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OPENING THE BLACK BOX: HOW STRATEGY PRACTITIONERS DEVELOP THEIR PRACTICES

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

at

**Massey University, Palmerston North
New Zealand**

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2016

ABSTRACT

While strategic management has been the focus of much research since the 1960s, there have been comparatively few studies on strategy practitioners, the human actors responsible for the process. These actors are often reduced to a set of observable demographic variables such as education level, work tenure, or job description. Consequently there is limited knowledge regarding strategy practitioners and, in particular, little is known about how they develop their practices, the knowledge and skills they use when engaged in strategic management.

To address this gap in knowledge, this study, conducted within the strategy-as-practice (SAP) perspective, interviewed strategy practitioners identified by their peers as effective strategy practitioners. The responsive interviewing technique employed opened the so called 'black box', the subjective views of individuals, and allowed participants to reflect and, importantly, provide their meaning of what significantly influenced their strategic management practice development. Eighteen interviews were conducted and the analysis of the rich, deep data collected allowed an understanding of practice development from a practitioner's perspective to emerge.

The study revealed that this group of strategy practitioners see strategic management in holistic terms with a focus on organisational outcomes and not in a traditional, normative view which privileges the creation of a strategy. This contribution was not, however, a primary research outcome but participants view of strategic management impacted significantly on how they view themselves as strategy practitioners, the purpose of strategic management and, vitally, the practices they believe are needed to be effective. Within this context, the study shows that participants develop their practices idiosyncratically and learning from practice, notable literature and being involved with a broad range of people, were valued significantly in their practice development. It was through this meaning that participants were able to relate important aspects of their own development.

This study contributes an empirical study to the SAP perspective that goes well beyond simple demographics in understanding how strategy practitioners develop their practices. In regards to research, the selection of strategy practitioners without considering their historical development has been identified as an area that may be

problematic, especially for studies seeking to understand how strategy is practised. Business school education was not identified as a direct, meaningful contributor to participants' development. This observation raises the interesting, and unresolved, question of the actual relationship between business schools and practice. The participants' idiosyncratic career paths contributes to the viewpoints of authors who question whether the strategic management field should, or could, attain the status of a profession such as law or medicine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The reflections of doctoral students on their journey is likely to be eclectic. There will be those students, who I have come to view as fortunate, who had a straight forward path and can honestly say that they enjoyed the experience. On the other hand there will be students who had to battle hard and, seemingly against the odds, manage to emerge victorious without permanent damage. I fall into the latter camp. It would be remiss of me not to note that there is a third group of students, larger than generally considered, who do not complete the doctoral journey. Some of my student colleagues suffered this fate, unnecessarily, and a review of the systems and processes that govern doctoral research seems long overdue.

There were people within the university I must acknowledge for without their effort, care and support I would not have completed my studies successfully. James Lockhart, through his diligence, knowledge and humour made the latter part of my studies almost fun. I learnt as much, if not more, in my final year with James than I did in the previous three, a tribute to James' ability to mentor. Andrew Dickson, a colleague who was always available to help throughout the PhD whether it be as a pilot interview subject or just to let me talk through what was happening. Andrew is one of the few people I encountered that keep the university collegial spirit alive. The late Ralph Stablein, who was always happy to sit down over a coffee and provide thoughtful and helpful advice which often provided moments of enlightenment. Finally to the admin team within the Palmerston North School of Management, in particular Pauline and Brigit, who always answered every request and query I had with a smile.

The support of my fellow doctoral students in the PhD lab was enormous and made the years a pleasure. I remember fondly the shared lunches, laughter, in-depth discussions about the English language, personal highs and lows and trips to the Bean Café with my buddies, especially Lei, Lynn and Uri. It is also important to acknowledge that my research would not have been possible without the generous time and insight provided by the people I interviewed. The time I spent with them listening to their stories and reflections were a highlight of my studies.

