

PRACTICING STRATEGY – FOUNDATIONS AND IMPORTANCE

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Learning Objectives

- Provide a foundation for the rest of the book.
- Assist readers to locate the strategy-as-practice within the debates in the strategic management literature.
- Present the key concepts that will form the backbone of the textbook (notably, the practitioners, practices, and praxis framework).

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader in the field of practice-based approaches to the study of strategy and organization, including its rationale and emergence. These will provide a basis for a clear identification of the key topics covered in the practice approach and a review of the main concepts involved in a key perspective to understand the practice of strategy: the strategy-as-practice perspective. By decoding the key concepts around the strategy-as-practice approach we encourage an appreciation of the micro-level aspects of strategy making and execution. Such micro-level aspects are not only of interest from a scholarly perspective, they are also critical in any strategic review and can help practitioners develop a more nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their strategy-making and execution processes. Overall, the key objective of this introductory chapter is to help the reader appreciate the micro-level foundations of strategy making and execution.

STRATEGY-MAKING PROCESSES: THE SEARCH FOR ACTION

1.2 The field of strategic management is often divided into different schools of thought. The planning and emergent schools are two fundamental schools that have shaped, and still influence, many debates in academia and practice. Based on the work of Chandler (1962), the planning (or rational) school considers strategy as the outcome of the sequential activities of strategic analysis, development, and implementation. The emergent school, on the other hand, led by Henry Mintzberg, considers strategy as not simply a plan but also a pattern that emerges over time based on experimentation and discussion (Mintzberg, 1973, 1978, 1987; Mintzberg and Walters, 1985). Mintzberg notes that “organizations develop plans for the future and they also evolve patterns out of their past” (1994: 24). Accordingly, strategy is

TABLE 1.1 Hart’s integrative framework.

Contingency factors	Command	Symbolic	Rational	Transactive	Generative
Environment	Simple; low-level complexity	Dynamic; high velocity or radical change	Stable; low degree of change	Complex; many stakeholders	Turbulent; dynamic and complex
Firm size	Small	Medium–large	Medium–large	Large	No relation
Stage of firm development	No relation	Rapid growth; reorientation	Steady growth	Mature	No relation
Strategic orientation	No relation	Proactive change (Prospector/Analyzer)	Solidify position (Defender)	Continuous improvement (Analyzer)	Innovation (Prospector)
Descriptors	Command	Symbolic	Rational	Transactive	Generative
Style	(Imperial) Strategy driven by leader or small top team	(Cultural) Strategy driven by mission and a vision of the future	(Analytical) Strategy driven by formal structure and planning systems	(Procedural) Strategy driven by internal process and mutual adjustment	(Organic) Strategy driven by organizational actors’ initiative
Role of top management	(Commander) Provide direction	(Coach) Motivate and inspire	(Boss) Evaluate and control	(Facilitator) Empower and enable	(Sponsor) Endorse and support
Role of organizational members	(Soldier) Obey orders	(Player) Respond to challenge	(Subordinate) Follow the system	(Participant) Learn and improve	(Entrepreneur) Experiment and take risks

Source: Hart (1992).

perceived as more than just an intended outcome based on a top-down procedure and as a more complex, emergent, bottom-up process developed throughout the organization with the participation of multiple organizational members. Based on the foundations of these two schools, a number of frameworks have been developed concerned with the strategy-making processes that firms follow. Combining the learning around strategy-making processes, Hart (1992) developed an integrative framework consisting of five models (see Table 1.1). The main advantage of this model is that it integrates many of the insights from pre-existing strategy models by contrasting the roles of different management actors. In that way, strategy making is viewed as an organization-wide phenomenon.

