COGNITIVE AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS: WHAT MAKES STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION SO HARD?

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Abstract

Good strategies do not guarantee business success, unless they are successfully implemented. It is possible to identify some recurring influential factors in the strategy implementation literature: some structural factors ("hard factors") that can be associated with routines, resources and decisions taken at institutional level that affect the behavior of individuals; and cognitive factors (“soft factors”), which refer to the interpersonal processes, that have to be dealt with positive and negative processes and sanctions. The main objective of this research is to map and identify key obstacles and facilitators encountered by administrators at each influential factor in the implementation phase of planned business strategies. A quantitative research was designed, with managers of different hierarchical levels in large private companies headquartered in Brazil. Data was collected through a survey with an online questionnaire and data analysis includes the use of factor frequency analysis. The results show new empirical evidences and identifies potential gaps in the theory of strategic management, as well as managerial contributions.

Keywords: *strategic implementation; key factors; cognitive factors; structural factors; obstacles*.

1. INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION HEURISTICS

Good strategies do not guarantee business success, unless they are successfully implemented (Ho et al., 2014). However, contemporary business literature suggests that there is a gap between the formulation and implementation of strategies (Greer et al, 2017). After devoting themselves to the planning part of strategy, executives maintain only reasonable understanding of the actions necessary to achieve it (Leonardi, 2015), the most relevant influential factors, as well as the main obstacles encountered by companies and how to overcome them (Greer et al, 2017; Li et al., 2008), resulting in a 50-90% rate of plans implemented inefficiently (Cândido & Santos, 2015).

It is the implementation that enables the value creation reflecting the use of internal and external resources, processes, activities and capabilities that determine how the value is generated in the organization (Teece, 2010). If the objective of the strategy is to generate competitive advantage, its implementation needs to be considered for a complete theory of strategy. However, implementation presupposes both structural and cognitive factors, requiring both a macro and a individual perspective that is not always addressed in classical strategy theories.

The literature that deals with the execution of strategies is a fragmented and eclectic process (Noble, 1999), favoring multidisciplinary approaches (Greer et al, 2017). Strategic implementation can be understood as "a dynamic, interactive and complex process composed of a series of decisions and activities by managers and employees - impacted by a number of interrelated internal and external factors - to transform strategic plans into reality in order to achieve strategic objectives "(Li et al., 2008, p.6). The dynamism and complexity inherent to the process are intensified in globalized markets, whose constancy, abundance and speed of transformation in the competitive environment result in a strong pressure for frequent changes or adjustments in the strategy (Pors, 2016), requiring companies to adapt with increasingly agile and efficient responses (McGrath, 2013).

Strategies may fail or succeed for different reasons (Raps, 2005), many of these internal to the organization and not external to it (Nutt, 1987). However, it is possible to identify some recurring influential factors in the strategy implementation literature: some structural factors ("hard factors") such as organizational structure and administrative systems; and cognitive factors (“soft factors”), with emphasis on leadership, the relationship between different business units and communication (Li et al, 2008). Understanding key influencing factors in strategic implementation can contribute to RBV by indicating heuristics and routines essential to ensure value creation and, consequently, sustainable competitive advantage. In a complementary way, the implementation literature discusses relevant individual and interpersonal cognitive factors and how they impact the achievement of institutional results, which may contribute to the discussion about the interrelation between the micro and macro levels of the theory (Coleman, 1988).

So, the main objective of this research is to map and identify key barriers and facilitators encountered by administrators at each influential factor in the implementation phase of planned business strategies. To achieve the proposed goal, a quantitative research was designed, with managers of different hierarchical levels in large private companies headquartered in Brazil. To collect the data, it was proposed the use of a survey, through the application of an online questionnaire. Data analysis includes the use of factor frequency analysis.

The results show theoretical and managerial implications, contributing with new empirical evidences and identifies potential gaps in the theory of strategic management, as well as managerial inputs when suggesting essential cognitive heuristics to implementing strategies and finding facilitators little used, such as the existence of a system of early warnings about changes in the competitive environment and an open and encouraging atmosphere for communication multidirectional, indicating a path for development and improvement of the strategic implementation process of Brazilian organizations. Limitations and suggestions for future studies are also discussed.

