, finance theory functions increasingly well and can thus be regarded as ‘reliable’ theory because the financial system adapts itself towards the premises behind that theory. Whether a theory or any abstract idea is indeed a useful or workable model thus depends on the extent to which relevant actors in organizations or society perform a reality which sustains such a model. In other words, performativity entails the notion that abstract ideas 'create the reality they pretend to describe' (Kornberger & Carter, 2010, p. 335).

The philosophical roots of performativity are grounded in Austin's speech act theory (1963), which explains that speech does not only describe but also create social reality. His most used example is the saying 'I hereby pronounce you husband and wife', which creates a new reality in which two single people become one married couple, leading to a whole new range of social consequences. Likewise, in our vignette, *WebRail* is discursively legitimized (e.g. comparing it with the old 'messy' system that was like a 'chat-box') which, then, was able to be translated into the design of the platform and by the creation of routines that aligned with this vision inspired by NPM strategy.

Although Austin specifically focuses on the practice of speech, organization scholars inspired by his ideas focus on any kind of practice that actualizes abstractions (Merkus, De Heer & Veenswijk, 2014a, 2014b; Cabantous et al., 2010; Callon, 2010; D'Adderio & Pollock, 2014; Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Gond et al., 2015; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Sage, Dainty, & Brookes, 2013; Venter et al., 2014). A review of performativity studies shows that different kinds of ideational abstractions can be enacted, such as policy initiatives (Beunen, Van Assche, & Duineveld, 2013) or financial models (Svetlova, 2012). Similarly, our vignette has shown how KPI's and the act of measuring organizational performance is performative by introducing a more uniform system of accountability, detectability, and comparability. The KPI indirectly changed the incident intake as it triggered a response from employees adjusting their practices. According to some, the strategy can indeed be understood as a performative concept (Guérard, Langley, & Seidl, 2013; Kornberger & Carter, 2010; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Sergi, Lusiani, Langley, & Denis, 2012; Vaara, Sorsa, & Pälli, 2010). For example, if the daily practices of strategy practitioners are based on tools such as the Balanced Scorecard they create a world which increasingly resembles the world that is assumed in theory:

> If the realities that it envisions and builds missions around cannot be realized the strategy has failed. In our view, this is how the strategy works. It not only represents and organizes elite views of the world but it also shapes the world – it has world-making powers (Carter et al., 2010, p. 586)

Consider for instance the influential work on the five forces of Porter (1980), which is a telling example of the performativity of strategy:

> His ideas may or may not be correct and, of course, they are open to empirical and theoretical contestation; however, when his ideas are vested in practice they become performative and a source of their own self-evident truthfulness (Carter et al., 2010, p. 582)

Therefore within a performativity lens several mechanisms might explainthe ways in which organizations are shaped to make a strategy functional. However, this paper focuses on 'shop floor practices' and even on a very specific kind of practices, namely organizational routines. These practices are considered to be performative practices in the routines literature (D'Adderio, 2008; Feldman, 2003); due to their repetition over time, routines are especially capable of transforming organizational reality and how these routines translate strategy into an organization thus becomes crucial.

The performative potential of routine practices

The burgeoning literature on organizational routines is too rich to review exhaustively in this paper. Our aim is to focus on potential performative consequences of routines for the constitution of organizations. One strand of routines research – which regards routines as practices – focuses more explicitly on the way in which routine practices bring an organization into being (Feldman, 2003; Howard-Grenville, 2005;; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011; Pentland & Feldman, 2008; Rerup & Feldman, 2011;).

Most definitions of routines are in line with the notion that routines are 'repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors' (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95). The practice perspective on routines stresses that routines are the building blocks of organizations (Becker, 2008) while at the same time averting a deterministic and linear-causal connection between routines and constituted organization. Routines offer the potential for change as they are regarded as dynamic potentialities that might or might not be actualized (Hodgson, 2008; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). The debate on routine dynamics commits to the idea that as ongoing and emergent practices, routines can lead to both stability and change in organizations (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013; Howard-Grenville, 2005; Labatut, Aggeri, & Girard, 2012; Pentland, Feldman, Becker, & Liu, 2012; Rerup & Feldman, 2011). Moreover, several studies show that organizational actors are aware and mindful that changing a routine might change organizational reality depending on the actual engagement with that routine (Pentland & Feldman, 2008; Turner & Rindova, 2012; Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010).

