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Contemporary strategic management practices of leading organisations

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Abstract

Underpinning the elements of strategy design and execution are assumptions, norms and beliefs which can be broadly characterised as strategic management practices. These strategic management practices are in evidence in all schools of strategy academic theory. Whilst there has been a great deal of work conducted into the processes of strategy design and execution, there is little study of strategic management practices. This research sought to uncover the contemporary strategic management practices in evidence at a select number of leading organisations through qualitative analysis of secondary data in the form of case studies and other publically available material. A nascent content based definition for the concept of strategic management practices was developed from the literature review and tested against the evidence uncovered. Additional themes uncovered from the data were incorporated into the proposed definition and a synthesised version developed based on the strength of the evidence uncovered.

Keywords

Strategy, strategic management practices, organisation behaviour

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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This is for Will and Jack, from Grace

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1. Introduction to research problem

Bain & Company reports that in the global management tools and trends survey conducted in 2009, benchmarking was found to be the most popular tool for the first time in the survey's history of 11 years (Rigby & Bilodeau, 2009). The increased usage of a cost focussed tool is indicative of the turbulent economic environment. A recent survey of US companies on how strategic planning served organisations during the global financial crisis, demonstrated that the drivers of successful strategic planning had more of an influence on how the organisation fared than which strategic planning technique was used (Wilson & Eilersten, 2010). It was the practices which supported the strategic activities that were more influential on the outcome.

Since the classical writings on strategy the pace of business has increased markedly, and strategy has become foreshortened into tactics (Marren, 2010). The comparatively stable world of mass market growth such as that experienced in the 1950s and 1960s, and even into the 1970s, has gone. Due to the need to be responsive, control has been placed in the hands of the market and responses or actions are therefore increasingly limited. As a result, decisions are being limited and ground breaking strategy is quickly emulated by competitors. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to separate out that which is strategic, as potentially all activities within an organisation can be viewed through this lens. The concept of strategic management practices as those assumptions which underpin the development and implementation of strategy is formed within this view.

The field of strategy occupies traditional academic disciplines and functional areas, there is a lack of synthesis in the research which does not aid use by practitioners with the academic debates occurring on the nature of particular ideas with “problems ... easy to state yet difficult to deal with” (Hafsi & Thomas, 2005, p. 512). That an academic field of study on strategy exists is undoubted, however, it is underdeveloped (Hafsi & Thomas, 2005) with a plethora of sub fields containing contradictions and inconsistencies created by attempts to include human elements in strategy theory and practice. There has been a focus on strategy design and execution in the literature, but underpinning these concepts are the practices driving the way strategy is ‘done’ in an organisation.

Strategy tools are more important than ever because of the highly competitive markets in which contemporary organisations operate (Allio, 2006). Businesses need new tools to meet this challenge, the top ten identified have been useful but it could be that strategic thinking ability may be the new basis of competitive advantage due to the fast changing competitive environment.

Strategy practitioners are looking to make strategy tools more adaptive (Allio & Randall, 2010). The Bain & Company survey conducted before the financial crisis showed an outward looking market focussed trend for powerful tools that go beyond cost cutting and can be used in many applications (Rigby & Bilodeau, 2007). The survey identified that strategic planning tools are the most prevalent in use. But tools

have assumptions based on frameworks and views of the world and it is important that an organisation selects the right tools for the purpose. The unanswered question is whether the organisation examines the assumptions underlying the tools selected, and verifies if these are aligned to the beliefs held by the organisation. Lack of alignment in these elements may lead to unsatisfactory results in application.

In an environment where the traditional ways of achieving growth and competing is no longer relevant and sustainable, it is better for an organisation to disrupt and change from within (Immelt, Govindarajan, & Trimble, 2009). This provides the opportunity for the organisation to influence how the disruption happens and thereby the outcome. If organisations do not follow this path then they face the possibility of being overtaken by time and events which render them obsolete.

Modern organisations therefore face the challenge of competing in an ever challenging environment without the widespread adoption of practices which academia suggests would serve them well. Some organisations have been successful and the question is therefore raised as to what practices these organisations have employed.

In an ideal environment there would be a single globally recognised measure for determining the quality of organisations and defining some as leading. There are perhaps as many definitions and views of the criteria to use for determining success of an organisation as there are academics and practitioners in the field. Recent

arguments hold that organisations which pursue continuous innovation and delighting customers as their goal are more successful and have profitability as a result (Denning, 2011). However, for those involved in business the belief that the purpose of any organisation is to make money is so widely held that it can be seen as a fundamental principle of business. The alternative view proposed may be true but it is exceedingly difficult if not impossible to measure.

Whilst measures such as triple bottom line reporting are finding favour, a global standard does not yet exist and whether this is possible across diverse industries is also questionable. Increasingly demanding markets and the influence of civil society have shaped the definition of 'leading' businesses (Elkington, Emerson, & Beloe, 2006). The triple bottom line concept appears to be an attractive definition, however, in a debate over the use and promise of triple bottom line reporting Norman & MacDonald (2004) and Pava (2007) disagree on most points, but do agree that there has been little academic research on the concept. Wiedmann, Lenzen, & Barrett (2009) have proposed a model for sustainability reporting and argue that this can be translated across industries and regions.

What must be highlighted from these debates is that there exists no single number or method of calculating a broadly considered measure of organisational success. This leaves the researcher with little choice other than to utilise a traditional financial measure of success for an organisation. Earnings are a suitable basis as the definition

for success as this is what external parties to the organisation, such as current and potential investors, look to when evaluating the organisation's success (Higgins, 2009).

Earnings per share (EPS) and dividends represent the cash paid out to shareholders, but if the organisation is engaging in a low dividend pay-out policy in order to pay down debt or re-invest in the growth of the business, then EPS would not be an accurate reflection of its level of success. Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) is the net sum game of how effectively the business performed financially, and represents the income before it is divided up amongst all the parties who have a claim to the wealth generated by the organisation. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the definition of leading to be applied is that of the EBITDA of the organisations being studied.

A disconnect has been found between what organisations believe they are or should be doing in terms of strategic management, and the actual practices uncovered once the researchers delved deeper (Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007). This indicates that there are unarticulated elements of strategic management influencing and directing the organisation. Strategy development and execution can therefore be viewed as the elements binding and directing an organisation's activities into a particular direction which is perceived as one which would provide favourable financial returns. As such the successful development and implementation of strategy is inextricably intertwined with success.

Mintzberg, the leading management academic, argues that managerial practices do not fundamentally change (Allio, 2011) but trends develop, and cites the current focus on leadership as evidence. Mintzberg advocates the learning approach to strategy development and formalising the implementation with mechanisms such as financial plans and monitored programs.

The recent financial bubble created a recession or turbulent environment, but companies from differing industries and with differing strategies have thrived. There is value in investigating below the manifested behaviour and results to uncover if there are commonalities in strategic management practices.

There is no academic work to be found explicitly focussing on strategic management practices which underlie strategy design and execution in successful companies. There is a need for an in-depth study of the strategic management practices of select leading organisations. The organisations studied are from different industries and geographies but have been selected based on characteristics which denote them as leading within their industries. The diversity of organisations is useful to investigate if there are common patterns in strategic management practices as part of general organisation theory. An attempt will be made to link common patterns of existing theory in strategic management and organisational behaviour.

2. Literature review

2.1. Leading organisations and strategy

Bowman & Helfat (2001) argue that corporate strategy, as the manner in which organisations co-ordinate various business units together, influences and impacts on the success of an organisation. There is strong evidence and support for the role of strategic management but practitioners question if this is being effective (Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007). It would appear that businesses have difficulty in linking strategic management to financial success. A relationship has been demonstrated between company growth rate as a proxy for strategic success and the usage of a strategy formation process which features a mix of emergent and planning characteristics (Titus, Covin, & Slevin, 2011).

A link has been demonstrated between strategic plan quality and the implementation capability of an organisation, and the subsequent performance of the organisation (Hahn & Powers, 2010). The study focussed on the effects of a quality implementation plan on strategy execution. It was concluded that truly successful organisations have a high quality plan combined with excellent implementation.

The link between effective strategy development and implementation, and organisation success is evident. Assumptions about strategy underpin these activities and as such, strategic management practices are linked to organisational success.

2.2.From strategy to strategic management practices

In the research work conducted into strategy the focus has largely been on strategy design and execution (Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan, & Yiu, 1999; Grant, 2003; Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007; Parayitam & Guru-Gharana, 2010). Underpinning the concepts of design and execution are the practices driving the way strategy is 'done' in an organisation.

The Merriam-Webster definition of the noun 'practice' details how this refers to a repeated or customary action and the usual manner in which things are done (Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 2011). Strategic management practices therefore refer to the habits, customs, routines and methods at an organisation as relates to strategic management. In viewing strategic management as the activities undertaken to develop and execute strategy, strategic management practices are by extension the underlying assumptions and habits about strategy development and execution which directly influence the manner in which the organisation engages in strategy development and execution. Should these assumptions, rituals and habits become sufficiently entrenched within the organisation then they would develop into often strongly held and difficult to change beliefs. Strategic management practices therefore refer to the assumptions, beliefs, norms, frameworks and habits about strategy development and execution that exist within an organisation underpinning and influencing the strategy formation and implementation – whether planned or emergent.

