

Article

How about Strategy? – A Survey into the Pitfalls of Strategic Alignment

Melissa Roelfsema, Adina Aldea, Marc Lankhorst, and Henry Franken

Abstract

The prospects are grim for organizations that manage organizational change through a new strategy. In the Strategic Alignment survey, conducted in the second quarter of 2014, 177 managers, consultants, architects, IT specialists, and others were asked about the strategic alignment efforts and experiences of their organization. This article presents findings concerning several aspects of the strategy process. Results from the Strategic Alignment survey suggest that organizations still experience significant difficulties during development and implementation of their strategies. Especially, ineffective communication and insufficient organizational capabilities are pitfalls that prevent organizations from reaching strategic alignment.

Keywords

Strategic alignment, strategic alignment survey, strategy development, strategy implementation, organizational change

INTRODUCTION

In a constantly changing environment in which competition and globalization are intensifying, it is increasingly important for organizations to manage and survive change (Amagoh 2008). Organizations need to keep up with the fast-changing and increasing demands of customers. The ability to adapt rapidly and to remain agile is imperative. A strategy determines the decisions and courses of action that organizations take to achieve competitive advantage and to survive change (Mintzberg et al. 2009).

A strategy needs to be developed and implemented in order to successfully direct the organization from their current position to a future desired state. Previous studies indicate that numerous organizations were not successful in completing this strategy process (Kaplan & Norton 2005). Formulating a consistent strategy is a daunting task; making that strategy work is even more difficult (Li et al. 2010). It seems that organizations fail when trying to implement strategic choices, and thus fail to realize their strategic vision.

The fit between the business and IT is an important example of strategic alignment (Luftman 2003). More specifically, strategic alignment is the ability to create synergy between the position of the organization within the competitive environment and the design of the appropriate structure to support the execution (Baker & Jones 2008). This should be done in such a way that a strategy is developed while considering the supporting structure (IT) and that operational goals and actions are in line with the overall strategy (business). Strategic alignment is an ideal state above all; it is a process of

continuous adaptation and change (Henderson & Venkatraman 1993).

To get a better understanding of why organizations often fail to reach strategic alignment it is essential to understand the variables that affect strategic alignment. There are various variables which can have an impact on strategic alignment. These variables are grouped into four main categories: the strategic alignment indicators, culture and shared beliefs, organizational capabilities, and communication (Beer & Eisenstat 2000; Luftman 2000; Higgins 2005; Hrebiniak 2006; Neilson, Martin & Powers 2008; Elquist LoRé 2012). A survey is used to examine which variables, found in the literature, affect the strategic alignment efforts of organizations.

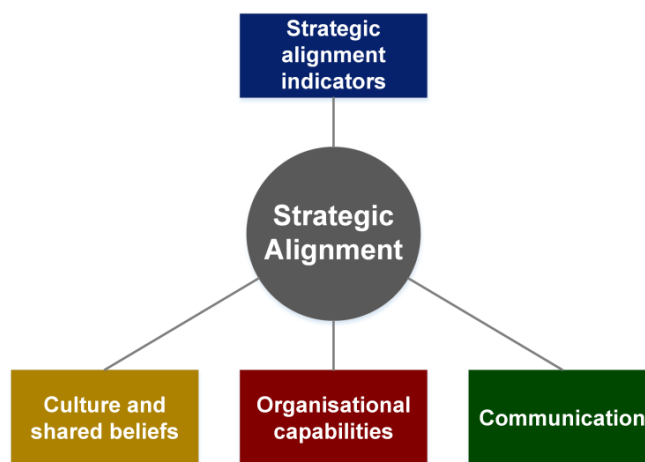


Figure 1: Variables Influencing Strategic Alignment

Survey Methodology

The Strategic Alignment survey is created to get a better understanding of the strategic alignment efforts and experiences of organizations. Especially, the way in which organizations move from strategy development to strategy implementation is examined. The questionnaire is designed to gather information about the problems experienced by organizations during the strategy process. The reasons that cause organizations to fail at developing and implementing their strategies are investigated. The respondents were reached through collaboration with The Open Group, the Association of Enterprise Architects (AEA), and the Nederlands Architectuur Forum (NAF). The Strategic Alignment survey asked 177 managers, consultants, architects, IT specialists, and others about the strategic alignment efforts and experiences of their organizations.

INSIGHTS AND FINDINGS

Problems in Strategy Development and Strategy Implementation

Organizations might experience a variety of problems during the strategy process; for example, some have insufficient communication. In general, more than half of the organizations experience problems during the development of their strategies. Strategy formulation is a challenging task for many organizations. However, implementing a developed strategy is even more difficult. About 75% of the organizations experience problems during the implementation of the strategy. This indicates that organizations have much to improve in the strategy process, especially during the strategy implementation phase. Nonetheless, the focus should not only be on the implementation phase; problems that occur during the development of strategies might cause problems during strategy implementation.

