

Agile Strategizing in a VUCA World.

A New Process Model.



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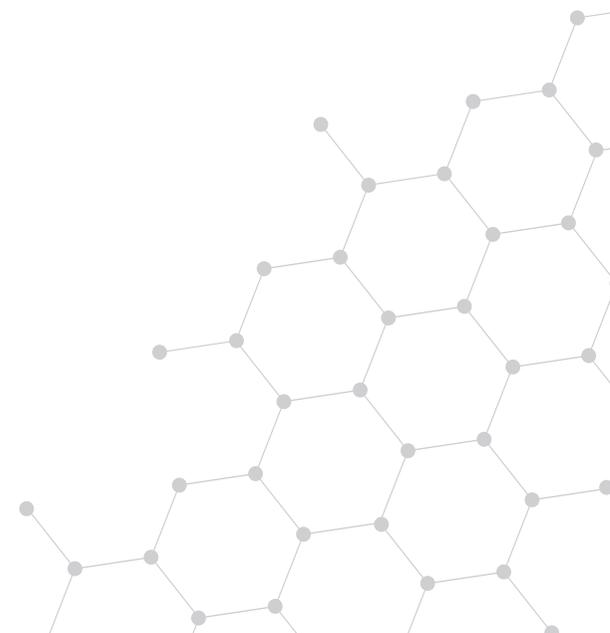
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1. Executive Summary

Agile and Agility as buzzwords have been around for a while. The idea of agile strategy though has only recently entered the world of business consulting and management. Agile strategy is different from strategic agility as it takes the strategy process as its core. In this whitepaper we compared traditional and dynamic approaches to strategizing and defined 'agile strategizing' as the process to proactively adapt strategy content to the environment and/or create a new environment. This process can be more traditional (with elements that also work in a simple environment, e.g., participation in strategy formulation) or more dynamic (with elements that are necessary in complex environments, e.g., short strategy formulation cycles). Agile strategizing implies undertaking choices between traditional and dynamic strategic elements of the strategy process.

Based on our in-depth interview study, we identified how strategy managers in 27 companies across different industries and countries with different sizes positioned themselves on the continuum of traditional vs. dynamic strategizing ("About the research" in the appendix). We highlighted several issues, starting from the need to have an agile organization, an overall guiding North Star (mission, vision, values) and the tools to implement an agile strategizing project, including an implementation model. For companies that want to be truly agile, engaging in an agile strategy project (content domain) should always follow agile principles and methods for implementation (process domain). Done iteratively, it helps companies to become real champions in dealing with VUCA worlds.



2. Introduction

When the COVID pandemic hit Europe, textile provider TRIGEMA was also feeling the effects of the virus. Several hospitals asked the company whether they could produce facemasks. The company quickly produced some makeshift mouth and nose masks and sent them out for testing. After a short feedback period TRIGEMA reorganized their production line and went into mass production in March, 2020.¹

The next generation of wireless network technologies (5G) will likely disrupt the telecommunications industry by expanding the traditional mobile business ecosystem to meet vertical sector-specific requirements in a world where everything is digital, smart, and hyper-connected. This will result in significant strategy changes.²

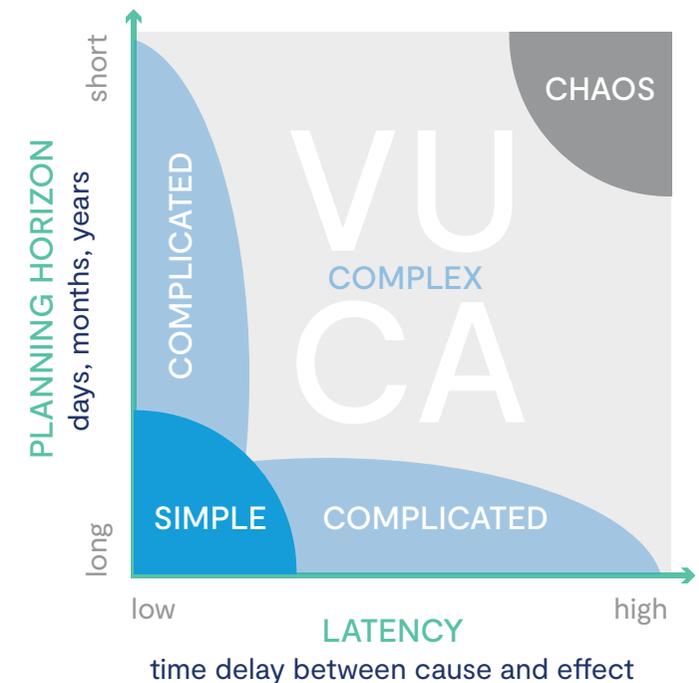
Companies today are facing situations where they have to rapidly change their strategies to deal with unforeseen challenges (e.g., wars, natural catastrophes, etc.). They have to be able to adapt their operations, supply chains and business model, and – even under difficult circumstances – try to grow their revenues. Even though dramatic situations, such as the upsurge of COVID or the Ukrainian war, present extremely rare events, they show that our

