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Evaluating virtual organisational preparedness

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Creating a Framework to Develop and Test an Operational Preparedness Strategic Alignment Instrument

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**Abstract**

This paper reviews the literature in relation to virtual E-business models and strategies. From this the authors develop a framework to test a new strategic alignment instrument designed to measure the espoused preparedness to operate more virtually. The results can assist organisations in identifying strategies that fully leverage the value of their ICT assets.

**Keywords**

ICT, Strategic Alignment, Virtual Organisation, Virtual Preparedness

1 Introduction

In the spirit of continuous ICT Information Communication Technologies adaptation and change, this paper seeks to confirm that strategic alignment can be improved by treating internal functional integration and external strategic fit, separately. Organisational performance firstly depends on structures and capabilities that support the successful realisation of strategic decisions, secondly alignment is a two way process, where business and IS strategies can act as mutual drivers; thirdly strategic IS alignment is not an event but a process of continuous adaptation and change (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993).

2 Theories of Virtual Organisations

Organisations that exploit the potential to develop their own ‘automated network’ according to noted authors are variously described as virtually organising or virtual organisations. Virtualisation allows one organisation to appear as many or many to appear as one, becoming increasingly adaptive, focussing on dramatically improving the speed and economics of business change to meet new market conditions (Yockelson, 2004).

This paper introduces a new framework designed to provide a more comprehensive view of the strategic context of VO. It is modelled on the early work of Venkatraman and Henderson (1993) that developed the concept of strategic alignment as being based on two building blocks, strategic fit and operational integration. They considered that strategic positioning required the alignment of both internal and external domains.

The Venkatraman and Henderson model has featured prominently in subsequent literature as noted authors attempt to help organisations grapple, especially in the 21st century, with the issue of global competitiveness. As organisations enter an era of information superhighways, expanded electronic commerce, and ‘virtualness’ executives increasingly realise that in addition to business strategy influencing IT, IT now influences business strategy (Rockart et al., 1996).
The framework introduced in this paper as Figure 1 reinforces this view and seeks to identify a distinction between internal operational integration initiatives and external strategic positioning initiatives. This paper focuses on the Operational Integration side of the framework.

3 Research Approach

Three existing models have been used to develop a new instrument; the Virtual Operations Preparedness Instrument (VOPI). The (Venkatraman & Henderson, 1998) model focuses on Strategic Planning (1). The model developed by Guha and others explores the concept of e-business Operational Management (2) (Guha et al., 1997). The model created by Zigurs and others looks at Process Management in a networked world (3) (Zigurs et al, 2006). All three of these strategic change theories seem to focus on conceptualising organisational virtual preparedness strategically aligned their operational integration strategies.

Table 1 pinpoints the four key dimensions identified in the three supporting models while the fourth column; the VOPI extrapolates out the commonalities and creates a set of six new headings and dimensions.
| Strategic Planning  
(Venkatraman & Henderson, 1998) | Operational Management  
(Guha et al., 1997) | Strategic Process Management  
(Zigurs et al, 2006) | New Instrument VOPI |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Customer Interaction  
Multi stage distribution  
Efficiency  
Linear value chain  
Innovation  
Customisation  
Communities | Relationship Balance  
Dialectic of cooperation  
Dialectic of competition  
Cooperative behaviour  
Conflict level  
Inter organisational linkage  
Cross functional cooperation | Coordination  
Trust  
Competence Based  
Experts  
Liaisons | Communications  
Shared goals  
Trust / Cooperation / Coordination  
Open communications  
Asset leverage  
Strategic direction |
| Asset Configuration  
Sourcing  
Integration  
Dynamic Portfolios  
Relationships  
Assembly  
Co-ordination | IT Leverage  
Information  
Imperatives  
Bidirectional relationships  
Socio/technical relationships  
Coordinated interaction | Knowledge  
Attributions  
Non Linear  
Complex  
Intelligence Repositories | Efficiency  
Value creation  
Organisational efficiency  
Effectiveness  
Knowledge sharing  
Process driven |
| Knowledge Leverage  
Source diversity  
Value Creation  
Organisational efficiency | Cultural Readiness  
Change agents  
Leadership  
Shared organisational goals  
Trust / Cooperation / Coordination  
Exchange relationships  
Risk Aversion  
Open Communications  
Shared output process controls | Innovation  
Dynamics  
Web Networked  
Diverse Culture  
Adaptive Interfaces | Viability  
Long / short term ROI |
| Work Unit Expertise  
Distributed tasks  
Decomposition  
Effectiveness  
Knowledge capture  
Knowledge sharing  
Process driven | Learning Capabilities  
Positive outcomes  
Adaptation to environmental change  
Cross functional entities  
Core competencies  
Technical gatekeepers  
Deutero learning  
Causation  
Adaptability | Process Management  
Emergent Tasks  
Non Linear  
Ubiquitous  
Self Organising Systems  
System Re-organisation | Supply & Value  
Linear value chain  
Innovation  
Customisation  
Integration  
Coordination |
|                           |                        |                          | Linkages  
Cooperative interpersonal behaviour |