Routines are performative because they occupy the 'crucial nexus between structure and action, between the organization as an object and organizing as a process' (Pentland & Rueter, 1994, p. 484). They can potentially become habits when people no longer think about why they are performing specific actions in the first place (Becker, 2005; Pentland & Feldman, 2008; Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010). Combined with the fact that they are repetitive, this is precisely why routines can be strong performative devices. In the work of MacKenzie (2006), for instance, it is clear that the practices that enact finance theory into the stock exchange are routine practices performed by traders on a daily basis.

However, it is crucial to stress that routines remain only a potentiality as organizational actors can choose to deviate from routine practice, as we have shown in how employees of ProRail have also resisted the NPM strategy of *WebRail* by *not* performing the new routines. This is exactly the assumption behind the stream of research on stability and change of routines. Although some assume that the intentions of actors are not important for explaining routine dynamics (Pentland et al., 2012), others demonstrate that those actors performing routines have agency, something which plays an important role in changing or stabilizing routines (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013; Howard-Grenville, 2005; Turner & Rindova, 2012; Venter et al., 2014).

Our focus on routinization of strategy – defined as enacting an organizational reality through routine practices which increasingly allows a strategy to function within that organization – can be regarded as an alternative way of understanding strategy implementation. If routines are regarded as flexible building blocks of organizations, it would mean that if routines are based on for instance 'lean' strategy, the organization which is constantly being 'build' might start to resemble a 'lean' reality. In other words, the everyday practices of organizational members on all levels of the organization influence implementation success. However, routines might not be adopted or might even be resisted by members of the organization. The analytical focus, therefore, shifts from finding catalysts or obstructers of implementation of strategy towards focusing on the relevant routine practices that have a potential to shape the organization to accommodate a designed strategy.

Attempts to instigate new routine practices are often coupled with changes in procedures and techniques which are meant to accommodate those new routine practices (D'Adderio, 2011; Pentland & Feldman, 2008). Scholars studying routines stress that designing techniques and procedures is not the same as designing routines as repetitive patterns of actions (Pentland & Feldman, 2008). However, the introduction of a virtual platform as an artifact is an important aspect for accomplishing the desired alignment of routines with a newly designed strategy. Our vignette demonstrated how a new routine – based on principles of NPM strategy – was sometimes adopted and sometimes resisted, explaining why only part of the organization was reshaped in such a way that NPM strategy functioned. The extent of successful implementation can thus be understood by studying the adoption or resistance of performative routine practices, and it is this *process* of strategy implementation that we have argued for in this paper and aimed to capture in the figure below (see Figure 1).

Discussion

To explain the points made in this paper, we now briefly position our perspective into the broader strategy literature. Even though research on strategy implementation is eclectic (Noble, 1999), most strategy studies have something in common: a focus on the outcome of strategy making which explains why some implementation processes are successful and others not. They study implementation as a dependent variable with independent variables such as middle-management attitude or organizational receptiveness. Behind this explanatory focus lies

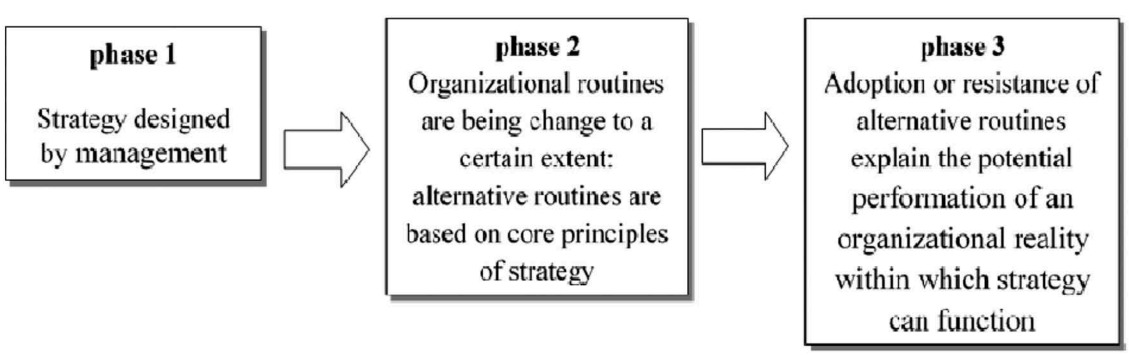

Figure 1. Conceptualization of performing strategy by changing routines.

the basic assumption that a strategy will penetrate the organization if only the barriers for implementation are overcome. Therefore, these authors focus either on the problems that arise or on specific catalysts that can be discerned during strategy implementation (e.g. Butler, 2003; Carlon et al., 2012; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Håkonsson et al., 2012; Van Rensburg et al., 2014).