Alongside Hart, the Bower–Burgelman (BB) process model of strategy making (Burgelman, 1983, 2002) has been a milestone in strategy process research. Bower (1970) developed a resource allocation process (RAP) model which was later modified and extended by Burgelman in the early 1980s using rich empirical insights. The result was the BB process model (Bower and Doz, 1979; Burgelman, 1983). The foundation of this process model was an evolutionary framework of the strategy-making process in established firms (see Figure 1.1). Burgelman's primary goal was to show the interactions between strategic behavior, corporate context, and the concept of corporate strategy. According to this model the strategy-making process is determined through strategic behavior that either is induced by top management or develops autonomously:

Autonomous strategic behavior introduces new categories for the definition of product or market opportunities. It develops from the bottom up within a company and covers project-championing efforts to mobilize corporate resources. Induced behavior on the other hand represents the guiding character of strategy: “The induced process concerns initiatives that are within the scope of the organization's current strategy and build on existing organizational learning” (Burgelman, 1991: 241).

Structural context determination means the top-down introduction of formal organizational structures (information, evaluation, reward systems, etc.) to shape the selection of strategic investments. Strategic context determination covers the political activities of middle management that aim at combining autonomous strategic behavior on the product-market level with the current corporate strategy.

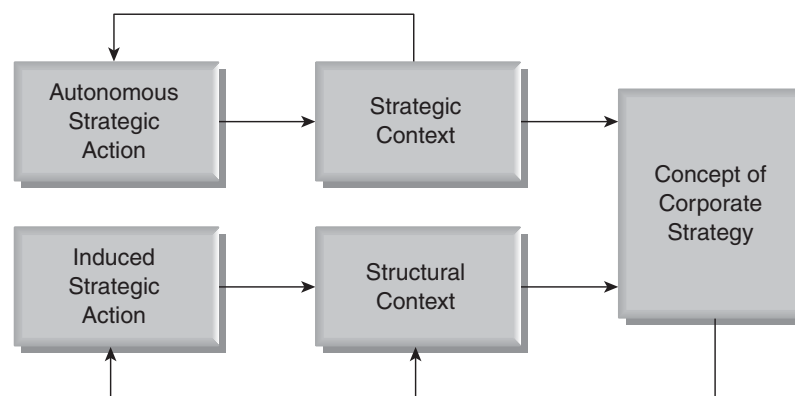


FIGURE 1.1 An evolutionary framework of the strategy-making process in established firms.

Source: Burgelman (2002).

What is interesting about Burgelman's approach is that this autonomous process is perceived as an integral part of the strategy-making process:

strategy making ... involves keeping both processes (induced-autonomous) in play simultaneously at all times, even though one process or the other may be more prominent at different times in a company's evolution ... A company rationally tolerates autonomous strategic initiatives because such initiatives explore and potentially extend the boundaries of the company's competencies and opportunities. (Burgelman, 2002: 14–15)

A deeper appreciation of the behavioral aspects shaping the strategy-making process comes from studies of managerial decision making. Miller and Friesen (1978) identified 11 strategy-making process dimensions including, for example, adaptiveness, analysis, expertise, integration, innovation, and risk taking. In his study, Fredrickson (1986) proposed dimensions such as proactiveness, rationality, comprehensiveness, risk taking, and assertiveness. Despite such developments most of our understanding of strategy making and execution has been mainly static, focusing on the macro, organizational level. As a result, a new approach, focusing on the micro-aspects of strategy or "strategizing," has emerged.

FROM STRATEGY TO STRATEGIZING

1.3 As indicated previously, in the present strategic management literature there is a limited analytical vocabulary to describe how managers practice strategy, as well as limited research attention being given to this topic as compared to the body of strategy scholarship, despite the emergence of the strategy-as-practice approach. Traditionally, conceptual and theoretical dichotomies within the strategy process area (think vs. act, content vs. process, micro vs. macro, rational process vs. political process) have bounded our understanding with respect to the day-to-day activities of