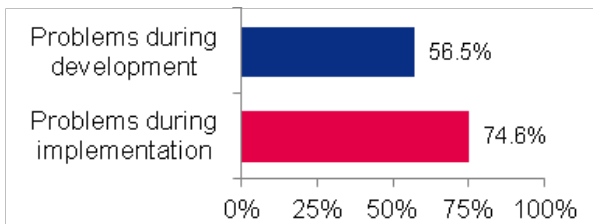


Figure 2: Identification of Problems During Strategy Development and Implementation

“52% of the organizations experience problems both during the development and during the implementation of their strategies.”

Of the organizations that experience problems during the development of strategies, about 52% also experienced problems during the implementation of a strategy.

These organizations did probably not reach a state of strategic alignment. The amount of organizations that might have reached a state of alignment is relatively small; only 5% did not experience any problems during the development and implementation of their strategies.

Remarkable, none of organizations was able to implement a strategy without problems when problems had already occurred during development. A strategy which is not properly developed is doomed to fail during the implementation phase. From the organizations that successfully developed a strategy, some experienced problems during the implementation of that strategy.

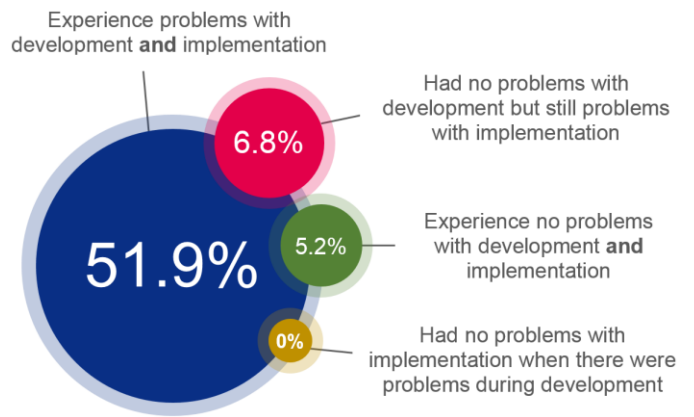


Figure 3: Problems During Development and Implementation

Involvement in Developing and Implementing Strategies

Strategic long-term plans are turned into reality by setting operational short-term objectives in the strategy implementation phase. Implementation is about the translation of strategic goals into executable objectives. During this implementation phase a large part of the organization is involved. About 67% of the respondents indicate that they were often involved during implementation.

“A larger part of the organization is involved during the implementation of strategies than during the development.”

Strategy development is about formulation of a strategy; i.e., the strategic plans and goals. In this phase a much smaller part of the organization is involved. Of the respondents, 33% indicate that they were often involved in the development of the strategies. Consequently, more people are involved during the implementation of strategies than during the development.

People involved during the development do not identify problems in the strategy process as often as the people who are not involved. They usually feel empowered and involved since they have ownership and responsibility for the success of the strategy. The people who are not

involved during strategy development experience more problems because their interests might not have been considered or heard. The involvement of the majority of the organization’s employees during development is essential for organizations to avoid difficulties during the strategy process.

the people involved during strategy implementation should get back to the strategy development team. It is important that those voices are heard and taken into consideration by organizations.

Involvement of Departments in the Strategy Process

In the strategy process there are various departments involved at different phases. In a state of strategic alignment there should be a synergy between the business and IT. Consequently, a strategy should not be developed without considering IT and a strategy should not be implemented without involving the business. However, business departments such as Finance, Legal, Marketing & Sales, and R&D are more involved during development than during implementation. Information Technology (IT) and operational departments such as Portfolio Management, Enterprise Architecture, and Program and Project Management (PPM) are more frequently involved during implementation. Especially PPM and IT are more frequently involved when strategy is already developed, thus when the strategy needs to be implemented. For a proper strategy process organizations should not forget to consider their supporting structure and involve departments such as IT and PPM.

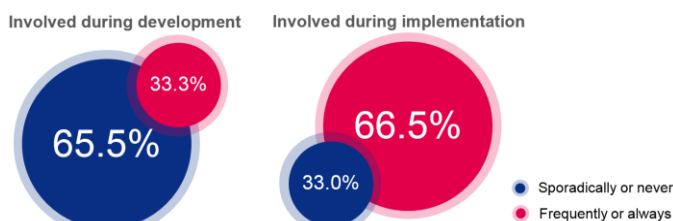


Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents Involved During Development or Implementation

Vice versa, the respondents involved during the implementation of strategies more frequently identify problems in the strategy process than those that are not involved. Those that are involved during the implementation phase know which problems occur during implementation and what has gone wrong during development. Consequently, the people uninvolved during development but involved during implementation most frequently experience problems. Feedback from

