

Linking Information Technology, Knowledge Management, and Strategic Experimentation

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the focus of IT infrastructure had been to capture the knowledge of experts in a centralized repository (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Grover & Davenport, 2001; Nolan, 2001). The centralized databases contained knowledge that was explicit and historical (e.g., competitor pricing, market share), and the IT infrastructure served to facilitate functional decision making or to automate routine tasks (as in reengineering). The users of technology approached the repository to obtain data in a narrowly defined domain (Broadbent, Weill, & St. Clair, 1999). Consequently, IT originally played a significant, yet ultimately limited role in the strategy creation process. Management information systems (MISs) arguably generated information that was less applicable to strategy creation, as noted in early writings on the linkage between MIS and strategic planning (e.g., Lientz & Chen, 1981; Shank, Boynton, & Zmud, 1985; Holmes, 1985).

The active management of knowledge was similarly underdeveloped. Despite the fact that strategic decision makers had always emphasized the role of tacit knowledge, the actual importance of knowledge was not *explicitly* recognized. Formalized knowledge management (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Dalkir, 2005), with its associated terminology and tools, is a recent development and as such did not inform the strategic planning process.

However, the shifts that have taken place in IT infrastructures over the last decade and the recent developments in knowledge management (KM) have brought them closer to the creators of strategy. Indeed, both IT and knowledge management are increasingly enablers in the contemporary strategic management practice:

1. IT infrastructure is transitioning in its focus from the functional work unit to a process orientation. Whereas computer systems were once the focal point, the new infrastructure is network centric, with an emphasis on business knowledge (Nolan, 2001). For example, traditional search engines utilized rule-based reasoning to identify elements matching specific search criteria; the “state-of-the-art” knowledge management systems employ case-based search techniques to identify all relevant knowledge components meeting the user’s request (Grover & Davenport, 2001).
2. IT now takes into account contexts that include cross-functional experts, knowledgeable on a wide variety of potentially relevant issues. Additionally, there is greater emphasis on the integration of infrastructure with structure, culture (Gold, Malhotra, & Segars, 2001), and organizational roles (Awad & Ghaziri, 2004). In many ways, the newer IT infrastructures have enabled the garnering of explicit knowledge throughout the organization to speed up strategy creation.

The objective of this article is to outline how the developments in IT and KM are facilitating the evolution of strategic management to strategic experimentation to create quantum improvements in strategy creation and unprecedented developmental opportunities for the field of IT.

BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this article, *information technology* (IT) is defined as the physical equipment (hardware), software, and telecommunications technology, including data, image, and voice networks, employed to support business processes (Whitten & Bentley, 1998). The overarching plan for IT deployment within an organization is called the IT architecture. Technology infrastructure refers to the architecture—including the physical facilities, the services, and the management—that support all computing resources in an organization (Turban, McLean, & Wetherbe, 1996).

As used in this article, data are objective, explicit pieces or units, information is data with meaning attached, and knowledge is information with an implied element of action. According to Davenport and Prusak (1998):

“Knowledge is the fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms.” (p. 5)

Knowledge management is “a set of business practices and technologies used to assist an organization to

obtain maximum advantage from one of its most important assets—knowledge” (Duffy, 2000, p. 62). In other words, it is actively capturing, sharing, and making use of what is known, both tacitly, informally and explicitly, within the organization. IT often facilitates knowledge management initiatives by integrating repositories (e.g., databases), and indexing applications (e.g., search engines) and user interfaces. Awad and Ghaziri (2004) underscore the fact that KM also incorporates traditional management functions: building trust among individuals, allocating resources to KM, and monitoring progress.

The concept of “strategy” explicated in *strategic management* is one of marketplace strategy, that is, winning in the marketplace against competitors, entrenched or incipient. The underlying premise is that “to enjoy continued strategy success, a firm must commit itself to outwitting its rivals” (Fahey & Randall, 2001, p. 30). A large body of literature on strategic management has persuasively argued that effective strategy creation and execution are central to a firm’s performance (e.g., Covin, Slevin, & Schultz, 1994).

Strategy creation involves both goal formulation—defined in terms of external stakeholders rather than operational milestones—and crafting of the strategic means by which to accomplish these goals (Hofer & Schendel, 1978). The means typically include business scope, competitive posture, strategic intent, and the organizational mechanisms for implementation. In practice, the process of strategy creation has often taken the form of strategic planning. Comprehensive strategic planning (Gluck, Kaufman, & Walleck 1978) has historically been practiced in large corporations: A celebrated example is the use of scenarios by Royal-Dutch Shell. It usually consisted of several sequential stages of decision making involving diagnosis, alternative development, evaluation and choice, and implementation. In each step, the strategic planners emphasized deliberate juxtaposition of “objective data” and careful analysis, with top management judgment, thus highlighting the role of tacit knowledge.

Strategic planning has evolved over the years. Writing in the 1970s, Gluck et al. (1978) identified four phases of evolution: budgeting, long-range planning, strategic planning, and strategic management. Each phase of evolution incorporated the lessons from the earlier phases, but also took into account the emerging realities faced by corporations. Gluck et al. (1978) noted that during the 1980s, the “strategic management” phase would represent the cutting edge of practice in the world.

TOWARD STRATEGIC EXPERIMENTATION

The 1990s witnessed a revolution in organizational environments often characterized as “hypercompetition.” These environments have created three major imperatives for orga-

nizations: time compression, globalization, and technology integration (Narayanan, 2001). In addition, the increased environmental dynamism also contributes to an increase in the degree of uncertainty confronted by strategic managers, calling into question traditional planning practices. Consequently, a new type of strategy creation process is evolving which is termed “strategic experimentation.” With this evolution, the relationship between strategy creation, knowledge management, and IT is undergoing a profound shift.

All the four phases of strategic planning documented by Gluck et al. (1978) incorporated a sequential approach to strategy creation and execution, leading to the identification of the one winning strategy that has the highest probability of success. Consequently, firms found it logical to commit the maximum available resources to the implementation of one winning strategy. The goal was to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage vis-à-vis the firm’s rivals, and to reduce uncertainty ex ante using analytical forecasting techniques as well as market research. This approach to planning seems to have been effective during the 1980s, when the environment was moderately dynamic.

In hypercompetitive environments, market participants frequently confront great uncertainty over technological possibilities, consumer preferences, and viable business models. This high level of ambiguity often results in a situation where: (a) traditional methods of ex ante uncertainty reduction (e.g., market research) fail, and (b) the costs and risks of the traditional “big bet” strategic management approach outweigh its advantages in terms of focus, decisiveness, and concentrated resource commitment. It is in this situation that the emerging strategic experimentation approach holds significant promise.

Strategic experimentation (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000) draws on *real-options reasoning* (e.g., McGrath & Nerkar, 2003), discussions of *exploration vs. exploitation* (March, 1991), as well as *trial-and-error learning* (e.g., Van de Ven & Polley, 1992):

1. Companies engaging in strategic experimentation continually start, select, pursue, and drop strategic initiatives before launching aggressively those initiatives whose value is finally revealed (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000, p. 340).
2. Strategic initiatives thus serve as low-cost probes (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998) that enable the discovery of product technology and market preferences. They also serve as a stepping stone *option* for future competitive activity in that particular product-market domain.
3. The role of the strategic manager is to administer a *portfolio of strategic initiatives* that represents an appropriate mix of high and low uncertainty projects, and to maximize the learning from these real options (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000).

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