2. STRUCTURAL AND COGNITIVE FACTORS

Multiple factors impact the success or failure of implementing a pre-determined strategy, and many of these attributes are internal to the organization and not external to it (Nutt, 1987). The main influential factors found in the strategy literature can be classified from a structural perspective, also known as "hard factors" and a perspective of interpersonal processes, also called "soft factors" (Skivington & Daft, 1991; Nobel, 1999). and a combination of both perspectives may occur (Li et al., 2008).

The structural perspective includes issues related to organizational restructuring (Govindarajan, 1988) and to control mechanisms (Drazin & Howard, 1984; Nilsson & Rapp, 1999). The perspective of interpersonal processes involves a range of behavioral and cognitive issues (Noble, 1999), covering the quality of communication (Forman & Argenti, 2005), the existence of consensus (Noble, 1999), among others.

This classification of perspectives reflects the dichotomy intrinsic to strategic thinking, which seeks the balance between logical rationality ("hard factors") and creativity derived from human motivations ("soft factors"). In this sense, the structural perspective is concerned with efficiency in the administrative processes and its strategic management occurs through indicators and improvement projects. In parallel, the interpersonal perspective aims at the effectiveness in meeting the needs of the stakeholders that make up the organizational environment and its management occurs through projects of change using qualitative measures. It is worth noting that the perspectives are complementary, since both efficiency and effectiveness are essential for the adequate strategic implementation (Almeida, 2003).

The hard factors can be associated with routines, resources and decisions taken at institutional level (macro level) that affect the behavior of individuals (micro level) and, consequently, the execution of the strategy, as proposed in the Coleman bathtub (Coleman, 1988). On the other hand, soft factors indicate inactive and interpersonal cognitive heuristics (micro level), which should be evidenced and encouraged by directly influencing the strategic implementation and the result (macro level).

Two influential factors are classified as "hard factors", that is, they are associated with the **structural perspective** of the implementation (Skivington and Daft, 1991). The organizational structure must be aligned with the strategy, and must be adjusted so that the corporate environment is conducive to implementation. **Control systems** and corporate policies favor implementation, as they allow for monitoring their development, highlighting divergences with agility (Li et al, 2008). Because they are institutional decisions, implementations of changes regarding organizational structure and control systems tend to be faster than those encouraged by individuals (Thornton et al, 2013). The absence of such capabilities can generate inefficiency in the use of the company's other resources and, therefore, compromise its competitive advantage.

Leadership is a soft key factor both in strategy development and execution. Ultimately, the formal business model reflects the view of leadership on the critical factors for value creation and capture (Martins et al, 2015), so the effectiveness of the strategy depends on quality (skills, attitudes, skills and experiences) of the people involved in the process (Li et al, 2008).

In particular, high-level management is attributed to the ability to directly impact the strategy implementation and innovation outcome (Hossain and Hossain, 2017), and it is possible to predict the characteristics of firms by the characteristics of their key leaders (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Leadership cohesion is singled out as one of the core capabilities of an agile organization, coupled with strategic sensitivity and fluidity of resources (Doz and Kosonen, 2010). In order to achieve such a unity, organizations should encourage routines such as dialogue, sharing and integration (Hossain and Hossain, 2017) among managers, leading leaders to focus on informal relationship dynamics within the company (Zott et al, 2011). After all, it is soft factors, which refer to the cognitive processes of strategic implementation, that positive and negative processes and sanctions would be useful to reinforce the desired behavior, anchored in the normative rationality of individuals (Lindenberg and Foss, 2011). In addition, empirical results confirm that both human capital (entrepreneurial and managerial skills) and social capital (relationship networks) of leadership positively impact implementation (Guo et al, 2013).

The **relationship between different business units** is closely related to the strategic implementation, since the functional and interpersonal relationship between the different business areas and their degree of autonomy interfere in the implementation of the strategy. The degree of autonomy of the units, formal programs of sharing and the synergy obtained have a positive impact on implementation, while conflicts and misalignments can jeopardize it (Li et al, 2008).

Multidisciplinary teams influence the implementation and innovation of models through collective learning (Hossain and Hossain, 2017; Huang et al., 2014) and shape institutions and decisions by the power struggle between the agents involved (Thornton et al, 2013). In this sense, the creation of an integrated vision and information sharing between the business units is pointed out as one of the necessary routines for the generation of value during the implementation (Gupta, 1987). Policies and incentives to share information to address possible internal conflicts of interest (Chimhanzi, 2004) also tend to leverage corporate results.