Much of the fundamental literature on business or corporate strategy – such as Andrews, Ansoff and Chandler – evolved during the 1950s to 1970s, and can be characterised as being of the resource based view of achieving competitive advantage where success is a function of aligning the internal strengths and weaknesses of the organisation with external opportunities and threats (Hoskisson, *et al.* 1999). The academic view then shifted to industrial organisation economics considering the structural aspects of an industry as key in achieving competitive advantage. After the initial early insights on strategy there were some notable developments in the 1970s and 1980s (Allio, 2006) but not much new has been developed since. It is argued that there are essentially ten big ideas in strategic thinking, and the initial models have been refined or repackaged. The lack of new ideas in the field may be due to the maturing of strategy as a field of academic study.

Ansoff (1977) detailed a model of strategic behaviour integrating multiple academic fields and detailing specific elements that interact to result in the strategy of an organisation. These elements encompassed interaction between the environment, organisation structure and strategy. But the assumptions underpinning these elements are not explored. Following the initial work on strategy and the development of a definition, the next great idea came about with the introduction of economic theory into the world of strategy (Porter, 2008). In an update to the original 1979 article, Porter outlined the central idea that the nature of competition within an industry arises from characteristics and interests of players within the industry. In so doing it affects competition and how players compete which is the basis of strategy.

Contained within the five forces competitive model developed by Porter is the belief that organisations succeed as a result of the position taken relative to the environment presented. It is evidence of a role for the environment view within the strategic management practices of a firm.

In subsequent writing Porter endeavoured to bring together the resource based and industrial organisation views through developing a dynamic theory of strategy (Porter, 1991). Success is seen as the result of being able to use resources [resource based view] to exploit the situation [industrial organisation view] to achieve competitive advantage: “Firms inherit positions that constrain and shape their choices ... have considerable latitude in reconfiguring the value chain with which they compete ... strategy is not a race to occupy one desirable position” (p. 104). This theory also sought to address the point in time issue where theories thus far lacked insight into the process over time by which competitive positions were created. Contained within this work are assumptions about businesses and the interaction with the environment. It includes the strategic management practices of timescale, the environment and the activities involved in strategy.

Drucker (1994) posits a theory of business which argues that the manner in which an organisation behaves is made up of underlying beliefs or assumptions that an organisation consciously and unconsciously holds about:

- the environment (society/ market) the organisation operates in and serves;

- the mission of the company; and
- the competencies needed to achieve the mission.

These policies, habits and practices that exist within an organisation are the general practices underpinning the activities of the organisation. How these assumptions may have developed is a result of past success where the theory of business was appropriate to the situation. It represents a belief set that an organisation – for the most part unconsciously – holds as valid. Whilst these specific assumptions are not explicitly linked to questions of strategy, the linkage can be inferred due to the strategic nature of the assumptions. The argument is developed that constant testing of the fit between assumptions and current circumstances is needed for continued success.

In advocating for a revolutionary change in the process of strategy design Hamel (1996) identified ten principles for organisations to pursue to achieve strategic thinking capabilities. These challenge many of the classical norms and assumptions around strategic planning. It is highlighted that in developing strategy organisations make assumptions around:

- the timescale applied to strategy;
- the purpose of strategic planning and desired output;
- the range of options available to an organisation;
- the boundaries (market or service) that an organisation operates in;
- the people/ roles involved in strategy development; and

- the industry rules or conventions that apply.

The nature of these assumptions is not developed further, and the focus is on advocating for a revolution in these assumptions in order for organisations to develop more successful strategies.

In studying the state of strategic management Drejer (2004) started a content definition of strategic management practice by writing about the activities that comprise strategic management. These include responding to competitive pressures, improving performance, developing competencies within the organisation, creating agility and the ability to innovate (Drejer, 2004). From this beginning it is possible to develop a more complete view of what comprises strategic management practices.

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel (2009) allude to strategic management practices when detailing the premises inherent in the ten schools of strategy identified. These premises are fundamental assumptions underlying each school and therefore are forms of strategic management practices. The ten different schools can be broadly classified into belonging in the planned or emergent paradigms of strategy development and execution. Drawing from the analysis conducted, the differences in strategic management practices between the emergent and planned views are outlined below. The strategic management practices discussed encompass the who, what, when, why and how assumptions about strategy development and implementation.

Table 1: Strategic management practices in design and emergent schools (Adapted from Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009)

Strategic management practice	Planned view	Emergent view
Role-players and nature of involvement	<p>The CEO and senior executive team are responsible for developing, selection and overseeing implementation of the strategy.</p> <p>The organisation believes it is the master of its own destiny through creativity in strategy creation, intelligence in strategy selection and excellence in strategy implementation.</p>	<p>Although in some schools the owner or business leader may take the lead, strategy is developed and implemented at multiple levels of the organisation and by many different parties.</p> <p>The external environment the organisation operates within is a role player in strategy, strategy is largely responsive.</p>
Process of development	<p>Development and execution is conscious, purposeful and known to the participants.</p> <p>It involves environment scanning (internal and external), prioritisation, selection and formal, pre-determined monitoring.</p>	<p>Development is mostly unconscious and informal based on interactions between the persons involved and/or the situation in which the organisation finds itself.</p>

Time dimension underpinning strategy	Design, implementation and review of strategy occurs periodically, on a pre-determined timetable or as and when leaders determine it is needed.	Some elements may occur at specific points in time but for the most part strategy design and implementation is constant and on-going within the activities of the organisation.
Purpose of strategy	Development of a strategic plan for execution, implementation of said plan.	Successful operation of the organisation.
Nature of relationship between design and execution	Strategy is conceived and articulated in a fully formed state as a preceding step to implementation – there is a linear relationship between design and implementation.	Strategy design and execution occur in parallel as intertwined concepts exerting influence on each other.

Searching for strategic management practices and processes returned a plethora of material. However, the commonality has been the varying application of the term. Strategy and strategic management practices as the activities undertaken within strategy have been co-mingled as one and the same in referring to strategy design and implementation (Chinowsky & Byrd, 2001; Kazaz & Ulubeyli, 2009). This is similar to findings around the intermingling of the terms strategy and strategic management (Bowman & Helfat, 2001). Harris & Ogbonna (2006) investigated the factors which

translate strategic thinking into planning with oblique reference to underlying assumptions about planning but without explicit examination.

The process by which strategy is designed, analysis conducted or strategy decided upon appears repeatedly in literature. Interactions of many elements were uncovered when studying how complex global organisations conduct formal planning (Grant, 2003). Grant (2003) examined the characteristics of strategy planning systems and the impact of a volatile business environment on these strategy systems. The features outlined can be characterised as strategic management practices. Strategy involves a planning cycle, stated goals and assignment of roles and responsibilities. It was highlighted how in turbulent environments, strategic planning activities are required to be flexible and responsive.

The question of ownership of strategy in terms of what role-players and their level of involvement are responsible for design and driving implementation is also a frequently mentioned assumption (Harrington, 2005; Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, & Schwarz, 2006; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Schwarz, 2009). However, these mentions have been situated within studies into other aspects of strategy, have not developed with time and have not included in-depth discussion of the beliefs and assumptions about strategy.

In studying the historical development of formalised strategic planning systems at General Electric, Ocasio & Joseph (2008) outlined strategic management as a system comprising positions, vocabularies, decision making channels, agendas and routines. These elements are beliefs about strategy and therefore represent strategic management practices. Within this systems view, factors supporting and shaping formalised strategy planning mechanisms were assessed.

It is difficult for an organisation to engage successfully in traditional strategy planning in turbulent environments as the future is unclear (Grant, 2003). Hence the development in theory of new tools and frameworks e.g. scenario planning, strategic intent/ vision and complex systems thinking have evolved as strategy planning systems in response to changing demands of the environment. There is a recent move to separate strategic thinking from strategic planning. The two concepts are compared below.

Table 2: Strategic planning and strategic thinking

Strategic planning	Strategic thinking
Stand-alone specific activity at a point in time and divisible from other activities within the organisation.	On-going process forming part of normal operations.

Conducted by a specific grouping within the organisation.	More widespread and taking place at multiple if not all managerial levels.
A singular activity with specific or unique outcomes and deliverables.	Multiple activities with outputs as part of on-going business operations.
Identifiable specific activities and procedures.	A mind set or approach to decisions that have strategic impact.

Strategic thinking, innovation management and business creation focus are more responsive in turbulent environments (Drejer, 2004) and represent a combination of the resource based view of an organisation and environmental responsiveness. It reflects the ability of managers to think strategically and be able to exploit the situations in which the organisation finds itself. It has been highlighted that management at mid-levels in an organisation affect strategy through operational decisions (Bower & Gilbert, 2007), supporting the argument for strategic thinking throughout the organisation.