Finally, there were all the family and friends who took a keen interest in my PhD and lived through the highs and lows. In particular Dani whose encouragement and support

never wavered during the long, and circuitous, trek to the top of the mountain. My mum who was always ready to look after the children making study possible. Mike, always ready to listen and allowed me to have a work-study-life balance which was invaluable. And my children who seemed to know when I needed time, space and quiet. They are, at times, the best children in the world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
LIST OF TABLES	VIII
LIST OF FIGURES	IX
CHAPTER 1 -INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 LOCATING THE STRATEGIST	11
1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT	13
1.3 AIM AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY.....	14
1.4 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	16
CHAPTER 2 -THE LITERATURE	18
2.1 WHAT IS STRATEGY	18
2.2 STRATEGY PRACTITIONERS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT	43
2.3 SUMMARY	77
CHAPTER 3 -RESEARCH DESIGN	79
3.1 DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....	79
3.2 METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION	82
3.3 THE METHOD.....	93
3.4 SUMMARY	109
CHAPTER 4 -METHOD APPLICATION	111
4.1 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS.....	112
4.2 THE INTERVIEW PROCESS	119
4.3 TRANSCRIPTION.....	131
4.4 DATA ANALYSIS	134
4.5 DATA VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY	143
4.6 SUMMARY	145
CHAPTER 5 -FINDINGS	147
5.1 PARTICIPANTS.....	147
5.2 STRATEGY AS A HOLISTIC ENDEAVOUR	150
5.3 SIMILAR DISSIMILAR PATHS.....	154
5.4 SUMMARY	173
CHAPTER 6 -DISCUSSION	176
6.1 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT – THE INFORMED VIEW.....	177
6.2 STRATEGY PRACTITIONER DEVELOPMENT	185
6.3 THE RELATIONSHIP OF BUSINESS SCHOOLS TO PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT	196
6.4 SUMMARY	202
CHAPTER 7 -CONCLUSION	204
7.1 A SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS	204

7.2 A REVIEW OF METHOD.....	207
7.3 ADDITIONAL RESEARCH	209
REFERENCE LIST	212
APPENDIX 1 – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET	232
APPENDIX 2 – SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE	234
APPENDIX 3 – NODE CONTENT 1	236
APPENDIX 4 – NODE CONTENT 2	253
APPENDIX 5 – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT	264

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 – The reach of scholarly journals and popular management magazines.	69
Table 2.2 – Top ten management tools over time.....	72
Table 3.1 – A 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis.	107
Table 4.1 – Candidate/Participant response and participation statistics.....	117
Table 4.2 – Interview checklist.	123
Table 4.3 – Overview of raw data.	128
Table 4.4 – Transcription example.	133
Table 5.1 – Background information of research participants.	149
Table 5.2 – Sources of foundational education.	159
Table 5.3 – Participant involvement with business school.	164
Table 6.1 – Comparison of studies employing differing selection approaches.	193

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 – Types of strategy.	12
Figure 2.1 – Strategic management and strategy.....	20
Figure 2.2 – Strategy content research paradigm.	27
Figure 2.3 – A genealogy of the practice tradition in social theory.	34
Figure 2.4 – Four perspectives of strategy.	34
Figure 2.5 – New directions from strategy as practice.	35
Figure 2.6 – Integrating practitioners, practices and praxis.....	40
Figure 2.7 – Knowledge structure research: An organising framework.	47
Figure 2.8 – Typology of SAP research.	56
Figure 2.9 – Business school influence, direct and indirect.....	66
Figure 2.10 – Business school influence?	77
Figure 3.1 – The research question figuratively.	80
Figure 3.2 – Inductive research model.....	95
Figure 4.1 – Perceived influences on the development of strategy practitioners.....	120
Figure 4.2 – Data schematic from Nvivo.	129
Figure 4.3 – Preliminary data analysis process.....	136
Figure 4.4 – Nvivo graphical user interface.	138
Figure 4.5 – Initial populated coding structure.....	139
Figure 4.6 – Practitioner development focused coding structure.....	140
Figure 4.7 – Coding structure based on participants meaning (stated or implied). ...	142
Figure 4.8 – Nvivo cluster analysis of the final coding structure.	143
Figure 5.1 – Participant linkages.	148
Figure 5.2 – Refined model of a strategist’s knowledge structure.	152
Figure 5.3 – Aspects of participants’ collective career development.	156
Figure 5.4 – The idiosyncratic careers of participant’s.	157
Figure 5.5 – Three classifications of management information.	171
Figure 5.6 – The idiosyncratic careers of participant’s.	174
Figure 6.1 – Refined model of a strategist’s knowledge structure	178
Figure 6.2 – Integrating practitioners, practices and praxis.....	183
Figure 6.3 – Integrating practitioners, practices and praxis.....	186
Figure 6.4 – Adding a historical perspective of practitioner development.	187
Figure 6.5 – Three classifications of management information	190
Figure 6.6 – Business school impact on strategy practitioner development.....	197