Table 1
4  Methodology – Case Study

The methodology chosen was to undertake a case study in a GDE (Geographically Dispersed Entity) that plays a critical role in providing essential services to a division of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The entities workforce of 150 is highly trained and disciplined with very specific role designations. Fifteen (15) group managers were chosen as subjects for the case study as these senior managers represented all the key drivers of an organisation charged with responsibility for critical and essential services. The case study process consisted of three phases; Phase 1, the Pre-Interview Audits, Phase 2, the one on one Interviews and Phase 3, the Post Interview surveys.

PHASE 1

The group managers were required to circle the response which most closely reflected how important they felt each of the questions was to their group. Table 2 provides an example of one of the 6 dimensions surveyed in the pre-interview audit (Phase 1) of the VOPI. Each complete audit comprised six dimensions, five questions per dimension making a total of thirty questions per audit. It is important to state that the questions were devised from the enablers of each dimension in the VOPI (See Table 1) and reflect only the first phase of the triangulation of methods. The first box in each table identifies the Phase, the acronym of the instrument and it full name. The second area denotes the question that was posed. In the case of Phase 1 of the pre-interview audit the question relates to importance. Below this the letters used for the survey are explained e.g. SA Strongly Agree, Agree etc. Next is the wording for the dimension. In the case of Table 2 the example given is Efficiency. There are 30 questions for each audit; the questions under Efficiency are numbers six to ten.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE 1: VOPI - VIRTUAL OPERATIONS PREPAREDNESS INSTRUMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE-INTERVIEW AUDIT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| If the group under my control were to work effectively with other internal groups using Information Communication Technologies it would be important that: |

**KEY**  (Circle the response below which is closest to your opinion)

SA = Strongly Agree  A = Agree  D = Disagree  SD = Strongly Disagree  DK = Don't Know

**Efficiency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I understand my groups value creation strategies</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>DK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Efficiency strategies are effective</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My group operates effectively and efficiently</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Knowledge is shared openly and effectively</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Processes are in place that aid efficiency</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

A simple method was devised to identify the priority from most important to least important and the subsequent gap. A scale of five being strongly agree down to 1 was used. There were 15 respondents, consequently the highest score achievable was 75 (15 x 5) and the lowest 15 (15 x 1); the higher the score the more the importance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>X 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 provides the results obtained from the 15 respondents to the 30 questions posed for the VOPI and reflect Phase 1 data analysis.

The chart clearly illustrates that the vast majority of the respondents, out of the 15 surveyed Strongly Agreed or Agreed that the dimensions and the questions posed were important. This is a significant initial outcome. The electronic version of these charts provides a colour coding for each of the thirty questions asked. One example of an outcome of the VOPI was that for Question 6 under the Dimension, Efficiency, 1 Strongly Agreed, 12 Agreed and 2 Disagreed that this question was important.

These results are significant because they validate the instruments in terms of whether or not the organisation felt that overall, the dimensions and the questions posed were important. As you can see the results are heavily weighted to the strongly agree and agree, indicating that the majority felt that the questions being considered were important to their organisation. Once this was established Phase 2 of the triangulation commenced.

**PHASE 2**

The second phase of the process involved one-on-one interviews with each of the respondents. Due to security considerations the interviews themselves all had to be paper based as the organisation was not in a position to approve the use of voice recorders. Consequently, all the transcripts were written up by hand during the interviews and later converted to spreadsheets. An excerpt of the questionnaire is set out in Table 3.

The questionnaire was designed to allow respondents to provide feedback about the pre-interview audit process. The overarching question remains the same as for the pre-interview audit in asking would it be important. But asks the subject to comment on whether he or she felt that the statement made sense; if not why not, then follows the dimension heading. The subject was then asked to comment on the five questions under the dimension regarding whether it made sense or not, what was missing or the subject would have liked to have seen added. Finally the subject was asked if he or she had any other comments to make about the dimension.
Questionnaire - VOPI

If the group under my control were to work effectively with other internal groups using Information Communication Technologies it would be important that:

Did the statement make sense? If not / why not?