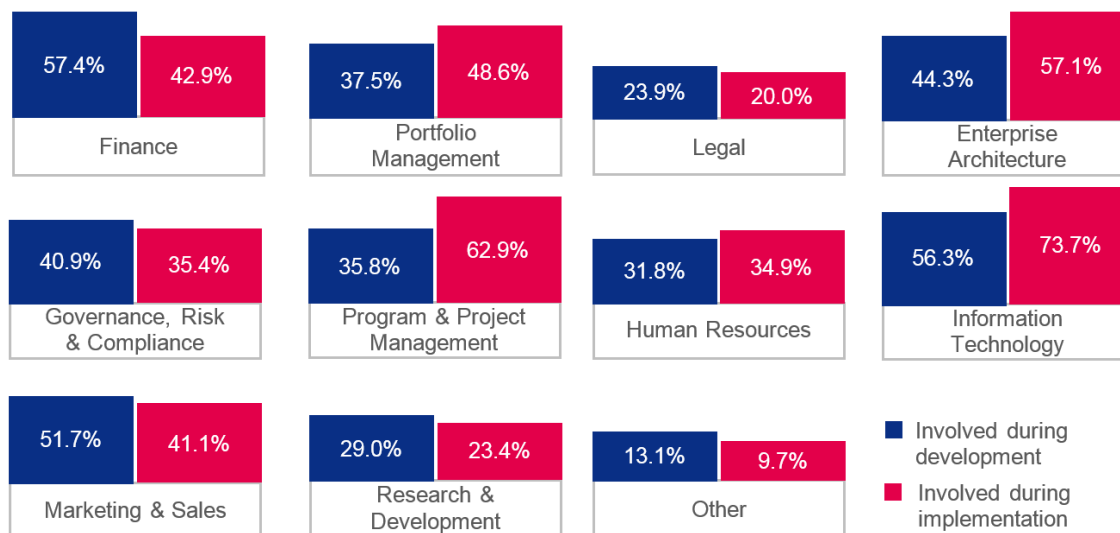


Figure 5: Percentage of Disciplines Involved During Development or Implementation

Problem Identification by Function Groups

Within the organization there are different function groups which are concerned with the development and implementation of strategies. These are function groups such as management, consultants, architects, IT specialists, and others from departments such as R&D

and HR. A distinction is made between these function groups to determine whether they identify problems differently during development and implementation.

“58% of management identifies problems during strategy implementation compared to 83% of the architects.”

A smaller part of the managers identifies problems during strategy development and during strategy

implementation than the other function groups. Of the managers surveyed, almost 46% identify problems during the development of strategies, while about 70% of the others notice problems during the development phase. Moreover, a far smaller part of management identifies problems during implementation (58%) compared to the amount of architects (83%). The fact that management does not identify the problems to the

same extent as the other function groups could have several causes. Managers may have a different perspective or look at the bigger picture in which the problems experienced by, for instance, an IT specialist are less significant. Apparently, there is a difference in how the function groups perceive problems which might cause frictions between these function groups.

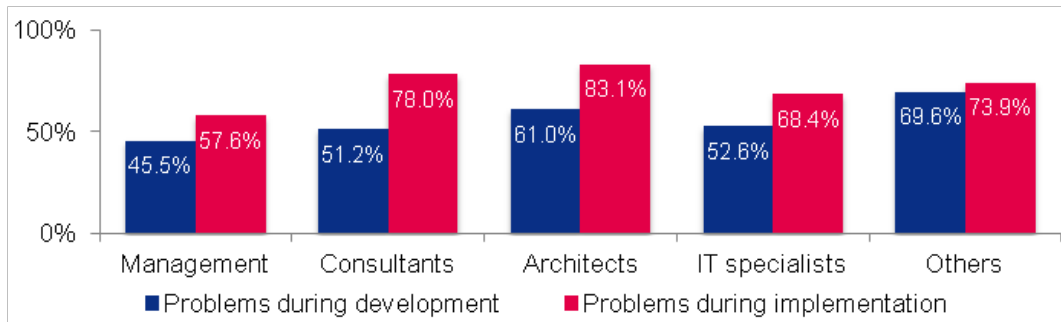


Figure 6: Differences in Problem Identification by the Various Function Groups

Use of Strategy Techniques and Methods in the Strategy Process

There is a wide range of techniques, methods, models, frameworks, and tools which organizations can use in their strategy process. Development and implementation can be supported by several of these techniques. In the current environment in which organizations often fail to develop or implement a strategy it is remarkable that a large part of the organizations (52%) never or sporadically use strategy techniques.

the techniques that are available. The results show that management is more hesitant to use software tools to support the development and implementation of strategies. A smaller amount of the surveyed managers (33%) immediately agree to the use of such a tool than the other function groups. Consultants (51%) and IT specialists (53%) are more confident about the use of such a software tool and indicate that they would certainly use it.