A disconnect exists between the theory of strategy and strategic management, and the experiences in practice of the same (Drejer, 2004; Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007). To contribute and be of value this chasm must be bridged with a focus on strategic thinking (Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007). Drejer (2004) argues that work in strategy theory has focussed on tactical issues and advocates a return to studying the very core of strategy: strategic thinking, innovation management and business creation.

In reviewing the key writings it is clear that the academic work around strategy and strategic thinking contain assumptions about these concepts which form the basis of a developing content definition of strategic management practices.

2.3. Organisations as complex adaptive systems

Organisations can be effectively viewed as open systems (Cummings & Worley, 2009) due to the interactive nature with the external environment, taking in resources, transforming these through processes, returning output to the environment and obtaining feedback.

The systems thinking approach has previously been applied in the field of studying strategy and the influence of systems theory appeared at an early stage in the theory development (Hoskisson *et al.*, 1999). Systems theory as applied to organisations, involves two or more elements where each element influences and affects the other element(s) of the system and the behaviour of the system as a whole (Skaržauskienė, 2010). Systems theory offers a way to view organisational elements highlighting the important interactive qualities of these elements (Ashmos, Duchon, & McDaniel, 2000).

Organisations have been found to be complex responsive systems, and strategy an iterative development through interaction with the environment (Pina e Cunha & Vieira da Cunha, 2006), therefore it would be erroneous to view analysis, planning and

implementation in stasis. With the importance of the interactive characteristics highlighted, so too does the importance of underlying assumptions about strategy come to the fore.

In order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, the resource based view and dynamic capabilities must be integrated as an organisation requires the benefits both approaches provide (Parayitam & Guru-Gharana, 2010). This is because the resource based view involves rarity of resources and dynamic capabilities focuses on innovation. In other terms, it is both what the organisation has access to as well as how it is utilised. Not only must these be considered together but the resource based/ dynamic capabilities view should be linked with the industrial organisation approach because an organisation has to use the resources and capabilities at its disposal to serve the market.

It is not possible to separate out strategy from structure, behaviour and the culture of an organisation, strategy choice and implementation are interrelated and affect each other (Andrews, 1987). It is possible to analyse strategy as pattern of interrelated decisions which aligns to the concepts of systems thinking. Therefore, it is useful to consider strategic management practices within the organisation as a complex adaptive system.

2.4. Excellence and strategic management practices

Research has been conducted on excellent companies with the focus largely on elements such as leadership, strategy design and strategy execution. Collins (2001) highlighted leadership as a key differentiator in organisational success. Drucker (1994) argued that it is the theory of business that is the main driver of success or failure, if the theory of the business is appropriate to the situation then the organisation will be successful. In a similar vein, Hamel (1996) advocated that retaining outmoded assumptions about strategy hamper an organisation's ability to succeed.

Seven factors as drivers of success were uncovered as sources of sustainable competitive advantage set against a hyper-competitive business environment and the challenges this brings (Matzler, Bailom, Anschober, & Richardson, 2010). These were clustered around the themes of leadership, innovation and market orientation. Correlation, mutual dependency and influence were found between the factors. These findings can be viewed as a study of strategic management in that it encompassed how strategy is managed or implemented, but it did not examine beneath these factors to uncover the assumptions about strategy at these successful organisations. There is, however, no work focussing specifically on strategic management practices as defined in excellent companies.

2.5. Why strategic management practices matter now

The pace of business has been driven by increasing globalisation, resulting in previously strategic issues being brought into the tactical or operational sphere. This has been in an effort to ensure market responsiveness, and decisions have been largely placed in the hands of the market (Marren, 2010). This means that business responses to situations are increasingly similar and somewhat restricted. To be successful an organisation needs to therefore change the frame of reference so that a large scale view is embraced.

The limits of incremental improvement based on doing more of the same but just better prompted the proposal that strategy should be a fundamental philosophical shift in the mind set of an organisation (Hamel, 1996). The success of the rule breakers that turn an established industry upside down or carve out new competitive territories was held as evidence that competition based on established norms will fail against such game changers. In a turbulent economy it is especially relevant to review this aspect, asking if the strategies are still relevant and questioning the assumptions on which the strategies are based. However, despite a changing environment there has been limited use of the new tools and thinking around strategy that support this form of innovation (Grant, 2003).

Andrews (1987) saw strategy not only as an inward looking and contemplative exercise, but one that considers the external environmental pressures and

characteristics. It is argued that if they wish to be successful businesses cannot continue with a traditionalist approach to strategy development and execution as the environment is unstable (Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007).

Grant (2003) concluded that strategic planning remains important to organisations during times of turbulence but how this activity is conducted may change due to the demands of the environment. Specifically it was noted that timeframes were contracted and processes became more a part of business operations as opposed to a stand-alone functional department. This is in line with the shift to strategic thinking from strategic planning. Whatever the changes in process, these had limited impact on the quality of the decisions made. It has been almost a decade since this study was completed and the instability experienced within one industry has grown to greater widespread economic instability and hyper-competitiveness.

In times of crisis, strategic planning as a decision making discipline is a strong indicator of subsequent survival and not what specific strategic technique or tool is used (Wilson & Eilersten, 2010). Organisations which rely on their strategic mechanisms are better positioned to be proactive during a crisis situation and so better positioned to take advantage of opportunities caused by the disruption.

Changing cognitive representations by questioning and amending thinking or the approach applied to a scenario can impact on adaptation to the situation by revealing

new possibilities (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). Therefore, challenging entrenched thinking assists with improving performance. It has also been demonstrated that the dominant industry logic based on the experience of managers in an industry can and does hamper an organisation's ability to respond when facing disruptive change (Weinstein & Standifird, 2010). There is a need to revise and question both cognitive and experiential thinking processes in environments undergoing change. This can be extrapolated to strategic management practices as the underlying processes, whether these are based in cognitive or experiential thought.

2.6.Conclusion

Strategic management practices are very wide ranging and encompass a diversity of assumptions about strategy design and execution. From the literature reviewed the following list has been developed. It must be noted that this is not exhaustive and is based only on the literature covered.

Internal

Ownership, role-players and level of involvement – who within an organisation is responsible for strategy development and implementation (Ansoff, 1977; Hamel, 1996; Bowman & Helfat, 2001; Grant, 2003; Harrington, 2005; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Schwarz, 2009)

Timescale – when is strategy reviewed, updated, amended, implemented and what timeframe does the organisation apply (Porter, 1991; Hamel, 1996; Grant, 2003; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009)

Activities – the actions and tasks undertaken to develop and implement strategy (Porter, 1991; Drucker, 1994; Drejer, 2004; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009)

Purpose – the intention behind the activity, the deliverable sought (Hamel, 1996; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009)

Process – how it is that strategy design and implementation unfold and relate to each other (Hamel, 1996; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009)

Competencies – the skills and capabilities the organisation possesses and/ or requires to develop and implement strategy (Ansoff, 1977; Drucker, 1994; Drejer, 2004)

Measurement – the metric or mechanisms used to determine success or failure (Grant, 2003; Drejer, 2004)

Mission of the company – why the organisation exists and the need(s) it serves to fulfil (Drucker, 1994)

External

Industry rules and conventions – the standard or most commonly held manner in which an industry provides its product or service offering to the market, how it is that the market should be served (Hamel, 1996)

Environment – characteristics that define the greater society and market the organisation operates in and serves (Ansoff, 1977; Drucker, 1994; Hamel, 1996; Drejer, 2004; Porter, 2008)

From the complex adaptive open systems approach to organisations the assumptions about strategy can be defined as:

Environment – the external environmental conditions the organisation is affected by (Pina e Cunha & Vieira da Cunha, 2006)

Inputs, transformations and outputs – the elements interacting together resulting in the service or product delivered (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Skaržauskienė, 2010)

Boundaries – where the organisation ends and the external environment begins (Skaržauskienė, 2010)

Feedback – results or achievements of the organisation used to control the future functioning of the organisation (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000)

Based on the above, the elements sought in this research which lead to these, or typologies of these, as the strategic management practices encompass:

- Mission of the company
- Ownership of strategy design and implementation
- Timescale
- Activities undertaken, inputs, processes and outputs (the elements involved in the process)
- Competencies (the skills and capabilities required to strategize)
- Purpose (the intended output of the strategy process)

- Feedback (the measurement mechanisms)
- Environment (the market the organisation serves as well as how the organisation interacts with the external environment)

The above synthesised listing is a nascent content based definition of strategic management practices derived from the theory and literature in the academic field of strategy. This requires testing against the evidence available of the beliefs and assumptions in place at leading organisations.

The global financial crisis of recent years resulted in recessionary conditions and a turbulent environment. However, some companies have thrived within these challenging circumstances. These organisations span different industries and have pursued different strategies, but are considered leading within their industries.