world has become much more complex, with unprecedented volatility, unpredictability, and ambiguity. The acronym VUCA world is commonly used to describe these challenges (Figure 1).³

In a **simple environment**, there are fairly direct relations with short delays between actions and results (toppling the domino leads to a knock-on effect). In a **complicated environment**, there is a range of variables and associated problem-solving approaches. In order to find the right solution, a detailed analysis based on expert knowledge is advisable (e.g., the technician's knowledge in a motor race). It takes a little longer to arrive at results and may require a few iterations. In a **complex environment**, the relationship between actions and results becomes blurred. Predicting individual steps becomes difficult because of the many different and unknown options. Learning by doing gains priority (e.g., finding a way out of the rainforest). Finally, in a **chaotic environment**, strategy veers away from linear planning or extrapolation.⁴ Nothing can be predicted and only accelerated action with retrospective sense making may help to remedy the chaos – a situation that fortunately does not occur very often. In customary language use, complicated, complex, and chaotic environ-

ments are often labeled 'VUCA' world (volatile, uncertain, chaotic, ambiguous).

Figure 1: Corporate Strategizing Takes Place in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, chaotic, ambiguous) World – The Stacey Matrix



Many exogenous and endogenous triggers evidence the existence of a VUCA world that requires companies to re-think the strategizing process. For example, numerous new competitors turn up on the global landscape, starting with emerging firms that challenge the dominant players, as well as the small niche market companies that enter the market with accelerated speed. In addition, new industry definitions require cross-boundary knowledge, for instance, in optoelectronics or multimedia, and new digital technologies disrupt existing businesses. The following developments illustrate some of these changes and their consequences:

- The analysis of corporate longevity in the S&P 500 shows a constant decline, (from avg. 30-35 years in 1970s forecasted to average of 15-20 years in this decade).
- The 'topple rate' at which big companies lose their leadership positions has more than doubled, suggesting 'winners' have increasingly precarious positions.
- Product vitality rates, which measure the percentage of revenues coming from new products during a certain time – usually three years – are going up.
- Black Swans: High-impact surprises outside the realm of regular expectation, e.g., the sinking of the Titanic or the rise of the Internet.

Endogenous triggers may have also spurred changes in strategic thinking. Work priorities are changing. Companies are transforming employment contracts. Project-based temporary work substitutes for a life-long company affiliation. Hierarchies are less important than entire talent pools – both inside and outside of the company. Companies have to reinvent themselves more often, moving away from structures to focusing on processes, communication, and cross-boundary collaboration. With these developments in place, companies search for recipes that will help them to react in a better way to unpredictability.

One such recipe that has gained traction over the last couple of years is the concept of agility and related agile methods. Both date back to 2001 when code developers thought about new ways of software engineering.⁵ An agile approach differs from a 'waterfall approach', which follows a step-wise linear planning sequence, is time-consuming, and prone to failure. Instead, an agile approach is composed of values and principles guided by a self-directed, low-risk, and adaptable step-by-step-development for the delivery of (IT) projects. Rather than suffering from inflexible, highly complex and inefficient procedures, agile methods (such as Scrum or extreme programming) provide more flexibility to adapt to changes over time.

Agile thinking has penetrated most areas of business management, ranging from human relations to marketing, organization structures and production planning, growing

from a project-focused approach through scaling methods like LeSS, SAFe etc. A distinction between being and doing agile is helpful here. Being agile refers to who the company is. It has to do with awareness, consciousness and values. For instance, agile organizations change their leadership to support self-organizing units and emphasize the mindset necessary to arrive at flexible and independent team responsibility. In contrast, doing agile is more focused on tools, practices, iterations, user stories, sprints, backlogs, etc. From a doing view, an organization dynamically adapts the processes and procedures that are likely to lead to quick benefits with industry reports noting up to 20 percent reduction in inefficiency.⁶