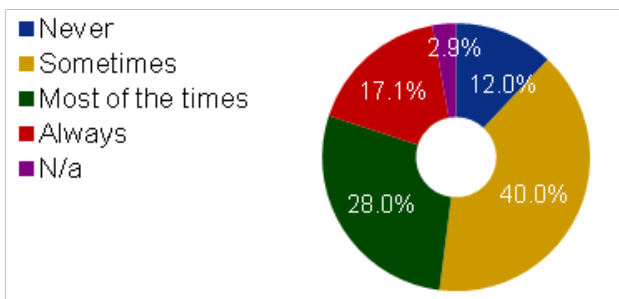


Figure 7: Use of Strategy Techniques to Support the Strategy Process

It is surprising that about 90% of the organizations are willing to use a software tool to support the development and implementation of strategies; at least if a good one is available. It appears there is a barrier to the use of strategy techniques or methods to support the strategy process. Organizations are willing to use a strategy technique or tool but a large fraction (often) do not use

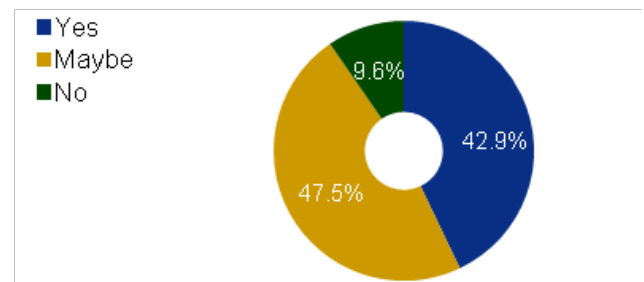


Figure 8: Willingness to Use Software Tools to Support the Strategy Process

“52% of the organizations do not (often) use strategy techniques to support the strategy process, while 90% is willing to consider it.”

About 80% of the organizations that do use strategy techniques use the SWOT analysis to support the development of strategies. The SWOT analysis is one of the most popular methods to analyze the environment of an organization. Almost 75% of the organizations use a business case to motivate the value of a project in the context of a strategy. So, the SWOT analysis and the business case are used by most of the organizations

while other techniques and methods are used less frequently.

Various frameworks or methods, techniques, and tools are mentioned as additional support for the development and implementation of strategies. Of the organizations surveyed a large part uses the TOGAF® framework, a

method for designing and implementing Enterprise Architecture (EA). In addition, the ArchiMate® language is used as a modeling language for EA. There was a large group of architects that participated in this survey (34%) which might explain the mentioning of EA methods or techniques to support the strategy process.

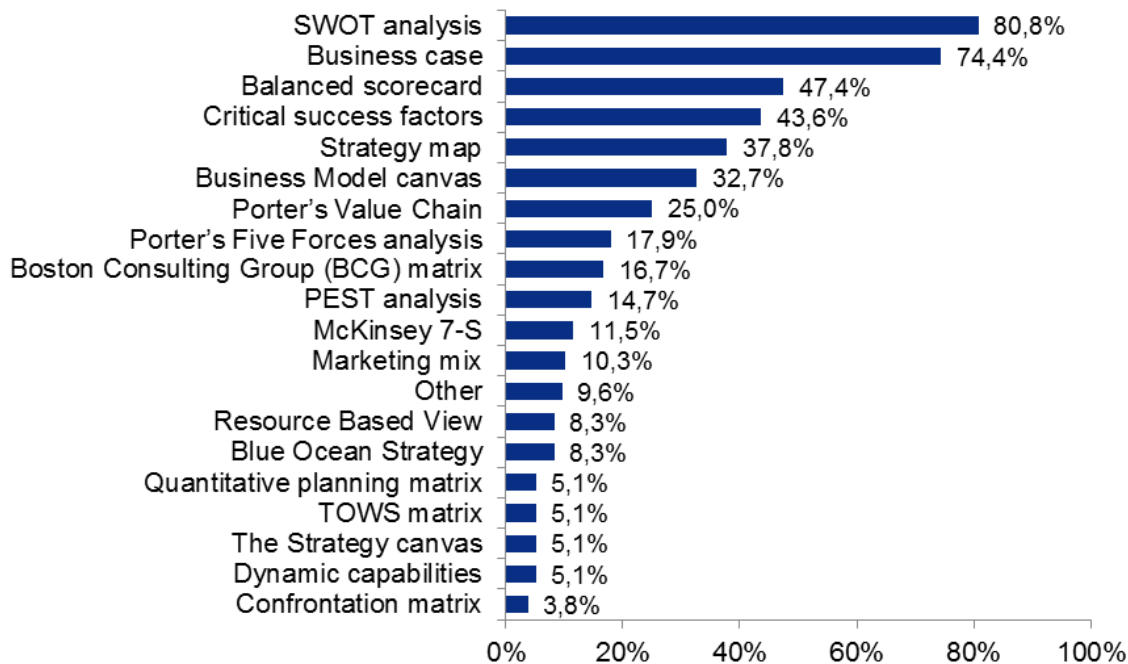


Figure 9: Percentage of Strategy Techniques Used During Development and Implementation

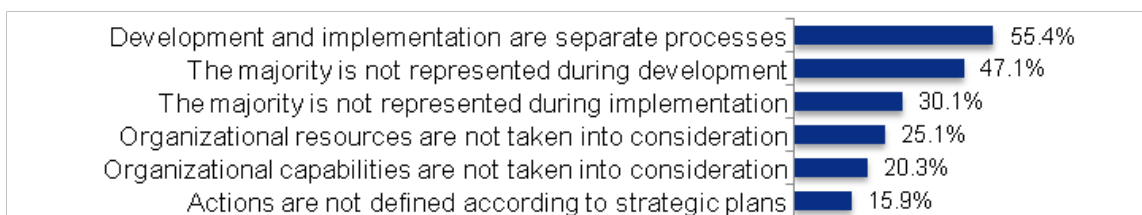


Figure 10: Percentage that Identify Each Indicator of Strategic Alignment as a Problem

THE PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED IN THE STRATEGY PROCESS

In this article the factors which influence the strategy process are grouped into four main variables. The results of the survey show which factors are experienced as significant problems in the strategy process.