In the implementation literature, the soft factor **communication** is defined as the proper alignment and correct understanding of the motivations, outcomes and expected results of the strategy with all stakeholders, which avoids rework and accelerates implementation (Li et al, 2008). Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2013) highlight the role of collective understanding in organizational change. Communication gains are based on collective models and beliefs of organizational members (Kaplan, 2011), which is more easily shared when it combines the cognitive schema (what others see and perceive) with the linguistic dimension (communication within the organization) (Massa et al, 2016).

By simplifying current cognition, the narrative proposed in the communication allows us to achieve a number of concomitant goals such as persuading external audiences, creating a sense of legitimacy around a new intent, or even guiding the attention of decision makers (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010). By such nature, communication heuristics can alleviate difficulties reported in the implementation literature such as lack of clarity in the definition and dissemination of critical tasks and activities (Rapert et al., 2002) or the ineffective dissemination of global strategic decision goals at all levels of the company (Kaplan and Norton, 2001).

A well-structured internal communication routine can also contribute to the formation of a consensus in the organization (Ring and Rands, 1989), by explicitly articulating and communicating the strategic objectives in order to generate a certain value. The consensus can then be understood as the agreement between top management, middle management and employees at operational levels as to what business priorities should be achieved for successful implementation (Li et al, 2018).

In addition, internal communication is responsible for the dissemination of knowledge and learning throughout the implementation process. Thus, the absence of consistent communication routines could induce faulty decision heuristics (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010), since they would not incorporate an essential element in the success of the strategy. The implementation literature ratifies the difficulties experienced by organizations about this myopia. For example, the difficulty of access and communication by employees and lower administrative levels with top management (Forman and Argenti, 2005), causes the necessary adjustments to occur slowly, wasting potential value.

Assertive ans continuously communication can also boost the involvement and **commitment** of all employees, another soft factor influencing the implementation process (Li et al, 2008). Clarifying the logical articulation of the strategy (Teece, 2010) and its key components contributes to limiting the harmful effects of a potential negative perception of the managers in relation to the probable results of the strategy and its capacity to implement it (Heracleous, 2000).

The influential factor called **strategic formulation** proposes that strategy targeting must be consistent, accurate and appropriate to the company's capabilities (Li et al, 2008) and is a combination of rational and cognitive elements (Allaire and Firsirotu, 1985) or the difficulty of early identification of problems in the external environment (Alexander, 1985) generate obstacles to implementation that result in loss potential of value creation. However, limiting the cognitive capacity of the agents responsible for the formulation (Barney, 1991) may hinder the perception of the reality of the firm.

Although there is some consensus in the literature regarding the main influential factors on strategic implementation (Noble, 1999), the methods to achieve them are still little explored (Li et al., 2008). Some authors focus on the detailing of a single aspect (Walker & Ruekert, 1987; Gupta, 1987; Chimhanzi, 2004; Rapert & Velliquette & Garretson, 2002; Noble & Mokwa, 1999) while others dedicate themselves to the articulation and interdependence between them, proposing models to the process of execution (Alexander, 1985; Hrebiniak, 2006). The main constraints found in the literature are supported by empirical evidence researched with market executives (Hrebiniak, 2006, Kaplan & Norton, 2001, Viseras, Baines, & Sweeney, 2005). A systematized summary of the key 21 constraints and 19 facilitators associated with each of the 7 influential factors on strategic implementation found in the management literature is presented in Figure 1 and used as the conceptual basis for the research

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The sample of this quantitative (Cervo, Bervian, & da Silva, 2007) study was composed by managers of large private Brazilian companies, chose for convenience. A pre-tested Survey was then conducted through an online questionnaire from April to June 2016, obtaining a total of 230 responses. Of this total 96 answers were excluded because they were incomplete, in addition to 6 responses from public companies. 50 other answers were discarded because they were not large companies, besides 9 respondents who do not hold a management position. The final database was composed of all valid responses received, totaling 69 responses.

In order to identify the main obstacles to the implementation of strategies in the managers' perception, we used a comparative factor frequency analysis (Anderson et al., 2013) in which 21 obstacles pointed out by the literature are found in the companies, as indicated by the respondents. Respondents assessed the 21 barriers to strategic implementation, following a likert scale. The main barriers emerged as a result of the analysis of the percentage of respondents who agreed to each statement (summed by "Entirely Agree" and "Strongly Agree"). Both barriers and results are synthesized in Figure 1.