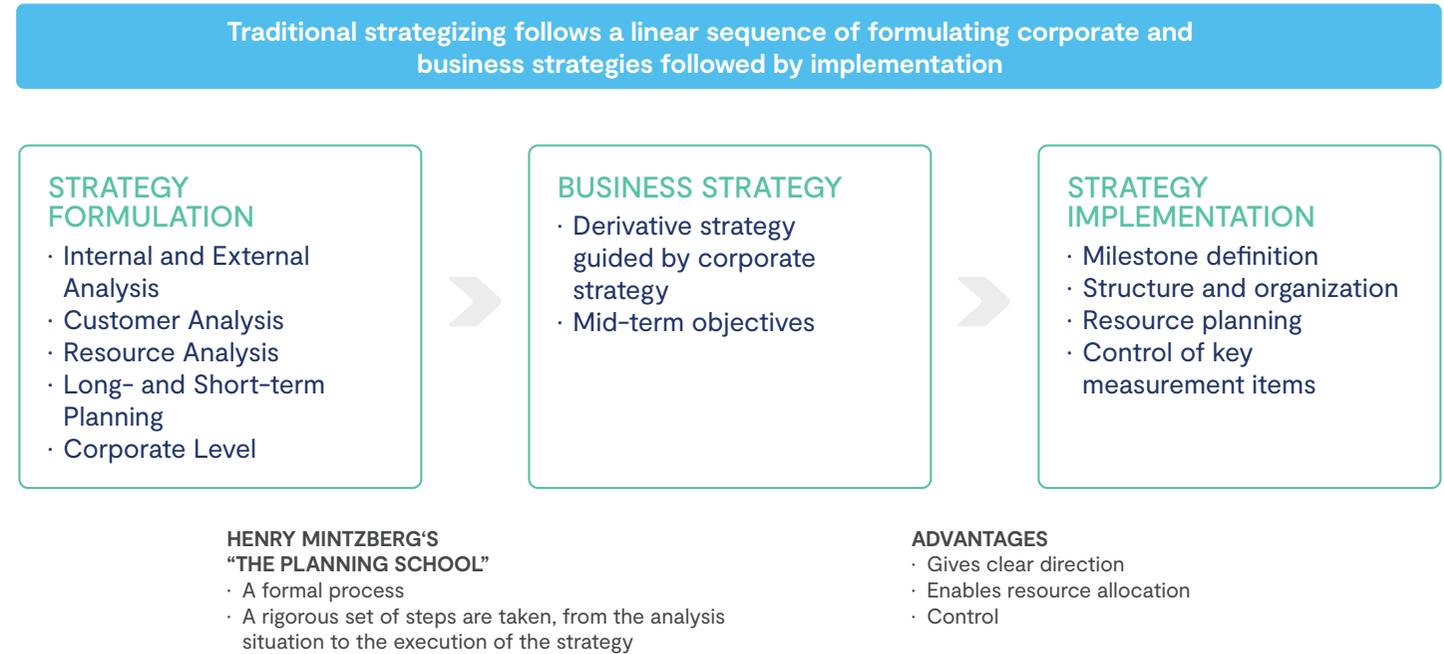
In a VUCA environment, companies need a strategizing process that itself is agile. Agile strategizing⁷ helps to change strategy as often, as radical, as interactive as necessary. In a sense, agile strategizing is what companies do to arrive at their strategy based on an analysis of how agile their organizations are. The shift from agile methods and an agile organization to agile strategizing is an important one. Though companies do not need to change their strategy content on a permanent basis, being able to do so is important in VUCA worlds with the need increasing during times of war or pandemics.



3. The End of Traditional Strategizing?

Since the beginning of strategy research in the early 1960s, different notions of the strategy process developed, ranging from a planning-execute approach to learning-based, adaptive or more iterative strategizing.⁸ Many strategists today start with planning and strategy formulation, typically by a company's headquarters and subsequently rolled out and implemented at the business unit level. Strategy guru **Henry Mintzberg** in referring to one of the most influential books on Corporate Strategy by Igor Ansoff, published in 1965, describes this as a formal planning process with rigorous steps taken from the analysis of the situation and leading to its execution (Figure 2).⁹

Figure 2: The Traditional Strategy Process [adapted from: Ansoff (1965), Mintzberg (1990)]



The traditional strategy process works best in simple environments with predictable developments and clear action steps to reach predefined objectives. Managers take insights from proper internal and external analysis to forecast future developments and mostly apply the tools and procedures that were successful in the past. In most cases, there is clear responsibility shared among the top management to formulate objectives and to design the strategy process.