The approach of this research was to study the strategic management practices of leading organisations across different industries and geographies, to ascertain if there were common patterns in strategic management practices at these organisations. An attempt was made to link common patterns of existing theory in strategic management and organisational behaviour. The purpose with this research was to delve below the manifested behaviour to see if there were commonalities.

3. Research questions

Against the background of the literature review conducted the following research questions were developed for investigation. As the strategic management practices inform strategic management and thereby the strategy of an organisation, it is worthwhile to unpack and uncover the practices of successful organisations to better understand their sources of competitive advantage and success. The developing definition of strategic management practices requires testing against the evidence available. If it is accepted that strategy development and execution are key to the success of an organisation then it is worth considering if there is commonality in the strategic management practices of the leading organisations studied. The research questions to be studied are therefore:

QUESTION 1: What strategic management practices are in evidence at leading organisations?

QUESTION 2: What commonality exists or themes occur in the strategic management practices of these organisations?

QUESTION 3: What is a working definition of strategic management practices?

The purpose of this research will be to attempt to illuminate some of the hidden aspects of strategy development and execution of successful contemporary organisations operating in changing and highly competitive environments.

4. Research methodology

Allio (2006) argues that a more scientific based approach to strategy research facilitates the formulation of laws for strategy similar to natural laws in other sciences. The purpose behind this would be to reduce and potentially even remove the trial and error which is so prevalent in the field of strategy practice. Dickie (2003) argues that the tendency to conform qualitative analysis into the empirical structures of quantitative analysis results in a loss of richness, texture and value. For qualitative research “description of the process of both data collection and analysis may best be interwoven with the findings” (Dickie, 2003, p. 50). In contrast, Thorne (2000) advocates that qualitative researchers communicate their findings in a way that demonstrates the logical processes employed so that the journey from the raw data to the conclusions is explicit. It can be argued that a combination of these approaches may be the optimal solution.

In this research report the experience was such that there was an iterative approach between planning the research project and execution thereof, thereby incorporating aspects of both these viewpoints. Elements of the data, analysis and results discussion are intertwined but communicated in a logical flow for each research question.

4.1.Method

This research project was exploratory in nature and aimed to obtain insight into the strategic management practices of leading organisations, therefore a qualitative

research approach was adopted. The method of study was through the examination of secondary data on the selected organisations including published case studies, annual reports and publically available material.

A qualitative approach was appropriate as the research contained a high level of ambiguity with many factors potentially to be uncovered. Furthermore, there was little researcher control over the variables which may have been introduced into the study. The desired results were purely exploratory and descriptive of what was to be uncovered, there was no intention to seek any causal relationship.

Secondary data has the advantage of convenience as the data is already gathered, it need only be sourced. It was necessary to reorganise and assess the data so that it was useable for the intended research purpose (Blumberg, Cooper, & Schindler, 2008). As a disadvantage the data was not collected specifically for this research purpose and so did not always fit the questions being investigated.

It was necessary to check for quality of data in terms of completeness and usefulness for purpose. Case studies are most frequently prepared for teaching purposes and so did not always contain the information needed. It was also necessary to consider the timeliness of data in whether it spoke to contemporary practices at the organisations in question (Blumberg *et al.*, 2008).

4.2. Population

The population in this study was all successful organisations as per the definition of leading detailed within the introduction. The population was limited to successful organisations and did not include all organisations as the research intent was only to consider the strategic management practices of leading organisations. It was not to study these practices at all organisations.

4.3. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis was a single company or organisation. The organisation is viewed as the largest global or corporate entity and not product, service, regional or local business unit.

4.4. Sample

The focus of this study was on organisations which have achieved success in the past five to seven years through methods other than acquisition. Success is viewed as achieving dominance or growth in market share and/ or shareholder return which outperform the achievements of the organisation's competitors. The empirical measure used as a filtering mechanism to achieve selection of the sample was EBITDA.

By keeping the period for review to the past five to ten years the impact of the global financial crisis was considered. Even though an organisation may not have achieved stellar results the achievements occurred in a highly competitive environment and

industry under significant pressure. As such, the organisation can be viewed as leading and successful.

The sampling method employed was non-probability and a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. This is because the respondents (organisations) were required to meet specific selection criteria in order to fulfil the requirements of the study. The purposive element was applied in the filtering criteria of the characteristic of leading as defined. The convenience element was applied in that the organisation was only included in the study if sufficient and appropriate case studies and public reports were available and could be sourced. The pool of potential material was further limited by restriction to publication in the past ten years in order to limit the study to a contemporary time period. The targeted sample size was ten organisations to allow for an in-depth study of each organisation within the timeframe available.

4.5.Data collection

Data was gathered and a review conducted on material available on the organisations selected for study. A secondary analysis of data was conducted due to lack of accessibility to individuals within the organisations selected. Data was sourced from published case studies, annual reports and other publically available material on the organisations selected. A search was conducted on case study databases for material on the companies selected and copies requested of the relevant case studies identified. The services searched for material are listed below.

Table 3: Case study sources

Source	Web address
IMD	http://www.imd.org/
IE Business School	http://www.ie.edu/
Ivey	http://cases.ivey.uwo.ca/cases/pages/home.aspx
EFMD	http://www.efmd.org/
CEIBS	http://www.ceibs.edu/
IBS	http://www.icmrindia.org/
Harvard	http://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/cases

In addition, this data was supplemented with publically available material such as annual reports or media releases where available. A full list of the material and case studies utilised is contained in Appendix A.

It is noted that the case studies available could have been written with the purpose of use as a teaching aid. Therefore the case studies were assessed in terms of the usefulness to the research questions (Blumberg *et al.*, 2008). Data triangulation was conducted between the sources for data validity and reliability. The raw data about each organisation was analysed within a phenomenological approach to uncover the underlying structure and depth experience of strategy (Thorne, 2000) at each organisation.

4.6.Data analysis

For each organisation in the sample, the available material was examined for evidence of the strategic management practices within the definition developed. At the same time the material was scrutinised for evidence of strategic management practices not included in the content definition developed from the literature review. The data analysis for each organisation was conducted with the comparative analysis method. Analysis was conducted by comparison within the cases and then by comparison between the cases (Boeije, 2002).

Pattern matching was conducted to form a general picture and detect possible patterns in the data (Blumberg *et al.*, 2008). A frequency table of characteristics and practices uncovered was drawn up to identify themes and possible commonality. For validity the data was triangulated with evidence being drawn from multiple points. Furthermore, the data was scrutinised for contrary evidence points or divergence from perceived patterns.

4.7.Limitations

A sampling error may have occurred. Due to the limitation of the sample to organisations for which the data is available, leading organisations for which the data was not available have been excluded from the study. It is possible that the practices employed by these organisations may differ to the organisations included in the sample. Furthermore, as the analysis was limited to publically available material, key

insights – which may have been obtained if interviews with representatives of the selected organisations were possible – have been excluded.

The definition or model of strategic management practices applied was developed within the paradigm of organisations as complex adaptive systems. If an alternative theoretical basis was used then the definition framework could differ and differing insights uncovered.

No causal relationship between strategic management practices and the success of the organisations was sought and none should be inferred. The characteristic of leading was used as a filtering criteria, as it was not possible to study organisations from across the performance spectrum within the time available. Should the data analysis demonstrate a commonality of practices or reoccurring themes then further quantitative research to test potential causal relationships between the practice and organisation success would be required. Furthermore, a study of the strategic management practices in evidence at poorer performing organisations may provide supporting or diverging results.

5. Results

5.1. Introduction

The findings detail a description of the sample organisations in terms of main business activities, purpose of the organisation and the markets it operates in. Idiographic information relating to history, size, geography and financial performance is included. Thereafter the information uncovered as relates to the first research question of the strategic management practices in evidence is outlined. A frequency and comparison table of the strategic management practices uncovered across the sample organisations was compiled, and the initial definition of strategic management practices reviewed against the material uncovered.

The sample achieved was six global organisations operating across a range of industries. The initial intention was to review ten organisations but the number reduced as insufficient information could be sourced on four of the intended sample companies within the timeframe available. The case study publishers searched as detailed in the methodology section, did not all return results or material that could be utilised in the research.

The case studies and reports obtained were studied in-depth and it was found that explicit detailing of the strategic management practices were not widely in evidence. Therefore the strategic management practices were inferred based on the behaviour and statements evidenced.

5.2. Description of sample

5.2.1. Apple

The story of Apple has become something of business legend centred around Steve Jobs. It was founded in 1976 and first developed and manufactured personal computers. The company has since branched out to include the design and manufacture of mobile communication and media devices, portable digital music players and supplying related software, services, peripherals, networking solutions and third-party digital content and applications. Apple is credited with having developed many of the iconic and society changing devices such as the personal computer with graphical user interface, digital music players and touch screen interfaces. The organisation has experienced significant swings in fortune particularly around the departure and return of Steve Jobs. Apple has built its business on a strong brand and currently enjoys the highest global brand value (Speckman & Bloomberg, 2011). This has been largely built on industrial design capabilities and the success of the Apple retail stores as a distribution channel. The markets supplied include direct to consumer via the retail operations, small and mid-sized business, education, enterprise, government and creative markets. Apple aims to compete on the user experience based on innovative hardware, software, peripherals, services, and Internet offerings; requiring continual investment in research and development. The company employs 46,600 people globally (Apple Inc, 2010), and in the financial year of 2010 reported revenue of US\$65,225-million and EBITDA margin of 28% in 2010 and 2009 up from 24% in 2008 (Apple Inc, 2011).