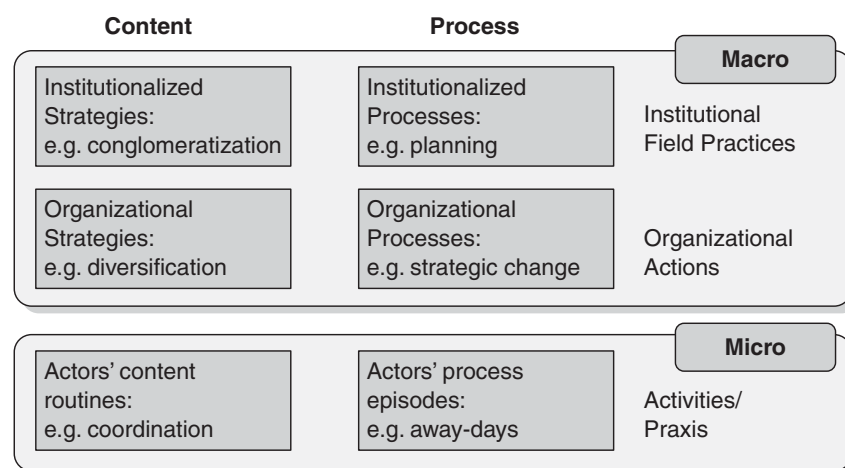


FIGURE 1.2 The micro and macro levels in strategic management research. Adapted from Whittington et al. (2004).

strategy managers. Further, most process research has been fragmented, characterized by limited cumulative theory building and empirical testing (Rajagopalan et al., 1993).

Figure 1.2 summarizes the key areas in strategic content and process research presented across the macro and micro levels. Most research has been carried out at the macro-content level and to a lesser extent at the macro-process level. Accordingly, strategy academics realized that there was a need for an area of research that would deal specifically with the actions and interactions of managers within and around the strategy process. The focus of such research is firmly at the “micro” level of Figure 1.2. This theoretical and empirical challenge has been pursued by researchers examining “strategizing” or “strategy-as-practice.”

Strategizing refers to the strategy work (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) and encompasses all the continuous practices and processes through which strategy is conceived, maintained, renewed, and executed. An explicit and widely agreed definition of strategizing does not exist in the literature, however (the principal definitions are presented in Table 1.2). Strategizing focuses on the what, when, how, and why of making and executing strategy and demonstrates “the way strategies unfold over time, that is the way strategies are developed, realized, reproduced and transformed in an ongoing process” (Melin et al., 1999). Further, strategizing encapsulates the micro-level activities through which organizational members construct and enact strategies by utilizing both informal and formal means (Whittington, 1996). This approach also echoes the argument by Balogun et al. that “most strategy research has been about know what, whereas strategizing research looks for know how, know when and know where” (2003: 199).

TABLE 1.2 Definitions of the term strategizing.

DEFINITION	SOURCE
‘the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life and which relate to strategic outcomes’ (2003: 3)	Johnson et al. (2003)
‘the meeting, the talking, the form-filling and the number-crunching by which strategy actually gets formulated and implemented’ (1996: 732)	Whittington (1996)
‘the concept of strategizing emphasizes the micro-level processes and practices involved as organizational members work to construct and enact organizational strategies, through both formal and informal means’ (2003: 111)	Maitlis and Lawrence (2003)
‘an organizational learning process ... new strategies evolve over time, not from discrete decisions but from indeterminate managerial behaviours embedded in a complex social setting’ (2000: 87)	Floyd and Wooldridge (2000)

Source: Paroutis (2006).

FINDING MISALIGNMENTS ACROSS LEVELS: THE ESCO FRAMEWORK

1.4 Before we investigate in more detail the strategy-as-practice perspective, it is important at this point to show how these macro and micro levels can be linked and what kind of insights can be generated for managers. There have been a number of frameworks that link the micro and macro levels. The model we present here is the ESCO model developed by Heracleous et al. (2009) in their investigation of Singapore Airlines. The ESCO model (Figure 1.3) stands for: Environment (at various levels such as the competitive, macroeconomic, and institutional), Strategy (at the business or corporate levels based on the kind of analysis to be conducted), Competencies (the core competencies of the organization that support the strategy), and Organization (the kinds of process, culture, structure, and people that operate in an integrated way to deliver the firm's core competencies). This model is scalable, and could be applied at the corporate, divisional, business, or functional levels as appropriate.

Heracleous and his colleagues note that: "Competencies must be aligned with the strategy and the organizational configuration must be aligned to deliver the desired competencies, all of this must support the strategy, which must be right for the competitive environment" (2009: 172).