In a simple environment, there are clear advantages of the traditional strategy process: It is a formal, clearly defined process with a rigorous set of steps to be undertaken, from analysis to the execution of strategy; everybody knows what to do when and how with what results. With almost no adaptation during the process, there are clear and consistent guidelines that enable resource allocation and control. Yet, despite its advantages, the traditional strategy process, with planning from one business cycle to the next, encounters serious limitations in VUCA environments where changing conditions can easily render any planning obsolete.

Planning faces its limits in complex environments. In a chaotic environment, planning is even useless. With reduced or zero predictability of changing conditions, the process of developing and implementing a company's strategy needs to change as well. It needs to facilitate the exploitation of new opportunities by increasing experimentation, and by a

more iterative and dynamic interplay between strategy formulation and implementation. This also includes the need for speed in learning about what works and what does not. The strategy process becomes an activity of constant adaptation – both reactive and proactive.



What our interview partners said

Agility is a very, very good way to deal with complexity, precisely under the premise that things are so complex that they can no longer be planned in the traditional way. And we have to distinguish exactly between the cases where are we in such a complex world and where are we in a complicated world. In the complex world, we rely fully on agile and in the complicated world, we tend to stick to waterfall approaches. (Interview 9)

Some of our interview companies explicitly distinguished between a 'body' and a 'mind' approach to strategizing, where the mind is used to formulate the strategy in simple environments and the body 'approach' is necessary in complex environments where leadership comes first (Interview 27). (Figure 3)

Figure 3: The Mind- and the Body-Approach to Strategizing



4. Towards Agile Strategizing

In a VUCA world strategizing never stands still! While the traditional process follows a strict order and gives you the impression you will arrive at an end where strategizing is completed on implementation, dynamic strategizing recognizes that most elements of the strategy process are changeable and need to be defined in an iterative process.

Before the strategy process is started, it is important to realize that dynamic strategizing is not the same as agile strategizing.

What is Agile Strategizing?

We define agile strategizing as the process to proactively adapt strategy content to the environment and/or create a new environment. This process can be more traditional (with elements that also work in a simple environment, e.g., participation in strategy formulation) or more dynamic (with elements that are necessary in complex environments, e.g., short strategy formulation cycles). Agile strategizing implies undertaking choices between traditional and dynamic. It reduces the gap between strategy formulation and implementation through an iterative feedback cycle.

Agile strategizing also does not ignore stability. The contrary is true. In choosing how much traditional and how much dynamic strategizing is needed, necessary stability is taken into account. In many cases, it is not possible to have the team experiment and venture into unknown spaces if a minimum of safety is missing. For example, in some companies leadership may take a stronger guiding role to create a safe space where flexibility can be exercised. In other companies, stability is provided by regularly comparing strategy to the overall mission, vision, and purpose. Many companies talk about a “North Star” to combine these concepts.

Further, agile strategizing is not isolated in the company (Figure 2). Before you start with agile strategizing, it is important to understand whether the organization and the corporate culture are ‘fit for agile strategy’. For instance, if the result of such mapping is that leadership prefers to stay in control and maintain hierarchical structures, or if the mindset of employees is directed towards guidance and safety, moving to a dynamic strategy process may be difficult and an agile diagnosis/transformation project may need to be launched first.