Strategic Alignment Indicators

Strategic alignment indicators are the indicators which are specific to strategic alignment; i.e., the indicators mentioned in the literature regarding strategic alignment. In order to reach strategic alignment, the development

phase and the implementation phase should be intertwined. The data shows that more than half of the organizations do not view strategy development and strategy implementation as an intertwined process. These organizations might have difficulties involving the supporting structure (e.g., IT) during development and the business during implementation, and therefore struggle to reach alignment. In addition, organizations struggle to involve the concerns and interests of the majority of the organization during development. However, most of the organizations do consider the organizational resources and capabilities during strategy development. They recognize the importance of the

characteristics of the organization which might limit the ability to successfully develop and implement a strategy. A large part of the organizations define actions according to strategic plans during implementation; they recognize that actions should contribute to the strategic goal(s).

Culture and Shared Beliefs

Culture and shared beliefs are about the mindset within the organizations regarding strategic changes. Many organizations experience conflicting priorities regarding reaching strategic goal(s) which can make the development and implementation of strategies

challenging. If there is no agreement regarding priority of goals it is difficult to determine how to use the limited resources of an organization. Except for conflicting priorities, there are no significant problems with culture and shared beliefs. About half of the organizations have a culture in which there is willingness to change. A relatively large part of the organizations recognize the contribution of individuals to the development and implementation of a strategy. The main recommendation regarding culture and shared beliefs is for organizations to focus on resolving conflicting priorities.

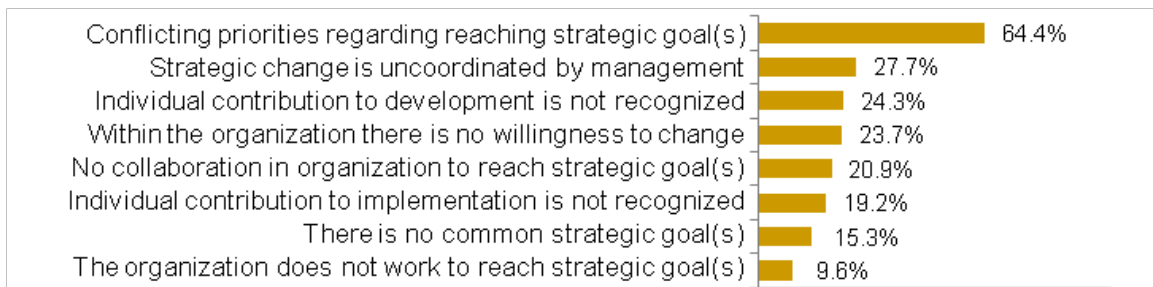


Figure 11: Percentage that Identify Each Indicator of Culture/Shared Beliefs as a Problem

Organizational Capabilities

Organizational capabilities are about the ability of the organization to create a strategy and to execute its strategic vision. Capabilities are not always sufficient; for more than half of the organizations the developed strategy is not in line with the existing information systems. Organizations might need to make unexpected investments to improve the existing information systems or (re)adjust their initial strategy to fit their current capabilities. Some organizations do not translate the long-term strategic goals to short-term objectives or

clear actions. Without these objectives it is difficult to determine the short-term direction. In general, the organizations are able to monitor and measure the process and performance of the strategy, employees have the right competencies, and management is able to motivate strategic decisions. The other variables which are not considered as significant problems are mentioned in Figure 12. Concerning the organizational capabilities, it is recommended that existing information systems are considered during strategy development, and long-term strategic goals should be translated into clear short-term actions.



Figure 12: Percentage that Identify Each Indicator of Organizational Capabilities as a Problem

Communication

Communication is concerned with creating understanding and awareness about the strategy. While communication does not have the largest impact on the strategy process, it is a common and well-known problem. A relatively large part of the organizations have not made the individual responsibilities and the impact of the strategy clear to their employees. About 45% of the organizations have employees who do not understand the strategy, which could lead to significant problems during implementation. Employees often have

no understanding of the expected actions and no access to information about strategic plans. There is unclear communication of the strategy for 36% of the organizations. The quality of the communication leaves something to be desired since for some of the organizations the communication is inaccurate, too late, or infrequent. However, 56% do have a defined and official strategy. Apparently, a defined and official strategy is present but not communicated sufficiently. Organizations should focus on creating understanding and on ensuring the quality of the information.