Efficiency

Perception across those surveyed is that “efficiency” is important

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Efficiency strategies are effective</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My group operates efficiently and effectively</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Knowledge is shared openly and effectively</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Processes are in place that aid efficiency</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What was good / made sense about the checklist for this heading?

What didn’t make sense?

What would you have liked to have seen covered / or added, felt was missing?

Any other comments you would like to make about efficiency?

Table 3

The next step was to collate all the input from the interviews and develop a consensus across the respondents of their reactions to the dimensions and the questions posed. During the interviews a problem was identified in the second dimension; Efficiency. Even though overwhelmingly the 15 group managers felt the questions were important, the consensus was that in Question 6, the terminology ‘value creation strategies’ did not mean much to the them, consequently the question was changed based on this input to ‘efficiency is recognised and rewarded’. The revisions appear in Table 4, in bold type.

PHASE 3

Phase 3 consisted of the distribution of the revised documents to the 15 group managers, as depicted in Table 4. Again the respondents were required to circle their responses to the 6 dimensions and thirty questions. The critical difference in phase 3 was that the overarching question that applied to all dimensions, changed to whether the respondents felt that they were actually doing the things they previously agreed were important.
How effectively does your group work with other internal groups using Information Communication Technologies under the following headings?

**KEY**  (Circle the response below which is closest to your opinion)

SA = Strongly Agree  A = Agree  D = Disagree  SD = Strongly Disagree  DK = Don't Know

**Efficiency – Competence, Effectiveness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Efficiency is recognized and rewarded</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>DK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency strategies are effective</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>DK</td>
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<td>My group operates efficiently and effectively</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>SA</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>DK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes are in place that aid efficiency</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>DK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

The true power of the instrument is reflected in the Phase 3 results shown here in Figure 3, which provided a very different picture of the organisation. In the vast majority of cases across the 30 questions, group managers were less confident that the organisation was actually doing the things it thought were important.

![Figure 3](image)

These results are significant because they validate the instrument in terms of whether or not the organisation felt that it was actually doing the things it felt were important. As you can see the results moved from a heavy concentration in the Strongly Agree and Agree columns to Agree, Disagree and in some cases even Strongly Disagree. It is this mixed response which was of most interest to the researcher and raised an interesting question; could the gap between Importance and Doing be used to set priorities for the organisation to focus on in terms operational integration? Table 5 converts the charts provided as Figures 2 and 3 into the top five priorities for the case study organisation.
The Number one priority was question 27 under the dimension of Adaptability. Another significant outcome was that of the top 5 priorities identified, three fell into the Communication dimension, reflecting the concerns the group managers felt about how their organisation communicated. The dimension considered as having the lowest priority was Viability with five of the questions falling in the last 10 of 30. At the other end of the scale scores that were also significant were the negatives, especially question 16 under the dimension Supply and Value. This organisation regarded this as something they were doing, but did not regard it as important. Engaging in activities that are unproductive could have a serious impact on overall productivity.

**Findings**

These outcomes prompted the development of Phase 4; reporting the results to the case study organisation. The top 3 results are provided in Table 6. The first column indicates the priority the case study organisation (as distinct from any other organisation) should give to the issue identified. Column 2 identifies the dimension it falls under. Column 3 denotes the number of the question. Column 4 calculates the gap between importance and doing, and column 5 provides potential solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P</th>
<th>Heading</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Gap</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Intelligent Software Agents, Enhanced Systems Capability, Flexibility, Agility, Procedure models, Open Source Systems, Enterprise System LX-Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Operational Integration Internet/ Intranet strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Issues may well be addressed by additional training in how to maximise the effectiveness of the mediums.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions**

The most significant conclusions that can be drawn from the first three phases of the case study are that the instrument did achieve a number of substantial objectives. Firstly the pre-interview audits did confirm that this part of the process was relevant to the case study organisation. Secondly, the interviews themselves were potent in that they confirmed that group managers had very real concerns about their areas of responsibility. Thirdly, the post interview surveys reflected the input gained and added real ‘value’ to ensuring that the final survey was organisation centric. The significance of the findings means the authors can test this applicability more broadly. The next stage is to identify at least six other organisations and undertake secondary case studies designed to test the potential modularity of the instrument.
References