Our vignette has shown an alternative understanding that complements existing perspectives on strategy by focusing on the actual process through which organizations change so that the strategy is increasingly accommodated. There are several others who have demonstrated the performative effects of strategy and the way it curbs organizational reality into alignment with a specific strategic vision. Green and May (2005) have studied the implementation of lean management strategy in the UK construction sector and found that 'lean' was actively enacted by different organizational actors in different ways, according to their own agenda. In a sense, different varieties of lean were 'implemented' because actors re-shaped the organization in different ways.

Another example is the study of Sergi et al. (2012), who demonstrate how lean management theory imposes itself – in the health-care sector of Quebec, Canada – creating an organizational reality that comes to resemble the abstract ideas on which lean strategy is based:

The new theory proposed by lean management does not simply offer principles or a new way of managing health-care organizations; it does not simply 'diffuse' in this specific context. Its entry on the health-care scene in Québec, in fact, transforms this scene: lean management is partly creating and reshaping the reality in which these organizations evolve (Sergi, Lusiani, Langley, & Denis, 2013, p. 19)

Our vignette exemplifies the established theoretical claim that of all practices in organizations, routines are known to have a specifically strong performative effect. This performative power has been topic of research within the debate on routine dynamics and the connected literature on dynamic capabilities which are often considered meta-routines – routines that can change routines (Adler, Goldoftas, & Levine, 1999; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Following Latour's (1986) conceptualization, the performative aspect of routines is understood as the actual practice or indeed performance of a routine, in contrast with the ostensive aspect of routines which concerns the more abstract idea or understanding of a routine (for instance Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Pentland & Feldman, 2005; Turner & Rindova, 2012; Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008).

Many routines scholars thus focus on the performation of the ostensive aspect of routines into reality. In other words, the enactment of routines *an sich* is the focus of research, instead of the potential of routines to perform organizational realities. Gond et al. (2015, p. 16) indeed state that Feldman (2000) – who introduced the ostensive/performative duality into routine literature – does not urge researchers to study how abstract principles, inspiring the ostensive aspect of routines, are enacted in organizational reality. Our conceptual point is that routines perform not only themselves; they have a performative effect on organizational reality, which makes routines interesting to study in the context of strategy implementation. Drawing on performativity and the innovative work of several routine scholars (D'Adderio, 2008; Labatut et al., 2012), we stress that routines are not only being performed but they are also perform*ing*: they enact and constitute organizational reality according to certain (strategic) principles on which they are based, which is acknowledged only implicitly in extant literature. Following this idea, routines that align with a strategy are valuable tools for performatively implementing that strategy.

Our practice-based view of implementation as performation connects with existing practice-based conceptualizations within strategy literature. For instance, in order to understand how organizations are reshaped towards strategy, Cabantous and Gond (2011) developed a practice-based model of performative praxis. This model is based on a combination of a strategy-as-practice approach (SAP) (for instance Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006) and performativity theory. This process model is based on the notions of conventionalization, engineering, and commodification: conventionalization is about creating cognitive embeddedness of a theory in the mind and actions of employees; engineering is about turning theory in concrete tools, techniques and procedures; commodification is about the promotion of the theory and its tools in the wider organizational field (Cabantous & Gond, 2011). The focus on praxis is central in this literature, essentially focusing on what practitioners do when strategizing (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Whittington, 1996; Nicolini et al., 2003).

Although our perspective shares the practice-orientation of SAP scholars, we do not regard our paper as a contribution to this literature. Instead of focusing on the practices of strategy practitioners – those who design strategy – we focus on the performative practices of common employees: repetitive, operational practices that can increasingly enact an organizational reality which allows a strategy to be functional (Gond et al., 2015). We thus focus on the enactment of strategy and not on the professional practices of strategy makers which is the focus of SAP scholars. We agree with the critique of for instance Chia and MacKay (2007) and Carter, Clegg, and Kornberger (2008a, 2008b)) that SAP could actually be more grounded on thorough practice ontology and more focused on practices on different organizational levels. Unlike our paper, these authors claim that SAP scholars do focus on the things that strategists do but SAP scholars do not hold the idea that organizations exist through practices.

This vignette has given a vivid illustration of the practical value of our theoretical model, thereby directly demonstrating the value of our theoretical conceptualizations for the actual practice of strategy implementation. The example also indicates that a 'perfect and complete' implementation is not guaranteed by influencing routine performation. However, this goes beyond the point we are trying to make. It has not been our aim to show how strategy can be implemented successfully but to unpack the 'black box' of strategy implementation and better understand the mechanisms and processes that explain how implementation happens. Such insights into dynamics inspire practitioners to reflect on their own implementation attempts in finding innovative ways to enact strategy into their organization.