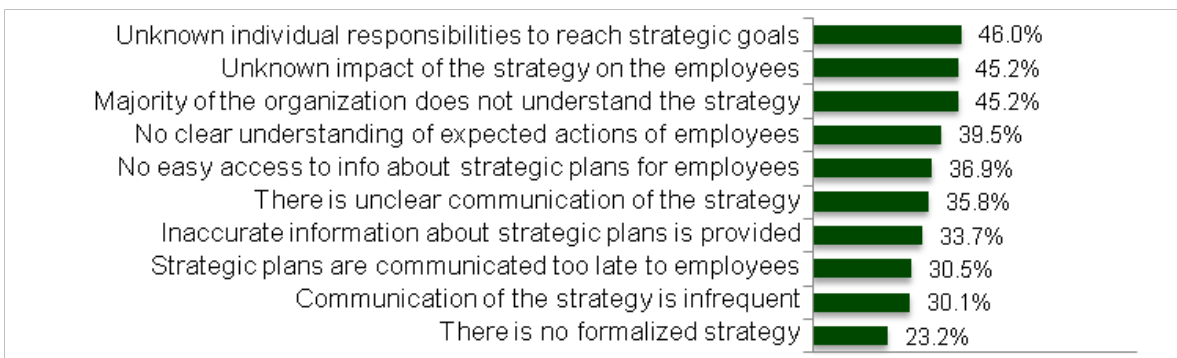


Figure 13: Percentage that Identify Each Indicator of Communication as a Problem

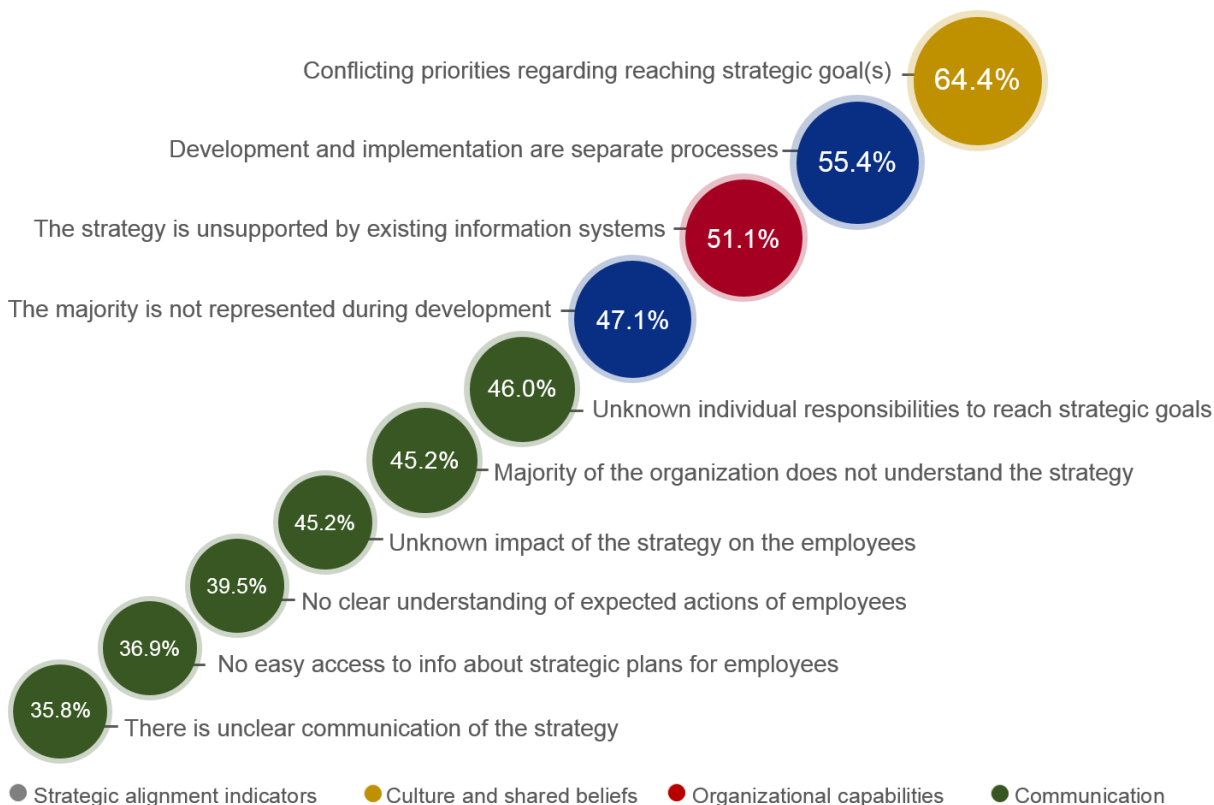


Figure 14: The Ten Most Significant Problems Identified in the Strategy Process

The Ten Most Significant Problems in the Strategy Process

From the factors mentioned above, the ten most significant problems can be distinguished. A large fraction of the organizations are not able to prevent conflicting priorities regarding reaching strategic goal(s). These conflicting priorities are the most significant difficulty for organizations in the strategy process. Conflicting priorities can seriously restrain strategic transformations and the implementation of a strategy.

“64% of the organizations have conflicting priorities within the organization when it comes to reaching the strategic goal(s).”