In addition, to identify the facilitators adopted by managers in order to minimize or circumvent eventualities in the implementation of strategies two complementary analyzes were developed: the comparative frequency analysis in which 19 facilitators pointed out in the literature are adopted by the companies (yes or no question) and a comparative analysis with the perceived criticality of the factors and related barriers, according to the managers' perception. The assessed facilitators and the found results are synthesized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Influential factors, obstacles and facilitators in strategic implementation

Influential factor	Main obstacles	Facilitators
Strategic formulation	• Conflict with cultural values and power structure (20%) • Unidentified external environment problems (43%) • Reduced time available for implementation (29%)	• Formation of strategy management coalition (17%) • Early warning system on environment changes (13%) • Weekly time to revision of the strategy (12%)
Business units (BU) relationship	• Excessive bureaucracy for decision making (43%) • BU did not share information with each other (42%) • Conflict of interests and activities between BU (41%)	• Autonomy of BU to adjust strategy if necessary (28%) • Incentive programs and rewards between BU (28%)
Leadership quality	• High leadership has modified priorities (48%) • Managers unable to promote change (33%) • Insufficient staff abilities (23%)	• Designated area for strategy implementation (28%) • Training offered to the professionals involved (33%) • Sense of gravity and urgency of change stimulated (29%)
Communication	• Tasks and responsibilities without proper definition (51%) • Global goals not well communicated and understood (51%) • Collaborators without access to top management (30%)	• Meetings to communicate goals (62%) • Internal communication tools (67%) • Open climate for multi-directional communication (19%)
Commitment	• Lack of "owner" feeling (42%) • Managers did not believe in the strategy (23%) • Strategy misaligned with managers' individual interests (32%)	• Multi-hierarchical levels involved in formulation (33%) • Incentive programs and rewards linked to the results of implementing the strategy (28%)
Organizational structure	• Lack of financial, physical and / or technical resources (35%) • Changes in organizational structure not performed (33%) • Insufficient human resources availability (30%)	• Budget associated with the defined strategy (41%) • Organizational structure adapted to the strategy (35%) • Recruitment of temporary consultancy or workforce (41%)

Administrative systems	• Lack of models or information and control systems (29%) • Incentive policy not linked to strategy (35%) • Lack of performance indicators (39%)	• Information systems to monitor the strategy (29%) • Financial indicators and goals linked to strategy (54%) • Process indicators and goals linked to strategy (55%)

Source: elaborated by the author, based on Li et al. (2008), Hrebiniak (2006) and Fischmann (1987).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

According to Figure 01, there are eight most critical obstacles in the perception of the respondents, with more than 40% agreement in the sample:

1st. Critical implementation tasks and activities, as well as those responsible, have not been defined and disseminated in sufficient detail;

2nd. Global strategic decision goals have not been widely disseminated and understood at all levels of the company;

3rd. Top leadership has either modified strategic priorities or failed to provide the necessary support during implementation;

4th. The emergence of major problems in the external environment that were not identified in advance had an adverse impact on the results;

5th. Excessive bureaucracy for decision-making on possible adjustments to the strategy hindered implementation by making it slow;

6th. The business units did not share information with one another and lacked an integrated view of the strategy;

7th. Even the collaborators who criticized the successful implementation of the strategy did not feel themselves to be the "owners" of the process; and

8th. Conflicts of interest and activities between the different business units have generated internal competition and hindered mutual coordination.

It is worth mentioning that among the 8 obstacles with the highest degree of agreement, 6 of them are interpersonal (“soft factors”) and only 2 are structural (“hard factors”). Thus, although it is not possible to state that on average interpersonal factors are more critical than structural ones, it can be said that, among the most critical obstacles evaluated, most are from an interpersonal perspective.

Communication emerges as the most critical influencing factor to implementation, supported by the respondents' perception of the barriers associated with it. The two main problems pointed out are related to this factor. It is worth mentioning that the higher the hierarchical level of the respondent, the greater the criticality attributed to strategy communication.

Analyzing the most used facilitators, it is identified that the two with greater penetration are associated with communication. The most present facilitating measures in the companies, according to executives' perceptions, were:

1st. Internal communication tools (eg intranet, endomarketing, etc.);

2nd. Meetings of dissemination of objectives;

3rd. Control of process indicators and goals, directly associated to the company's strategy;

4th. Control of financial indicators and targets, directly associated with the company's strategy.