Furthermore, according to Heracleous et al. (2009: 178–185) there can be a number of misalignments based on analysis through the ESCO model, namely:

- Strategy is out of line with external competitive environment.
- Organization and competencies fail to support strategy.
- Incompatibilities and tensions exist within the organization level.
- Reward misalignments, i.e., rewarding one thing but expecting another.
- Failure to realign strategy and organization with environmental changes.
- Misguided strategic actions leading to even greater misalignments.

The key message from this framework is that the micro and macro levels are interrelated and managers need to be aware of these links. The classic problem of the separation between strategy formulation and strategy execution can be put in context when viewed from the perspective of the ESCO framework. Firstly, the

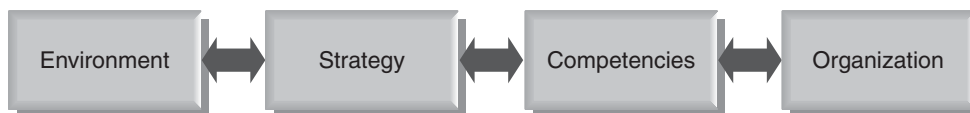


FIGURE 1.3 The ESCO model.

Source: Heracleous, Wirtz and Pangarkar (2009).

framework confirms that unless the strategy is translated into necessary competencies and appropriate organizational configuration, it will remain simply a plan. Secondly, a strategy plan is incomplete and most probably ineffectual unless it contains clear accountabilities and timeframes for the areas of competencies and organization. Finally, the framework suggests that identifying and dealing with misalignments represents a key task for the strategist.

THE STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

1.5 In the last decade the **strategy-as-practice** (SAP) perspective on strategic management has emerged. Taking a leaf from a classic paper on the study of organizational culture (Smircich, 1983), this perspective recognizes that the traditional approach of the strategy discipline has been to treat strategy as a property of organizations – something an organization *has*. This has ignored that strategy is also something that executives *do* (Jarzabkowski, 2004). In this way, the type of research conducted in the “Mintzberg studies” on the nature of managerial work that we touched upon at the start of this chapter becomes once more the focus of the strategy field. According to strategy-as-practice scholars, there is a need to approach holistically “how managers and consultants act and interact in the whole strategy-making sequence” (Whittington, 1996: 732) and develop studies that focus more solidly on the practitioners of strategy. As Johnson et al. stress: “In good part, the agenda for the micro-strategy and strategizing perspective is set by the limitations against which the process tradition has run” (2003: 13).

The strategy-as-practice perspective views strategizing “as a socially accomplished, situated activity arising from the actions and interactions of multiple level actors” (Jarzabkowski, 2005: 6). Practice researchers try to uncover the detailed actions that, taken together, over time constitute a strategy process. Hence, the strategy-as-practice approach favors managerial agency, situated action, and both strategy stability and strategic change rather than focusing on a set of change events from a firm level of analysis, as most process studies tend to do. In addition to this anthropological orientation, where scholars are invited to delve deeply into organizations to engage with executives’ strategy activity in its intimate detail – sometimes described as “micro-strategy” (Johnson et al., 2003) – this perspective is also mindful of the aggregations of strategic activity into a bigger phenomenon.

Johnson et al. (2003) argued in favor of an **activity-based view** for studies investigating strategizing practice. They pointed out that such a view provides strategy scholars with three benefits: “extending existing traditions of research; transcending divisions within the discipline; and offering practical, actionable guidance to practitioners” (2003: 14). Within the activity-based view a number of theoretical approaches can be used, one of which is activity theory (Engeström, 1987), that considers organizations as activity systems comprising of three main constituents: actors, collective social structures, and the practical activities in which they engage (Blackler et al., 2000).

One of the most comprehensive strategy-as-practice studies has been Jarzabkowski's research on three UK universities which looked at the interaction between individual actions of top management team (TMT) actors and formal structures (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2002). Regnér (2003) also investigated managers representing multiple levels across firms. His study of managerial actions at the center and the periphery of four multinational organizations suggests "a twofold character of strategy creation, including fundamentally different strategy activities in the periphery and centre, reflecting their diverse location and social embeddedness" (Regnér, 2003: 57). Further, Regnér's study focuses on the distinctiveness between central and peripheral managers and demonstrates "the great divide between periphery and centre" (2003: 77).