A majority of the organizations still see strategy development and strategy implementation as separate processes, following strategic alignment they ideally form one intertwined process. About 51% have a strategy which is unsupported by the existing information systems, which means that new information systems should be created to make implementation successful. Slightly less than half of the organizations do not involve the majority of the organization during the development of a strategy. When the interests of the majority of the organization are not considered it can cause difficulties during implementation.

Organizations experience difficulties with communication during the strategy process. Several communication problems have been identified by some of the organizations, such as unknown individual responsibilities, lack of understanding of strategy, unknown impact of the strategy, lack of understanding about needed actions, insufficient access to information about strategic plans, and unclear communication. These communication problems form serious problems for organizations managing strategic changes.

Constraints of Strategic Alignment

The previous findings show which problems organizations experience in the strategy process. However, it does not indicate how these problems influence the extent of strategic alignment. In order to measure the impact on strategic alignment a distinction is made between organizations with a state of strategic alignment and organizations without strategic alignment. This distinction is made by the amount of problems they experienced during development and during implementation. The extent to which organizations with strategic alignment identify the above-mentioned indicators as problems is compared with the extent to which organizations without strategic alignment identify the above mentioned indicators as problems.

Variables identified as a problem by both groups of organizations have no influence on strategic alignment; i.e., these variables are not constraints to strategic alignment. Variables identified more frequently by organizations without strategic alignment as a problem than by organizations with strategic alignment have an impact on strategic alignment; i.e., these variables are constraints.

The constraint that affects strategic alignment the most is an unknown impact of the strategy on employees. Organizations that are not aware of the consequences of a strategy on their employees will struggle to reach strategic alignment. Another significant constraint is no understanding about the strategy by the majority of the organization. Without a proper understanding of the strategy, implementation becomes a challenge. These two constraints which have a significant effect on strategic alignment both concern problems of communication. As explained earlier, strategic alignment is influenced by several indicators of communication. Other significant constraints concerning communication are: unclear understanding of expected actions, unknown individual responsibilities, and no access to information about strategic plans.

“Communication has the largest impact on strategic alignment; the main constraint is an unknown impact of the strategy on employees.”

Organizations that do not translate their long-term strategic goals into short-term objectives negatively influence the level of strategic alignment. This translation is of importance to make sure that the execution of strategic plans becomes possible. Without short-term objectives it is challenging to determine what has to be changed in order to achieve strategic transformations. A similar constraint is the insufficient translation of strategic goals into clear actions. These constraints pertain to organizational capabilities. An additional constraint regarding organizational capabilities is a lack of measurement of the impact of the strategy on the organization's performance. Without measurement it is unclear whether a strategy creates shareholder value.

Only a few indicators of culture and shared beliefs have a significant effect on strategic alignment, such as conflicting priorities within the organizations regarding strategic goal(s) and uncoordinated strategic change. Strategic alignment indicators have the weakest impact on strategic alignment, as can be seen in Figure 15. Apparently, these indicators of strategic alignment do not represent the full extent of strategic alignment. Our findings suggest that the strategic alignment indicators, as identified in the literature, are actually not a good determinant of strategic alignment.

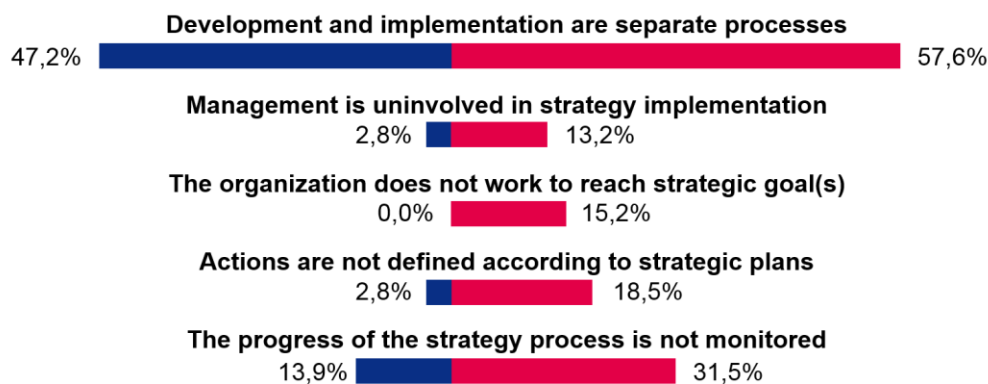


■ Organizations with strategic alignment ■ Organizations without strategic alignment

Figure 15: The Ten Most Significant Constraints to Strategic Alignment

Contrary to the ten most significant constraints, there are variables with no significant effect on the extent of strategic alignment. A similar percentage of organizations with and without strategic alignment experience (or do not experience) these problems, indicating that it is not a constraint to strategic alignment. Development and implementation are not seen as an intertwined process by a large part of the organizations with and without strategic alignment. Consequently, the

extent of strategic alignment is not influenced by this indicator. The same applies to uninvolved management during strategy implementation. While organizations without strategic alignment experience this problem more often than those with strategic alignment, the difference is too small to have an effect on strategic alignment. Strategic alignment is not influenced by the variables mentioned in Figure 16.