5.2.2. AstraZeneca

Whilst AstraZeneca was formally incorporated in 1992, the company operated as the Zeneca Group until merging with Astra of Sweden in 1999. The company originates from the demerging of the various businesses contained within Imperial Chemical Industries. The company describes itself as a research driven global pharmaceutical organisation “focussed on the discovery, development, manufacturing and marketing of prescription pharmaceuticals and biological products for important areas of healthcare” (AstraZeneca PLC, 2009, p. 8). In 2010 it showed revenue of US\$33,269-million (AstraZeneca, 2011) and employed 61,000 people in over 100 countries. EBITDA margin in 2010 was reported as 33%.

5.2.3. Huawei

Huawei is a global information and communications technology solutions provider established in 1988 by Ren Zhengfei, a former colonel in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, who built Huawei with a focus on significant research and development investments. Most other Chinese companies in the industry at the time were largely engaged in on-selling activity securing technology and hardware from European and American suppliers. Contrary to this trend, Huawei focussed on the in-house development of technology solutions “From its inception Huawei invested 10% of its sales in R&D” (Gadiesh, Leung, & Vestring, 2007, p. 8), building skills in technology as a result. The current positioning is that of customer centric innovation based on research and development abilities (Huawei Technologies Co Ltd, 2011). The business is 100% employee owned and Ren Zhengfei remains as CEO. In 2010 it

showed revenue of US\$29,109-million [converted from CNY185,176-million based on exchange rate of 0.1572 as at 28 October 2011] (Huawei Technologies Co Ltd, 2011) and employed 110,000 people in over 140 countries. EBITDA in 2010 was 16%.

5.2.4. Intel

Founded in 1968 to build semiconductor memory products, Intel is credited with having developed the first microprocessor in 1971 and is synonymous worldwide with the computer industry as the major supplier to manufacturers. The company has a rich history, having taken the bold move to abandon what many viewed as their core business and move into a different field identified as the future of computer memory. Over the years, Intel has grown its employee base to 82,500 as of December 25, 2010 with more than half of those employees located in the United States (Intel Corporation, 2010). Intel has an EBITDA margin in 2010 of 35.8% on revenue of US\$43,263-million.

5.2.5. SABMiller

SABMiller originated as South African Breweries (SAB) in South Africa in 1895, and grew to be the country's largest brewer with widely diverse interests. This diversification was largely driven by international business sanctions as a result of the apartheid policies. During the height of apartheid SAB was the first organisation to implement a non-discriminatory code of employment highlighting the company's commitment to people resources. It was this commitment which grew to be the basis

of competitive advantage. With the change in government in the early 1990s SAB was able to embark upon international expansion on a large scale, the first move was into Europe in 1993 and mainland China followed soon after. This strategy was combined with the sale or closure of non-core operations to enable the company to focus on the beverage industry, and topped off in 1999 with the return of the primary listing to the London Stock Exchange. In 2000 SAB purchased Miller and SABMiller was formed resulting in the second largest brewer by volume in the world (SABMiller plc, 2011). SABMiller has continued to achieve steady international growth through acquisitions and joint ventures to the situation today where it operates across six continents, with over 200 beer brands and 70,000 employees in 75 countries. Revenue in 2011 was US\$28,311-million. The company reports an EBITDA margin of over 16% for the past five years peaking at 17.8% in the most recent financial year (SABMiller plc, 2011).

5.2.6. Wipro

Whilst it is known today as a technology company, Wipro was founded in 1945 as Western India Vegetable Products Limited focussing initially on the production of edible oils and laundry soap. The company diversified into manufacturing toiletries and baby care products in 1966. In 1975 Wipro further diversified into hydraulic cylinders and fluid power components, moving into the field of industrial and business application of their products. The first entry into the IT industry was in 1980 a full 35 years into its history. By the 1990s the technology business had become the flagship of the organisation having broken new ground as one of the leading Indian IT companies built on increasing globalisation trends. The focus is on consulting, system

integration and outsourcing for industries such as manufacturing, financial services, retail, automotive, energy, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing and transportation. Currently, Wipro employs 120,000 employees and the company recorded total revenue of US\$6,980-million (IT revenues of US\$5,200-million). EBITDA margin in financial year 2011 was 20% (Wipro IT Business, 2011).

5.3. Research question 1

Evidence of the strategic management practices identified from a review of the data is grouped by theme with specific quotations.

Theme 1: Innovation and non-traditional ideas/ thinking

One of the emergent themes from the data obtained was that of an innovative approach to business. This extended beyond the traditional view of innovation in terms of products and services. The application was in a more fundamental view of the reason for the organisation's existence, purpose for being and manner in which business is conducted.

Apple

Revolutionise "Yet another bold move ... to redefine an industry" (Yoffie & Kim, 2011, p. 12)

Consider and embrace revolutionary change "transforming 'Apple Computer' into 'Apple Inc' with innovative non-PC products" (Yoffie & Kim, 2011, p. 1)

AstraZeneca

Consultation with wide range of people and willingness to elicit alternative views “The team which consisted of marketers, lawyers, and scientists, including some Nobel laureates, came out with a strategy” (Ikrama & Purkayastha, 2008, p. 3)

Utilise non-conventional tools “the company adopted a ‘decision analytic’ approach. This involved assigning executives to work closely with data and analytics experts to understand the challenge, the available data, and the ‘realm of the possible’ in analytic techniques and technologies. The goal was for the team of executives and analytic experts to co-craft a decision analytic solution that would help the executives understand relationships between and among different key participants in the research communities. The team focussed the decision analytic solution on a combination of ‘Social Network Analysis’ or SNA supported by deep-web harvesting of the required data from Internet-accessible databases” (Clifton, 2009, p. 19)

Learning and growth “it’s the internal process and learning and growth perspectives that form the heart of AstraZeneca’s sales strategy map” (Koch, 2003, p. 4)

Huawei

Go against trend “believed that joint venturing with foreign companies would not enable the Chinese to obtain foreign technologies” (Farhoomand, 2006, p. 6)

SABMiller

Do things differently “unlike its predecessors, it set up a joint venture company” (Tao, 2004, p. 4)

Wipro

Innovation “Wipro realised that along with its focus on implementation of quality standards it needed to come out with innovative products and services to gain acceptance in the global markets. It also realised that innovation would provide the company with a platform to differentiate itself from the rest of the players in the industry. In order to come out with innovative products and services, the top management at Wipro committed itself to fostering innovation in the organisation and encouraging employees to come out with innovative ideas.” (Subhdra, Bhatia, & Dutta, 2004, p. 4)

Challenge past behaviour “Make strategies that were quite contra to what the firm had successfully used before” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (B), 2002, p. 1)

Urgency “ideas have limited shelf-life” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (B), 2002, p. 6)

Theme 2: The role of values

Many organisations include a values statement as part of their strategy planning and positioning. With the organisations studied this went further as a strategic management practice in that a values based approach to doing business was in evidence.

AstraZeneca

Values in application “mission requires us to do things in the right way – to behave in accordance with our values and act with integrity” (AstraZeneca, 2011, p. 2)

SABMiller

Values in practice “Analysts noted that SABMiller had a strong focus on resourcefulness, integrity, drive and excellence” (Purkayastha, 2006, p. 4)

Wipro

Values as part of all activities “With utmost respect to human values, we promise to serve our customers with integrity through innovative, value for money solutions, by applying thought day after day” (Subhdra *et al.*, 2004, p. 9)

Role of values “values set boundaries” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (B), 2002, p. 6)

Theme 3: A position within the external environment

The organisations studied showed evidence of awareness of holding a position within the environment and an external facing point of view. This goes beyond a customer facing or customer focussed approach and includes the awareness that the organisation has a role to play and responsibility towards society.

Huawei

Fit to environment “hiring local personnel was also part of Huawei’s strategy to tailor technologies and services to customer’s specific needs” (Farhoomand, 2006, p. 9)

Intel

Structure around the market “To adjust to the Chinese government policy ... Intel adopted a new market strategy” (Shalini IBSCDC, 2005, p. 3); “The new structure which focussed instead on the uses to which customers might put technology” (Yoffie, 2005, p. 2); “decision was driven in part by market research on comparative industry sizes and growth rates” (Shih & Thurston, 2009, p. 3)

SABMiller

Benefit broader than the organisation alone “our business is not separate from society but embedded within it, the success of SABMiller is inextricably linked to the well-being of the wider community.” (SABMiller plc, 2011, p. 1)

Wipro

External market focus “Premji’s strategy was to focus on customers” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (A), 2002, p. 1)

Theme 4: Strategy happens throughout the organisation

It is recognised within the organisations studied that strategy is an activity and not only a plan. Therefore, the development and execution resides throughout the

organisation wherever decisions are made and not only at the senior levels. This theme forms part of the ownership strategic management practice identified from the literature review.