Although companies appear to be making extensive use of facilitative measures to this end, communication still represents a major barrier to the implementation of strategies. These results could indicate that: either the measures are being used inefficiently or they are ineffective to improve the communication of the strategy. For example, 62% of respondents say their companies hold goal-sharing meetings, although 51% of managers agree that overall strategic decision goals have not been well-publicized and understood at all levels of the company, indicating that holding meetings is not sufficient to ensure understanding of the objectives.

However, one of the facilitators mentioned in the literature on communication is still among the measures with less penetration in companies, according to the respondents. The lack of an open and encouraging climate for communication (perceived by only 19% of managers) may be indicative of why the internal communication tools and the meeting of disclosure of goals are not being effective since seem to be used unidirectionally.

Regarding the relationship between the different business units, this influential factor in the implementation of strategies concentrates the most relevant obstacles, in the perception of the respondents, along with the communication. However, it is surprising that its perception of criticality is not so consolidated and homogeneous. Diametrically opposed to the results referring to communication, the lower the hierarchical level, the greater the relevance of the relationship between the business units seems to be. A possible explanation for the result addresses the nature of the assignments of each hierarchical function. Information sharing and conflict of interest (constraints on the relationship between business units) tend to have a direct influence on tactical and / or operational decisions and actions, which are the responsibility of the middle management and the first levels, respectively. High leadership, in turn, shrouded in strategic decisions can distance itself from the operation and no longer identify these difficulties. This asymmetric perception can indicate a risk of myopia in the formulation of the strategy, traditionally focused on high leadership. It is possible that because the planners do not consider it a relevant obstacle, the strategic plan does not incorporate initiatives to facilitate information sharing and relationship between BU.

Finally, the low relevance attributed to administrative systems by the respondents may indicate that this influential factor, although important, is already more developed in companies. The analysis of the main facilitators corroborates this idea. Two of the measures with greater penetration in the companies concern administrative systems. The comprehensive presence of control indicators may signal the reason why systems are no longer such a critical influencing factor in implementation, indicating that the adopted facilitators seem to address the issue satisfactorily. It should be noted that technological development and the speed of changes in the competitive environment may require adjustments and improvement of the administrative system issues. Among the additional obstacles reported by managers, for example, a latent concern with the complexity of control systems has already emerged.

5. CONCLUSION

The results show that the main obstacles are related to the soft factors, indicating cognitive barriers, such as communication, strategy formulation and the relationship between business units. In parallel, the difficulties related to hard factors such as administrative systems seem to be overcome. A joint analysis of the data indicates that there is evidence that a broad understanding of the needs of all stakeholders involved in the organizational environment is necessary for the planned strategy to be implemented efficiently and effectively.

It’s comprehensible why the hard factors seem to be the first obstacles surpassed. The organizational structure must be aligned with the strategy, and must be adjusted so that the corporate environment is conducive to implementation. On the other hand, control systems and corporate policies favor implementation, as they allow for monitoring their development, highlighting divergences with agility (Li et al, 2008). Because they are institutional decisions, implementations of changes regarding organizational structure and control systems tend to be faster than those encouraged by individuals (Thornton et al, 2013). The absence of such capabilities can generate inefficiency in the use of the company's other resources and, therefore, compromise its competitive advantage.

Instead, the soft factors, which refer to the cognitive processes of strategic implementation, have to be dealt with positive and negative processes and sanctions. If aligned to the strategic purpose, those would be useful to reinforce the desired behavior, anchored in the normative rationality of individuals (Lindenberg and Foss, 2011).

In addition, it was found that are still some facilitators with low penetration in companies, such as the existence of an early warning system for changes in the competitive environment and an open and supportive climate for multidirectional communication, indicating a path to development and improvement of the strategic implementation process in brazilian organizations. The absence of such resources and capabilities associated with the influential factors in strategic implementation can generate inefficiency in the use of company resources and thus compromise their competitive advantage.

It is worth mentioning that the research has limitations as the development of the analyzes on a non-probabilistic sample, not allowing generalizations. Moreover, because they are based on the perception of the respondents, the results imply that they correctly interpreted the questions and that their opinions are capable of reflecting the reality of the companies in which they work. The results of this study can contribute to the development of new research on the subject, such as: new application of the questionnaire already tested with probabilistic sampling for generalization of the results; research with non-managers or the investigation of barriers segmented by economic sectors.

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