There have also been a number of other studies focusing on the micro-level aspects of strategizing. Oakes et al. (1998) studied the practices around a new business planning model in Canadian museums. Maitlis and Lawrence (2003) analyzed the failure of members of a UK symphony orchestra to construct an artistic strategy for their organization. These authors argue that failure in organizational strategizing can be understood as resulting from the interplay of certain elements of organizational discourse and specific kinds of political behavior. As indicated earlier, these empirical research efforts are attributed to the perceived failure of the traditional strategy process research to study the micro-level characteristics of how strategists actually think and act strategically in the whole strategy process of the firm. While there has been an increase in the empirical studies using the SAP perspective, there have also been calls for more critically oriented studies that focus on the fundamental issues of identity and power (Carter et al., 2008; Clegg, 2011).

Recently, Vaara and Whittington (2012) offered a comprehensive review of 57 SAP empirical studies published since 2003 (24 studies relating to practices, 18 to praxis, and 15 to practitioners) and developed a set of five research directions for the SAP perspective (placing agency in a web of practices, recognizing the macro-institutional nature of practices, focusing attention on emergence in strategy making, exploring how the material matters, and promoting critical analysis). Importantly, the authors note the distinctiveness of the "strategy-as-practice" label and that:

[it] carries with it a double meaning: "practice" signals both an attempt to be close to the world of practitioners and a commitment to sociological theories of practice ... its focus on the ways in which actors are enabled by organizational and wider social practices in their decisions and actions provides a distinctive contribution to research on strategic management. (2012: 2)

Overall, **strategy-as-practice scholars** examine the way in which actors interact with the social and physical features of context in the everyday activities that constitute practice. They investigate how managerial actors perform the work of strategy, both through their social interactions with other actors and through practices present within a context, as well as habits, tools, events, artifacts, and socially defined modes of acting through which the stream of strategic activity is constructed.

PRACTITIONERS, PRACTICES, AND PRAXIS: THE 3P FRAMEWORK

1.6 Three key concepts have been used to encapsulate the SAP approach: practitioners, practices, and praxis. This **3P framework** helps reveal the micro-level aspects of strategizing by focusing on the “who,” “how,” “where,” and “when” of strategic actions (Figure 1.4).



FIGURE 1.4 The praxis, practitioners and practices framework. Adapted from Whittington (2006).

Practitioners are the actors of strategizing, including managers, consultants, and specialized internal change agents. Overall, as Vaara and Whittington note:

Practices refer to the various tools, norms, and procedures of strategy work, from analytical frameworks such as Porter’s Five Forces to strategic planning routines such as strategy workshops. Praxis refers to the activity involved in strategy-making, for example, in strategic planning processes or meetings. Practitioners are all those involved in, or seeking to influence, strategy-making. (2012: 6)

The concept of **practices** refers to the various methods, tools, and techniques that practitioners utilize when they strategize. These methods, in many organizations over long periods of time, tend to become standardized and routinized ways of analyzing strategic issues. In other words, practices are “the shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’, this last in the broadest sense” (Whittington, 2006: 619).

Praxis refers to the activity comprising the work of strategizing. This work encompasses all the meeting, consulting, writing, presenting, communicating, and so on that are required in order to make and execute strategy. In other words, “all the various activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy” (Whittington, 2006: 619). Activities are defined as “the day to day stuff of management. It is what managers do and what they manage” (Johnson et al., 2003: 15).

Importantly, across these three concepts there are areas of overlap, as indicated in Figure 1.4. Each area of overlap raises a number of interesting questions about the conduct of strategy. For instance, in the area where the concepts of “Practices” and “Practitioners” meet we could raise a number of related questions, for instance “what kinds of methods do CEOs use to help them strategize?” or “how are particular planning techniques/tools/SWOT used in action by consultants?”. Similarly, in the “Praxis” and “Practices” area of overlap we could raise questions such as “what kinds of actions do away-days encourage?” and “do particular strategy tools actually help us think in more innovative terms about our strategy?”.