SABMiller

People are the basis of success “well known in industry circles for its performance-oriented culture. Its employees were perceived as being achievement-driven and having a high amount of optimism and passion for their brands and the company. SABMiller put great emphasis on the ability of its people to be in sync with the changing requirements of the market and to avoid complacency at all costs.” (Purkayastha, 2006, p. 4)

Strategy driven through the organisation “All employees were held accountable to the corporate goals and strategy and great care was taken to ensure that people got the right job fit” (Purkayastha, 2006, p. 5)

Wipro

Evidence of involving multiple levels in development of strategy “constituted innovative teams with the aim of generating innovative ideas in line with customer needs and market trends” (Subhdra *et al.*, 2004, p. 6)

Theme 5: Tolerance of paradox

Evidence was uncovered of the organisations being able to entertain seemingly conflicting concepts. Many companies subscribe to trade-offs on the assumption that

certain behaviours and options are mutually exclusive. An example of this would be a cost versus quality choice. In the organisations studied it was uncovered that apparently contradicting concepts can be, and are, pursued.

AstraZeneca

Consistency of goals but change in way that go about getting there “Going forward, we are not changing direction. Our overall strategy remains the same, but we are doing some things differently to make sure that we are well-positioned to manage the challenges – and the opportunities – that lie ahead.” (AstraZeneca, 2011, p. 1)

Huawei

Value of people and consulting with them, with discipline “Mr Ren brought his military discipline into the company, and hired retired officers from the central police regiment to train employees”, “company-wide discussion ... brought to the fore differences ... on many issues ... took serious note of the matter ... formulate a set of basic guidelines for the company employees” (Shengjum, 2005, pp. 6-7)

Intel

Value of people and consulting with them, with discipline “If you lose the argument, you don’t forego the responsibility to make the most of the decision” (Burgelman & Meza, 2006, p. 6)

Customers as competitors “China is going to be both a customer and a competitor for us going forward” (Shalini IBSCDC, 2005, p. 6)

Parallel procedures “approach was in stark contrast to the more formalised and mature processes that drove Intel’s large mainstream divisions” (Shih & Thurston, 2010, p. 5)

No trade-offs “work both hard and smart, long and intensely” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (B), 2002, p. 6)

Theme 6: A role for debate, challenge and questioning

The organisations studied showed evidence of a willingness to debate, challenge and discuss decisions. This would occur in an open and honest manner, with even entrenched thinking and views being challenged, reviewed and revised if necessary.

SABMiller

Openness to challenge and debate “have a more open, engaging, challenging culture .. people must not be afraid to talk up ... confident enough to engage in debate and that makes them feel part of what is going on” (Purkayastha, 2006, p. 10)

Intel

Open discussion and debate “constant debates occurred within the company about whether getting out of the DRAM business was the right thing for Intel to do” (Burgelman & Christensen, 2001, p. 10)

Constantly question “revisit our assumptions regularly enough as our domain knowledge grew and the market shifted” (Shih & Thurston, 2009, p. 1)

Theme 7: Connecting on an emotional level

Many businesses advocate for the removal of emotion in business practice and dealings. However, the organisations studied showed evidence of passion and commitment to a greater cause. Furthermore, this emotional connection to the purpose of the organisation and its goals is part of the culture and relationship with employees.

AstraZeneca

Commitment and audacious goals “position the product for success and invest heavily in becoming the market leader” (Calkins & Neiman, 2006, p. 10)

Huawei

Fanaticism “employees often sang revolutionary songs to show their passion for the company as well as the country” (Shengjum, 2005, p. 10)

Apple

Passion, disciples, advocates and believers “competitive advantage with respect to retail because of how the company handled its people. Apple generally tended to hire employees who were already big fans of the brand, looking to hire individuals who were passionate about what they were selling” (Di Muro, Murray, & Goode, 2009, p. 6)

Galvanising vision “Jobs wanted Apple to be a cultural force” (Yoffie & Kim, 2011, p. 4)

A rallying point “There needs to be some gravitational force that pulls it all together” (Bloomberg, 2011)

Wipro

Emotional connection “Must attract best minds and create a sense of ownership ... through emotional engagement” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (B), 2002, p. 6)

The seven themes described above are not a comprehensive listing of the evidence uncovered around strategic management practices, but represent the major and most frequently occurring concepts.

5.4. Research question 2

The evidence of strategic management practices uncovered is tabulated below against the framework definition and the themes uncovered. This includes evidence points in relation to the content definition in addition to the themes identified above. The commonality is detailed in the matrix with an “X” indicating data having been uncovered for the strategic management practice at the organisation.

Table 4: Themes and elements of strategic management practices uncovered

	Apple	AstraZeneca	Huawei	Intel	SABMiller	Wipro
Ownership		X			X	X
Timescale		X		X		
Purpose						
Process/ activities						
Competencies					X	X

Mission of the company		X	X	X	X	X
Environment	X		X	X	X	X
Feedback	X	X	X	X	X	X
Non-traditional thinking	X	X	X		X	X
Role of values		X			X	X
Tolerance of paradox		X	X	X		X
Debate and challenge				X	X	
Connecting on an emotional level	X	X	X			X

5.5. Research question 3

The evidence uncovered in the study was used to test the robustness of the content definition of strategic management practices developed. Each element of the definition was considered in terms of the volume and strength of evidence found in support of the strategic management practice.

Mission of the company

There was evidence uncovered of the purpose of strategy and reason for the organisation's existence forming a basis for the strategic activities undertaken. Most of the organisations detailed specific mission and/ or vision statements which incorporated this element.

AstraZeneca: “our mission is to make a meaningful difference to the world’s health”
(AstraZeneca, 2011, p. 1)

Huawei: “vision was to build innovation capability into the company” (Farhoomand, 2006, p. 6); “vision was to enrich life through communication” (Huawei Technologies Co Ltd, 2011)

Intel: “Our goal is to be the preeminent provider of semiconductor chips and platforms for the worldwide digital economy” (Intel Corporation, 2011)

SABMiller: “Our vision: to be the most admired company in the global beer industry. Our mission: To own and nurture local and international brands that are the first choice of the consumer” (SABMiller plc, 2011, p. 1)

Wipro: “Premji’s Leadership Laws. Vision: is like a lighthouse, showing the way and pointing out hazards. It must be slightly beyond reach, but must not be an impossible dream.” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (B), 2002, p. 6)

Ownership

There was little explicit evidence of who at the organisations was involved in and responsible for strategy development and implementation. Where explicit evidence was available it was found that in these cases ownership of strategy existed throughout the organisation. Wherever the ownership may reside, ownership is in evidence as a strategic management practice.

SABMiller: “All employees were held accountable to the corporate goals and strategy”

(Purkayastha, 2006, p. 5)

Wipro: “top management at Wipro committed itself to fostering innovation in the organisation and encouraging employees to come out with innovative ideas ... Wipro management identified that innovation would be one of the major growth drivers ... process to encourage innovation was implemented in all group companies” (Subhdra *et al.*, 2004, p. 4)

Timescale

There was limited evidence of timescale as a strategic management practice. Only two of the organisations in the sample demonstrated evidence of a timescale applied to strategy. This was in the form of references to annual reviews, short or medium term goals, or five- and ten-year strategies.

AstraZeneca: “Our priorities to 2014”; “Longer term, ten-year forecasts are developed as part of our annual strategy review” (AstraZeneca PLC, 2010, p. 15)

Intel: “one of the things that comes up in our annual strategic review. We tend to look at things in the five-year range in those reviews. But in the ten- to 15-year range” (Shalini IBSCDC, 2005, p. 1)

Activities undertaken, inputs, processes and outputs (the elements involved in the process)

There was little material to substantiate that the activities undertaken as part of the strategy development process be included as a strategic management practice. The material uncovered did not speak to specific procedures of how strategy is developed or implemented.

Competencies (the skills and capabilities required to strategize)

Some of the sample organisations showed evidence of believing that certain abilities are required to be at the disposal of the organisation in order to conduct strategic activities. This may have occurred as skills within the organisation or specialists brought in for a specific purpose.

SABMiller: “Accountability is clear and personal ... We work and win in teams”
(SABMiller plc, 2011, p. 1)

Wipro: “conducted workshops and brought in external consultants from specialised fields to help employees” (Subhdra *et al.*, 2004, p. 6)

Purpose (the intended output of the strategy process)

There was little evidence uncovered in support of this strategic management practice. The intended output as representing the reasons why an organisation engages in

strategic activities was not explicitly covered, and it was not possible to infer this from the material studied.

Feedback (the measurement mechanisms)

The organisations showed evidence of feedback in the measurements of success as a strategic management practice. Many included specific financial, market share or customer satisfaction targets in the strategic objectives in the statement of objectives or goals. It is clear that in order to determine success the organisations believe that an empirical measurement of success is needed as part of strategy.