■ Organizations with strategic alignment ■ Organizations without strategic alignment

Figure 16: A Similar Percentage of Organizations With and Without Strategic Alignment Experience Each Indicator as a Problem

The Way Organizations Move from Development to Implementation

There are some additional interesting findings about the way organizations move from development to implementation. Organizations that define the boundaries of strategic transformations have various guidelines such as budget, scope of the strategy, timeframe, by management, and by objectives. The

intent behind strategic plans is communicated mainly by management through the intranet, meetings, or channels such as presentations, emails, and newsletters. The organizations that align personal values and goals to a common (strategic) goal mostly use personal target objectives or define the expected personal values. They use training and education to make sure that values and goals are aligned, or appraisals in the form of bonuses.



Figure 17: The Way Organizations Move from Development to Implementation

Interdependencies between stakeholders are primarily recognized by a stakeholder interdependencies matrix, by Project Portfolio Management, or by stakeholder analyses. However, many recognize interdependencies in an *ad hoc* or an informal way. Necessary changes and actions are defined through the use of project or program management. Management is involved when the necessary changes are defined and roadmaps, discussions, gap analyses, or workshops are used. The contribution of a project to reaching the strategic goals is communicated through the intranet or through the use of newsletters or emails. Meetings and presentations are also held in order to communicate this contribution.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, there is a demand for change since an environment has developed in which customers expect a swift delivery of products and services with seamless user experience. Competitors born in the digital age take their advantage through rapid delivery of digital products and services. Organizations need to change their business model as in a few years every organization will be a digital organization. The capability to change rapidly and remain agile is imperative. Subsequently, management wants to satisfy stakeholders, create sustainable business revenue, and effectively execute their constantly renewed strategies. Moreover, they want to enable business transformations that are agile and to make fast business improvement while reducing the costs significantly. In a time where

most organizations fail to develop and implement a strategy it is crucial to successfully manage strategic change. Management needs to take into account the constraints to strategic alignment such as an unknown impact of strategy or lacking translation of long-term strategic goals. There is a need for strategy rationalization and strategy implementation through consistent modeling, and for sufficient communication to all stakeholders involved. This study illuminates the areas and problems on which management should focus if they want to survive upcoming necessary changes.

EVIDENCE

In total, 177 people participated in the Strategic Alignment survey, which consisted of:

- 33 managers = 18.9%
- 41 consultants = 23.4%
- 59 architects = 33.7%
- 19 IT specialists = 10.9%
- 23 others = 13.1%

These participants mostly worked for large organizations with more than 500 employees. About 73% of the organizations included in this survey have more than 500 employees. About 12% of the organizations are small organizations with less than 50 employees.

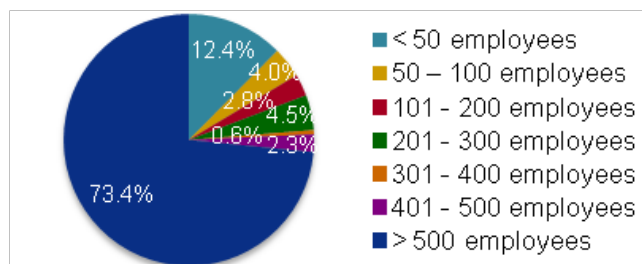


Figure 18: The Size of Organizations Involved in the Survey

There is an equal distribution of the industries in which the organizations are active. Some of the largest industries are the information and communication industry in which 25% of the organizations are active and the finance and insurance industry in which 21% of the organizations are active. Most of the organizations have an office located in Western Europe (71%), about 37% in Northern Europe, and almost 25% in North America.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Adina Aldea MSc is a Junior Research Consultant at BiZZdesign, assigned to the R&D department. Here she works on developing a method for improving the gap between business and IT, with the help of strategy models, capability-based planning, portfolio management, and Enterprise Architecture. She is working on this topic also in collaboration with the

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Marc Lankhorst MSc PhD is Managing Consultant and Service Line Manager Enterprise Architecture at BiZZdesign. As an internationally recognized thought leader on EA, he guides the development of BiZZdesign's portfolio of services, methods, techniques, and tools in this field. In the past, Marc has managed the development of the ArchiMate[®] language for EA modeling, now an Open Group standard. Marc is a TOGAF[®] 9 Certified architect, and holds an MSc in Computer Science from the University of Twente and a PhD from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

Henry Franken MSc, PhD is co-founder and CEO of BiZZdesign. BiZZdesign offers complete and integrated solutions (software tools, methods, consultancy, and training) to design and improve organizations. BiZZdesign offers solutions including training courses and tools that conform to Open Group standards. Henry is responsible for the strategic international growth of BiZZdesign. Moreover, Henry is responsible for the research and innovation at BiZZdesign. In this capacity, the alignment with and contribution to open standards is key. Henry is chair of The Open Group ArchiMate[®] Forum. Henry is an invited speaker on business architecture at many conferences.

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