CONCLUSION

1.7 In this introductory chapter we have examined the move to study the micro levels of strategy paying particular attention to the strategy-as-practice (SAP) perspective. We showed that the strategy-as-practice perspective fundamentally moves away from modernist and positivist views of strategy that focus on the macro scale of organizational activity toward a more micro-level, humanistic, behavioral, interpretive approach to strategy making and execution. Integrating these insights with the ESCO model that we saw earlier, we arrive at the summary shown in Figure 1.5.

At the **macro level**, the more traditional approach to strategy, attention is on the environment and the key question is where to locate the organization among its

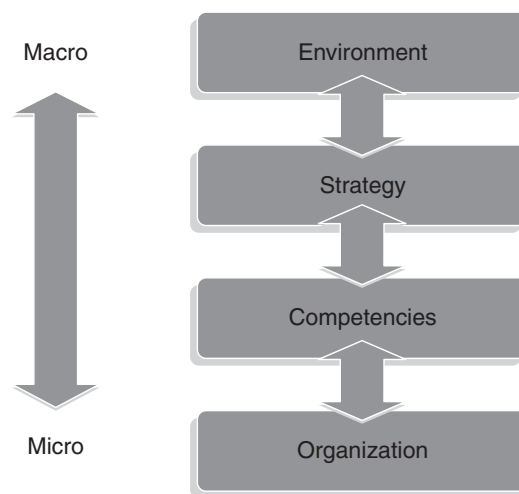


FIGURE 1.5 The ESCO model through the macro and micro lenses.

competitors. At the level of the environment, the classic considerations of industrial organization (Porter, 1980, 1985) are relevant, but at the strategy level, the assumption is that managers and organizations have a choice on which environmental domains to compete in and how to position the organization (Child, 1972).

At the **micro level**, strategy is conceptualized as a *situated* and *socially constructed* activity involving multiple actors. The key question here is how to practice strategy and organize the culture, process, and structure in a way that supports the core competencies of the firm. At this level, considerations of the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) are relevant. The particular strategy actors, their tools, and their capabilities will be the focus of the following chapters.

ROUTE-MAP TO THIS TEXTBOOK

The purpose of this book is to deal with a number of topics that contribute to our understanding of strategy-as-practice. These topics are divided into three parts (Figure 1.6). Part II deals with particular kinds of strategy practitioners, both internal and external to the organization (Chapters 2, 3, and 4). The aim here is to highlight the importance of the individual strategists in making and executing strategy. Part III focuses on the discursive practices employed by these practitioners to alter their organization's strategy (Chapters 5 and 6). Hence, the aim is to contribute to our understanding of one central, constitutive aspect of the micro-level practices employed by key strategic actors. Part IV deals with particular contexts of strategy practice: complex organizations and mergers and acquisitions (Chapters 7 and 8).

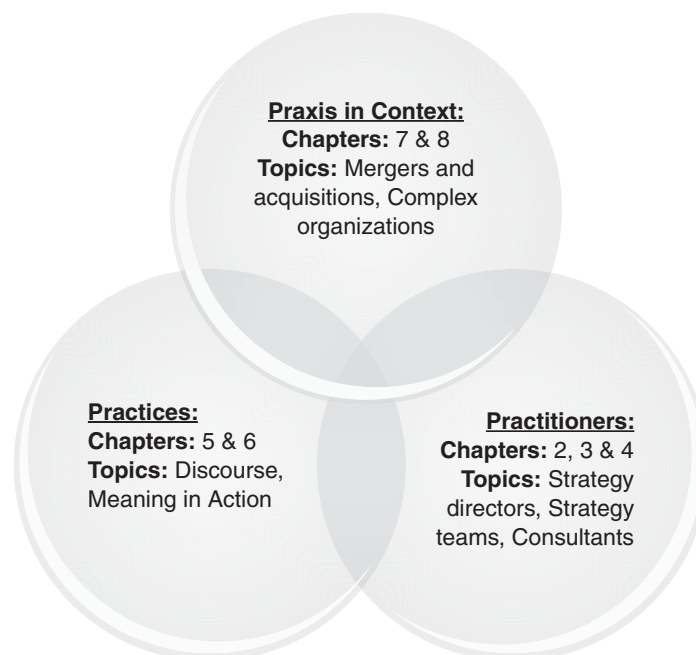


FIGURE 1.6 The chapters and key themes of the textbook.