Apple: “became a retailer to increase its five per cent market share” (Di Muro *et al.*, 2009, p. 5)

AstraZeneca: “Transforming R&D: Our R&D record over the past few years is disappointing”; “Leveraging our commercial assets: Our key medicines ... achieved double digit growth”; “People acting with integrity: ... reviewed our existing sales and marketing policies and standards” (Brennan, D R, 2011)

Huawei: “achieve business success with our ABC strategy: growing average revenue per user (ARPU), increasing bandwidth and reducing cost” (Huawei Technologies Co Ltd, 2011)

Intel: “the world’s largest semiconductor chip maker, based on revenue” (Intel Corporation, 2011)

SABMiller: “raising the profitability of local businesses” (SABMiller plc, 2011, p. 1)

Wipro: “goal of being one of the top ten IT players in the world” (Subhdra *et al.*, 2004, p. 7)

Environment (the market the organisation serves as well as how the organisation interacts with the external environment)

Almost all the organisations in the sample demonstrated evidence of this strategic management practice. This took a variety of forms from realigning to the market shifts and changing industry dynamics, to orientating the organisation purpose around anticipating and serving client or customer needs, as well as positioning the organisation within a greater societal role to serve more than commercial goals.

Apple: “three-step sales process: position, permission, probe. When sales people met a customer, they explained to the customer that they have some questions to ask in order to understand their needs, then obtained permission to ask those questions, and then kept digging in order to determine which products were the best fit for a given customer’s needs.” (Di Muro *et al.*, 2009, p. 6)

Huawei: “The essence of Huawei culture is in serving its customers whole-heartedly” (Shengjum, 2005, p. 5)

Intel: “To adjust to the Chinese government policy of ‘Buy China’ ... adopted a new market strategy” (Shalini IBSCDC, 2005, p. 3)

SABMiller: “become a global leader by excelling locally – nurturing strong, local brands and building brand portfolios that meet the needs of consumers in each of our markets” (SABMiller plc, 2011, p. 1)

Wipro: “While globalising our brand and our business, we must look local to the customer” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (A), 2002, p. 1); “growing the European business was going to require more knowledge of the subtleties of the local markets and potential customers” (Wishik *et al.*, Wipro Technologies Europe (A), 2002, p. 4)

6. Discussion of results

The findings of the research are discussed as these relate to the research questions under investigation, and how these findings speak to the literature is reviewed.

6.1. Research question 1: What strategic management practices are in evidence at leading organisations?

The evidence uncovered about the strategic management practices are discussed against the literature reviewed, with an assessment as to the inclusion of these strategic management practices in the definition under development.

Theme 1: Innovation and non-traditional ideas/ thinking

The concept of innovation and non-traditional thinking as a core assumption to strategic management activities was not uncovered in the literature reviewed. The position advocated by Hamel (1996) for a revolution in how strategy is undertaken is the closest contributor to this factor. The weight of evidence uncovered in support of this strategic management practice and the impact it arguably has, supports inclusion of an innovative and questioning approach within the definition. There has been work on the role of innovation as a new approach to management (Hamel, 2007) but this was not part of the scope of this research project. This finding, however, does support the view advocated for management innovation as a driver of success.

Theme 2: The role of values

Assumptions about values relating to the organisation strategy were found in evidence. However, this element was not found in the literature reviewed. It may be that, similar to the situation as with the innovation based approach to business, the role of values in strategy was not in the literature due to the systems based approach adopted. Therefore the element should be included in the definition of strategic management practices.

Theme 3: A position within the external environment

A role for the environment and how the organisation interprets and interacts with the environment on all fronts was strongly in evidence in the organisations studied. This element is also to be found frequently in the literature (Ansoff, 1977; Drucker, 1994; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Porter, 2008). Whilst the specific details of the linkages into strategy may vary, it is undoubted that assumptions about the environment form a key part of organisational behaviour and are also repeatedly appearing in the literature. There is a close convergence between the academic world and that of practice. Therefore the element of environment should form a component in the definition of strategic management practices.

Theme 4: Strategy happens throughout the organisation

Where within the organisational structure strategy is situated in terms of role-players and level of involvement is part of the ownership dimension identified frequently in the literature (Ansoff, 1977; Hamel, 1996; Grant, 2003; Harrington, 2005; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009; Schwarz, 2009). The data demonstrated that the organisations studied regard strategy as part of the responsibilities of all within the firm. Therefore, there is a strong case for inclusion of ownership, with the view of dispersed and widespread involvement in the development and execution of strategy, as a strategic management practice.

Theme 5: Tolerance of paradox

Given the view taken of organisations as complex adaptive systems it is somewhat surprising that there is not greater correlation between the literature and the evidence uncovered on this point. The interactive and flexible nature of a systems approach would support a tolerance of paradox in strategy. Although the concept is absent from the literature it is clearly evident in the data uncovered, and it therefore should be included in the definition of strategic management practices.

Theme 6: A role for debate, challenge and questioning

Drucker (1994) features an assumption of the competencies needed for strategy in the concept of the theory of the business. If the business is to be successful the

assumptions held must be aligned to the environmental requirements. This implies that the organisation is open to challenges to assumptions. This is supported with the strategy as revolution argument proposed by Hamel (1996). The data featured this element in a number of organisations therefore it should be included in the definition.

Theme 7: Connecting on an emotional level

The theory does not incorporate this concept and this may be due to it being perceived as un-academic in nature. Where an emotive element is contained in the literature it takes the form of vision or mission statements. But these do not necessarily tie into the emotional connection evidenced in the data. The data implies that the organisations view an emotional connection on strategy as a requirement. This links into the work of Denning (2011) where the purpose of an organisation is seen as something other than that of profit. Due to the powerful nature of this element it is retained in the definition.

6.2. Research question 2: What commonality exists or themes occur in the strategic management practices of these organisations?

There was some element of commonality found in the strategic management practices uncovered in the organisations in the sample. It is worth noting that the only strategic management practice contained within the content definition developed for which evidence could be found in all organisations studied, was that of feedback and a measurement mechanism. The other strategic management practices with a strong

showing were the environment, the mission of the company and non-traditional thinking. The sample may have influenced the strength of showing of the non-traditional thinking element. Knowledge economy industries such as information technology were more widely represented in the sample despite attempts to obtain a diverse range of industries in the sample. Such industries may naturally attract this skill and mind set.

The limited commonality in evidence may have been a result of the research methodology employed as the evidence was inferred from secondary data sources. It may have been that evidence was inadvertently omitted from the study in an effort to avoid projection onto the material as opposed to uncovering insights.

Another potential source of the lack of common elements found may be the sample. By utilising a convenience sampling technique with the sample limited to organisations for which the secondary data was available, additional organisations were excluded from the study. If the sample had been larger it is possible that the themes and evidence uncovered may have shown greater consistency.

The organisations studied came from many different industry sectors and had origins in different countries and therefore differing cultural dispositions. The sample was diverse. This differentiation may aid generalisation of the study to many organisations, but at the same time may have contributed to the lack of common elements

uncovered. A sample drawn from a particular industry or region may have demonstrated greater commonality in behaviour and practices.

6.3. Research question 3: What is a working definition of strategic management practices?

The definition developed based on the literature reviewed proved to be somewhat useful when assessed against the data. It can be viewed as having limited application. A number of the elements were not found to be widely in evidence and some showed only limited presence. Furthermore, additional elements not included in the initial definition and having greater prevalence were uncovered as strategic management practices. These elements are discussed below with an assessment of whether the assumption should be considered for continued use in the developing definition of strategic management practices.

Ownership

An assumption about ownership of strategy was widely in evidence in the literature (Ansoff, 1977; Hamel, 1996; Bowman & Helfat, 2001; Grant, 2003; Harrington, 2005; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009; Schwarz, 2009). Ownership is taken as the role-players within an organisation responsible for the development and implementation of strategy, the levels these role-players operate at and the level of involvement within the strategic processes. It indicates where within the organisation responsibility for strategy development and execution

resides. Although the evidence in the data was not explicit it could be readily inferred from the material and was found in almost every organisation studied. Given the strong role that ownership occupies in the literature and that support for inclusion was uncovered in the research, it is believed that this should be included in the definition of strategic management practices.

Timescale

The concept of a timeframe applied to strategy appears repeatedly in the literature (Porter, 1991; Hamel, 1996; Grant, 2003; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009). However, there was not the same level of support for the factor from the data with only limited evidence uncovered. The lack of widespread evidence for a timescale component may be due to the data sources. The case studies and reports material simply may not be viewed by the organisations or authors as appropriate vehicles to detail the timescale applied. Different testing instruments may result in uncovering of this data. Therefore this element should not be discounted entirely from the definition.