What our interview partners said

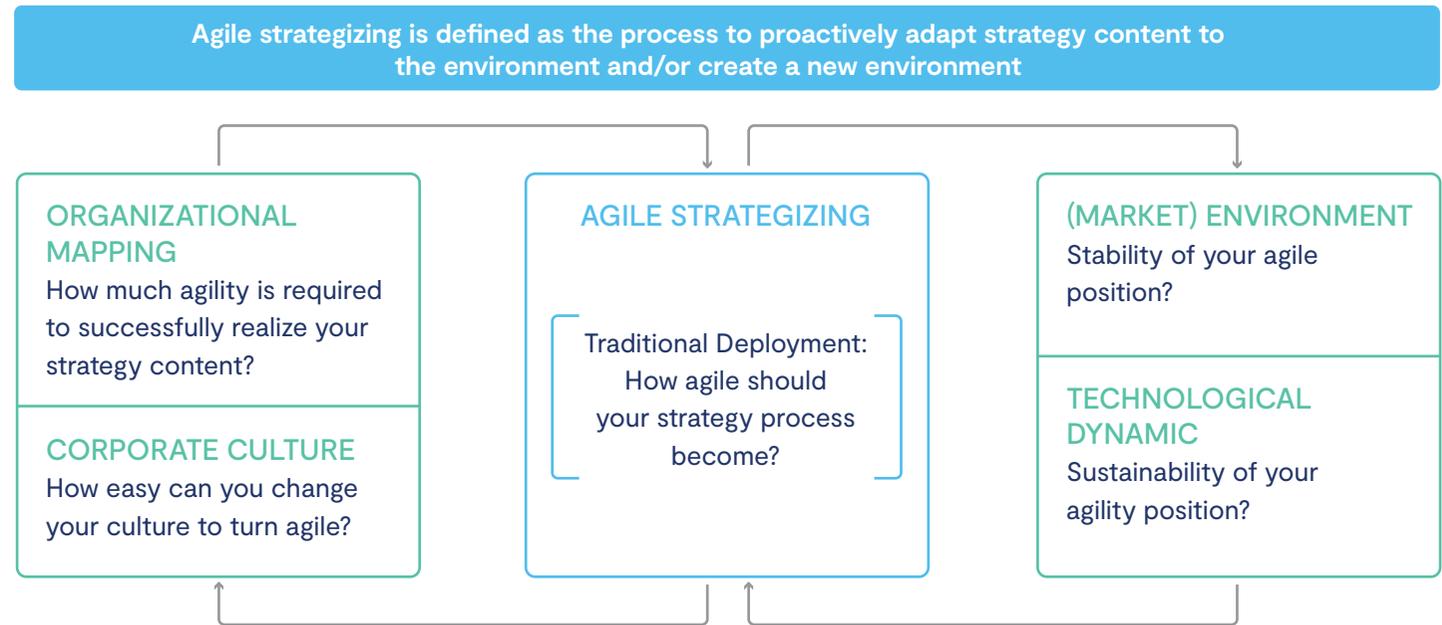
You have to prepare the C-suite for the fact that they too have to become more agile Also have to become quicker in decision-making, possibly also have to be more willing to take risks. Teaching someone who has worked for years on 100/120 percent protection to be satisfied with 85 percent is a very, very difficult subject. (Interview 2)



In agile strategizing the environment is important and its changes are continuously reflected and implemented in strategy execution. Stable and sustainable environments will yield different results for agile strategizing than volatile environments. For instance, in industries with high volatility and short product life cycles, agile strategizing leads to a more dynamic strategy process and strategy execution (e.g., different rates of new product development) whereas in stable environments, typically infrastructure providers, agile strategizing will tilt more towards the traditional strategy process. Again, agile strategizing builds on choosing the appropriate elements that make up the strategy process.

A most important point to remember is that, ideally, the agile strategy process is tightly linked with projects for transformation and change: One project primarily directed at serving customers (typically external customers), the other project focused on internal changeability (typically internal stakeholders). Ideally, the two go together (see also “project approach” below).