The objective of this part is to demonstrate the importance of the specific context within which practitioners formulate and implement strategy. Finally, the fourth part (Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13) provides a set of in-depth strategy case studies where practitioners, practices, and praxis can be explored.

REVISION ACTIVITIES

- In this chapter we have highlighted the importance of micro-level aspects of strategy making and execution. Based on what you just read in the current chapter and your own experience, what kinds of questions would you be asking at the micro level as a student and researcher of strategy?
- Select an organization that you are familiar with. Conduct an analysis of that organization's micro-level strategy using the ESCO and 3P models. What kinds of insights do you gain?

GUIDELINES FOR THE REVISION ACTIVITIES

Strategy at the micro level is a situated and socially constructed activity involving multiple actors. As such, the kinds of questions that we could raise relate to the kinds of actions, tools, and methods used to practice strategy and the ways to shape culture, processes, and structure to develop the core competencies of the firm.

Whittington (2003) provides the following questions related to the strategy-as-practice perspective at the micro level:

- 1 How and where is strategizing and organizing work actually done?
- 2 Who does the formal work of strategizing and organizing and how do they get to do it?
- 3 What are the skills required for strategizing and organizing work and how are they acquired?
- 4 What are the common tools and techniques of strategizing and organizing and how are these used in practice?
- 5 How is the work of strategizing and organizing itself organized?
- 6 How are the products of strategizing and organizing communicated and consumed?

Under each question Whittington provides a brief commentary (and references) that you can investigate further.

Using the ESCO and 3P frameworks you can gain at least two key types of insights: (a) about the way strategy is conducted at the micro level; and (b) about the kinds of potential misalignments that exist/have existed in the particular organization. In order to provide such analysis at the micro level you will appreciate that you need good-quality information from the particular organization (e.g., based on your own experience of that firm). Accordingly, micro-level analysis is demanding and should only be conducted if there is enough good-quality information available.

FURTHER READINGS

- **Book:** Heracleous, L., Wirtz, J., and Pangarkar N. (2009) *Flying High in a Competitive Industry*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill. An insightful investigation of one of the world's leading airlines, Singapore Airlines, and a number of strategy frameworks, including the ESCO model which we examined in Section 1.4.
- **Papers:** For two encompassing sets of theoretical and empirical papers on the strategy-as-practice perspective you can look at the following special issues: *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(1), January 2003 and *Human Relations*, 60(1), January 2007.
- **Papers:** Jarzabkowski, P. and Spee, A. P. (2009) Strategy-as-practice: a review and future directions for the field. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 11, 69–95; and Vaara, E. and Whittington, R. (2012) Strategy-as-practice: taking social practices seriously. *Academy of Management Annals*, 6(1), 285–336. Two comprehensive reviews of the strategy-as-practice area of research which provide classifications of papers employing the particular approach and avenues for future research.
- **Website:** For the latest announcements (for instance, for calls for special issues of journals, calls for conference papers, workshops and jobs advertisements), discussion forums, and journal publications about the strategy-as-practice area, you can register at the SAP-IN (Strategy as Practice International Network) at <http://www.s-as-p.org>.
- **Website:** In order to find out more details about the aims, activities, and conferences offered by academic communities associated with the strategy-as-practice perspective you can visit: the Strategizing, Activities and Practice (SAP) interest group of the Academy of Management at <http://sap.aomonline.org>, the Strategy Practice interest group at the Strategic Management Society at <http://practiceig.pbworks.com>, and the Strategy-as-Practice special interest group at the British Academy of Management at <http://www.bam.ac.uk/sigs-strategy-practice>.

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