Activities undertaken, inputs, processes and outputs (the elements involved in the process)

The concept of the activities to be undertaken in developing and executing strategy or how strategy is to happen appear repeatedly in the literature (Porter, 1991; Drucker, 1994; Hamel, 1996; Ashmos *et al.*, 2000; Drejer, 2004; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009; Skaržauskienė, 2010). The data, however, did not show

evidence of this strategic management practice. This may be due to the nature of the data in that this is a deeply process based element and so may not have been included in the case studies. Although there is strong support from the literature the lack of support from the data places the inclusion of this factor under question. As the literature is not explicitly focussed on studying strategic management practices it is decided to exclude the element from the definition. Further study based on different methodologies may support the re-introduction of this factor to the definition.

Purpose (the intended output of the strategy process)

Support for the purpose and deliverable sought from the strategy processes was only present in two instances in the literature (Hamel, 1996; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2009), and evidence was not uncovered in the research. Given the limited prevalence in the literature and lack of supporting evidence from the data it is believed that this element should not be included in the definition of strategic management practices. That is not to say that it may not be re-introduced at a later stage, but current evidence does not support this. Research based on differing methodologies may uncover additional data.

Competencies (the skills and capabilities required to strategize)

There is some support in the literature for the inclusion of competencies as a strategic management practice (Ansoff, 1977; Drejer, 2004; Drucker, 1994). This is also supported in the data although not as extensively as other elements. The shortage of evidence may be due to the nature of the source material and data collection process.

More direct data gathering would possibly have shown greater prevalence. The element is therefore included in the definition of strategic management practices.

Mission of the company

The presence of the mission of the organisation as a strategic management practice was not widely found in the literature. It was only in the work of Drucker (1994) that assumptions about why an organisation exists and the societal needs it fulfils were in evidence. However, all but one of the sample organisations demonstrated assumptions about the mission of the company. Therefore this factor should be included in the definition.

Environment (the market the organisation serves as well as how the organisation interacts with the external environment)

Norms about the environment, the role the organisation plays within the greater society and how it interacts with the environment were widely present in the evidence. This was as expected from the literature reviewed (Ansoff, 1977; Drucker, 1994; Hamel, 1996; Drejer, 2004; Pina e Cunha & Vieira da Cunha, 2006; Porter, 2008; Skaržauskienė, 2010). There is a strong argument for inclusion of assumptions about the environment in the definition of strategic management practices.

Feedback (the measurement mechanisms)

This proposed element was the only one to be found in evidence at all the organisations sampled. These mechanisms took varying forms and were largely focussed on specific measurable goals. The assumption that success of a strategy must be measurable is widely held. Considering this together with the prevalence in and support from the literature (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000; Grant, 2003; Drejer, 2004), the role of feedback mechanisms and a manner in which to gauge strategic success is a core strategic management practice. This element is therefore included in the definition.

The synthesised and revised content definition for strategic management practices is that it encompasses assumptions, norms or beliefs about measurement mechanisms and feedback, environment, competencies, mission and ownership. In addition the element of timescale cannot be excluded from the definition but requires further investigation. Elements from the data that were not in the definition initially but which merit consideration based on the data uncovered are: an emotive connection, non-traditional thinking, values, tolerance of paradox and a role for debate. The factors of activities, inputs, processes, outputs and the purpose of strategy development and execution should be excluded from the definition at this stage of development.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to uncover the contemporary strategic management practices as the underlying assumptions about strategy in evidence at selected leading organisations. This was supported through developing and testing a definition of strategic management practices against the evidence available. From what has been uncovered and the nascent content based definition developed, recommendations for future research are provided. The findings as set out in the previous chapters are reviewed and summarised in terms of the relevance for business and suggestions for future research.

7.1. Insight for business

The key findings indicate that leading organisations demonstrate assumptions and beliefs around the mission of the organisation, a dispersed role for ownership, a culture of challenge and innovation and a clearly articulated means of feedback and definition of success.

For the business community it is highlighted that an organisation would be wise to seek out an improved understanding and appreciation of its own strategic management practices. Strategic management practices are a factor in strategy and it therefore behoves an organisation to understand their own strategic management practices. These beliefs and assumptions may have an impact on business success as these influence strategic behaviour. Organisations may endeavour to test if the

abovementioned key strategic management practices are part of their organisation, are clearly articulated and understood.

In a form of almost circular logic the most valuable strategic management practice could be to have no strategic management practices or assumptions about strategy. This would translate as questioning, innovation, challenge and revisiting widely held assumptions, and challenging widely held beliefs.

7.2.Future research

This research project has in effect raised more questions than it answered and its greatest value may rest in encouraging debate and work on the area of strategic management practices. As shown in the literature review there is little work published on this topic and no study based explicitly on this area.

Where explicit evidence was available it was found that in these cases the ownership of strategy existed in a dispersed fashion throughout the organisation. Wherever the ownership may reside, role-players and the level of involvement in strategy design and execution is a key strategic management practice. It may be a worthwhile to investigate the relationship between the nature of strategy ownership and organisational success.

Innovation and innovative thinking was a common theme running through the material uncovered. This was reflected as innovation not only in terms product and service development or process change, but innovation bordering on maverick behaviour ingrained into the organisation. This raises the question of whether there is a link between beneficial strategic management practices and the innovation based management paradigm advocated by Hamel (2007).

Despite each organisation in the sample being regarded as leading and admired for this success by the business community, it is worth noting that the organisations also faced criticism. For example, Apple has been criticised for draconian secrecy practices and unilateral relationships with resellers, whilst Huawei is regarded with distrust as a tool of the Chinese communist government. What role this duality may play especially in relation to the theme of tolerating paradox within the organisation is a potential field of study.

There was limited explicit evidence found of strategic management practices as per the nascent content based definition developed. What could be uncovered was achieved for the most part through inference. This could be due to the methodology utilised which focussed on secondary data and therefore may not have contained the information needed for the study. It may also have arisen as a result of the sample achieved which was limited again due to the methodology employed. This outcome may indicate that the definition of strategic management practices as developed is

incomplete. The further development of this definition to include additional factors may produce more meaningful results.

One of the greatest challenges in this research was to separate out strategic management practices from strategy and strategic management. This was largely due to the methodology used which relied heavily on inference from the material available. A differing method such as in-depth case studies based on primary data, where the evidence is direct and not inferred, would greatly assist in overcoming this obstacle.

The definition of strategic management practices developed for this research project was based in the field of organisation behaviour with a systems based approach to organisations. In order to test the concept further, definitions of strategic management practices could be developed based on other academic frameworks or approaches such as chaos theory. Furthermore, the definition could be positioned within the field of strategy based on the resource based view or industrial organisation to test for differences in what is uncovered based on these two differing approaches to the academic study of strategy.

It may be worthwhile to investigate for relationships between the resource based view or industrial organisation views of strategy and the strategic management practices in evidence. These approaches to the study of strategy contain assumptions about how

organisations gain competitive advantage, and a study to see if these correlate to strategic management practices could be worthwhile.

A different methodology utilising primary data to uncover strategic management practices in evidence on a qualitative or quantitative basis would be useful. Much of the evidence contained within this research project was inferred from the material. Primary data analysis could provide a more robust finding.

It was hoped with this research that commonality would be shown between the strategic management practices in evidence and organisations that succeed during difficult periods and times of turbulence. If this had been uncovered it would demonstrate that strategic management practices are important in terms of success during such periods. Whilst this relationship was not uncovered in this research it does not refute a potential linkage, and future research based on differing methodology may show otherwise.

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Appendix A: Material utilised in analysis

Title	Author	Year	Source
Apple			
Apple Inc in 2010	Yoffie, D B & Kim, R	2011	Harvard Business School
Apple is now most valuable brand	Speckman, A	2011	Independent Newspapers
Apple three-year financial history	Apple Inc	2011	Apple Inc
Form 10-K	Apple Inc	2010	Apple Inc
Strategic planning at Apple Inc	Di Muro, F, Murray, K & Goode, M	2009	Richard Ivey School of Business
Will Jobs' choice cut it at the helm of Apple?	Bloomberg	2011	Independent Newspapers
AstraZeneca			
A pharmaceutical company harnesses the power of analytics	Clifton, T E	2009	Strategy & Leadership, Emerald Group Publishing Limited
AstraZeneca 2010 in brief	AstraZeneca plc	2011	AstraZeneca plc
Chief executive officer's review	Brennan, D R	2011	AstraZeneca plc
Crestor	Calkins, T	2006	Kellogg School



			of Management
Directors' report: strategy and performance	AstraZeneca plc	2010	AstraZeneca plc
Financial highlights 2010	AstraZeneca plc	2011	AstraZeneca plc
Market leader strategies: AstraZeneca defending its turf	Ikrama, S & Purkayastha, D	2008	ICMR Centre for Management Research
Winning prescription for breakthrough sales performance at AstraZeneca	Koch, J	2003	Harvard Business School
<i>Huawei</i>			
Consolidated financial statements summary and notes	Huawei Technologies Co Ltd	2010	Huawei Technologies Co Ltd
Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd	Shengjum, L	2005	China Europe International Business School
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