Conclusion

The contribution of this paper to the literature on strategy implementation is the idea that the workings of a strategy in organizations can be researched by studying performative practices. Rather than arguing that a specific strategy is implemented or incorporated into the organization, this alternative perspective argues that organizational reality and patterns of organizational action increasingly accommodate that strategy. In other words, implementing the strategy is like trying to bend an organization into a fit with the assumed principles of such a strategy. We have used an empirical vignette to illustrate our view on performation as implementation: focusing on routine practices – known to be powerful performative devices – we demonstrated how a new strategy based on NPM-principles was performed, and partly resisted, within ProRail.

Until now, this practice-based perspective has remained under-researched because most scholars have focused on exploring and testing factors enabling or obstructing implementation of the strategy. Actual implementation has remained mostly a 'black box'. Our perspective helps understand under which circumstances and for which reasons employees adapt daily practices, thereby constituting a context in which a new strategy can function (or not). We do not claim to present a fully-fledged theoretical model for strategy implementation. Our purpose is to lay the theoretical base for additional research on strategy implementation as a performative practice. This perspective does not replace or contradict extant models but merely complements and enriches strategy literature, thereby deepening our understanding of strategy implementation.

Practical value of the theoretical model

This alternative perspective is not about measurement but about gaining understanding about the process of enactment. This kind of process-based knowledge is valuable for practitioners who want to understand the workings of the actual implementation process in order to influence it. To explain the added value of our research perspective in terms of practical value, it is interesting to compare the explanation of Butler (2003) concerning the variation of implementation success of NPM strategy with our proposed explanation. Butler uses the notion of receptivity of an organization for NPM strategy as an independent variable, presenting several receptivity factors such as institutional politics and implementation capacity. In other words, his message is that if these factors are considered NPM strategy can be implemented. Our vignette based on performative routinization demonstrates how and why NPM strategy principles are enacted through routines practices. We try to understand how NPM strategy is enacted in an organization, while Butler (2003) limits his focus on one contingency – in this case, receptivity – and its explanatory power concerning implementation success (or lack thereof).

Both research strategies are valuable: a performative perspective does not and should not replace existing research approaches, but it can trigger an alternative research design, sparking new models for understanding strategy implementation. Moreover, a performative perspective on strategy implementation is not only relevant for understanding how strategy 'works' within organizations. NPM strategy can potentially reshape entire sectors (Carter et al., 2011; Pollitt, 1995), just like lean management strategy has had an impact throughout the entire health-care sector in diverging parts of the globalized world (McCann, Hassard, Granter, & Hyde, 2015; Sergi et al., 2012). If a strategy is implemented in many organizations, even society might increasingly be shaped in the alignment of the underlying principles of that strategy. This line of reasoning justifies the relevance of a performative perspective on strategy implementation and demonstrates the need to understand how organizations are reshaped to allow specific strategies to function. The implementation of the strategy is not just about setting a new direction for that organization but about the actual transformation of the reality of those who are part of that organization.

Future research opportunities

The focus on daily 'shop floor' practices is useful for studying the implementation of the strategy. The specific focus on routine practices as a mechanism explaining strategy implementation is promising, also because studying the ways in which routines perform strategic plans are regarded as an avenue for developing performativity theory (Gond et al., 2015). The idea of 'routinizing' strategy needs to be further developed through extensive empirical research which focuses more on the intentions of top management: do strategic managers intentionally attempt to manipulate routine practices and if so, how exactly do strategic managers exert their influence? This kind of research would render an even more nuanced pallet of tools and techniques for practitioners to influence and improve strategy implementation.

Scholars studying routines warn that designing techniques and procedures – conceptualized as artifacts – is not the same as designing routines as repetitive patterns of actions (Pentland & Feldman, 2008). A new tool or software program does not automatically trigger new routines. This being said, it remains the case that attempts to instigate new routine practices are often coupled with changes in procedures and techniques which are meant to accommodate those new routines (D'Adderio, 2011; Pentland & Feldman, 2008). However, our study shows that the introduction of a virtual platform as artifact can be an important aspect for accomplishing the desired alignment of routines with a newly designed strategy. It would be a promising avenue for research to understand how specific artefacts intentionally alter routines, thereby enacting a reality which fits the strategic intent of top management.

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