Figure 4: Agile Strategizing



What our interview partners said

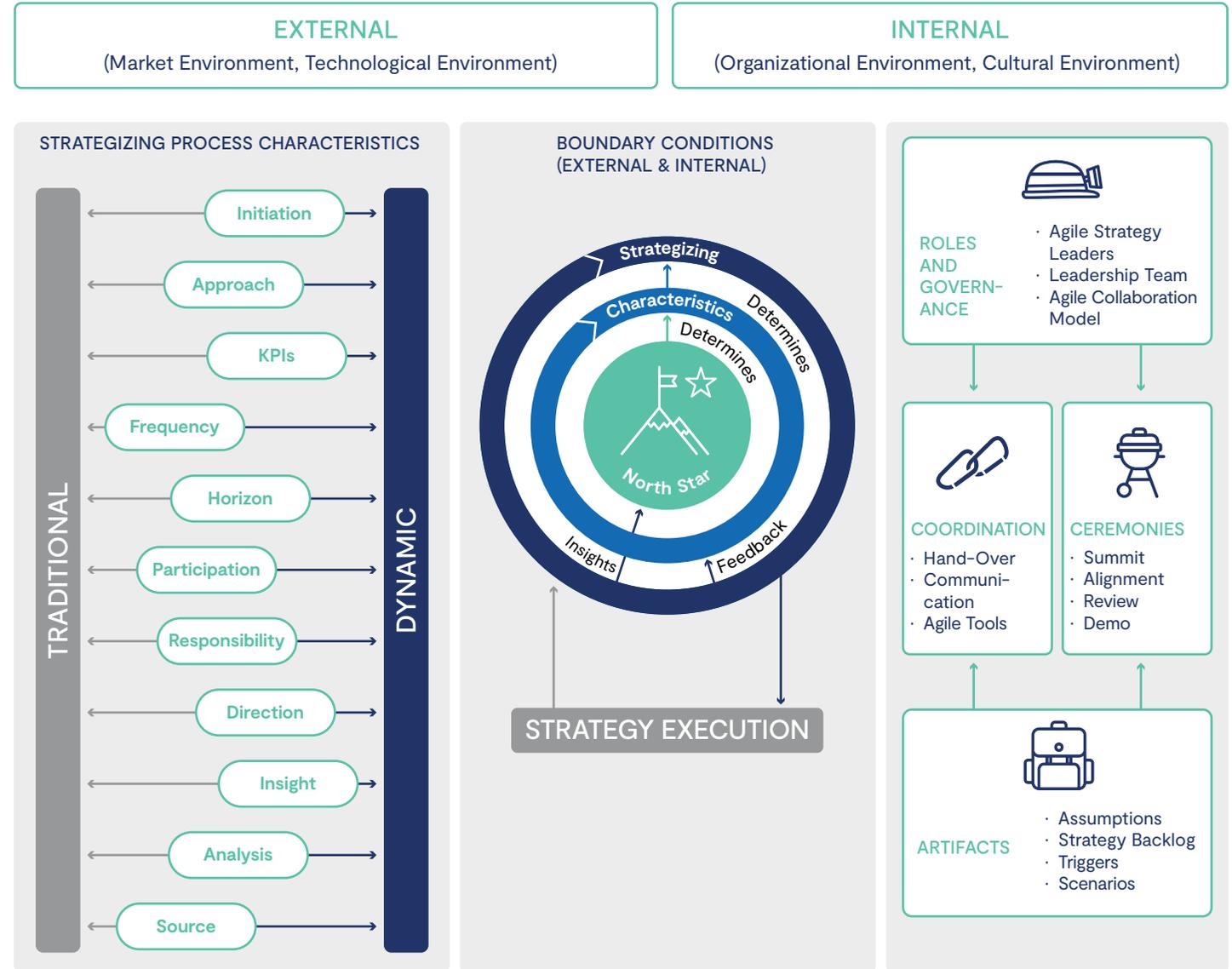
For me, that means that it is important to develop a strong vision in this whole context. It's also about us as a company developing a strong, clear, understandable vision, because we no longer have these clear days in the Alps, but these foggy days, where I can just see to the next street corner, so it's important that we create clarity through the vision and it certainly has a long-term character and it is based on the strengths of the company. And then I have to regularly validate my medium to long-term planning scenarios based on this vision, and that is the long-term reference. (Interview 11)

5. The Agile Strategizing Model

We conducted a number of expert interviews with strategy specialists from different industries and in different countries (see: About the Research). Based on our insights, we developed the 'Agile Strategy Model' (Figure 5) as a new approach to agile strategizing.

The model consists of three major blocs. First, the iterative cycles of strategizing including the 'North Star' (middle); Second, the strategy process characteristics that help to determine how traditional or dynamic the strategy process should be (left). Third, the artifacts that help to implement the defined strategy (right). All three parts of the model are related in constant iteration with developments in the environment (internal and external) and by taking existing boundary conditions into account (industry, culture, etc.).

Figure 5: The Agile Strategizing Model



5.1 The North Star and the Strategy Layers (Vision, Mission, Values¹)

In our model, the “North Star” has a guiding function for the company. It can be understood as a blend of vision, mission and purpose.

The **vision** describes the target a company wants to reach for in developing its business. It maps out the strategic aspirations in terms of future products, technologies, markets and technology and provides a rationale for where the company is going. A clearly articulated vision translates the rationale of the management and makes it attractive to the larger group of stakeholders. The vision is a valuable management tool to create commitment for a mid- to long-term orientation of the company.

The **mission** statement is more geared to the here and now of a company. It describes its present activities and achievements. This could include its position as a market leader or the scope of its operations in the sense of ‘who we are what we do and why we are here’. The **values** of a company are the beliefs, traits, and behavioral norms that underlie the vision and strategy. They are at the core of the company's conduct and the behavior of its people.

To mirror the actual practice of an organization in terms of strategizing, a look at the three individual components of the North Star is useful because each of them can be a trigger for change. While the North Star remains comparatively stable, it is nonetheless subject to change if required.

To start the strategizing process, it is necessary to identify the North Star and how it determines the choice of the strategy process characteristics (left part of the model). The choice of strategy process characteristics is also influenced by a) the analysis of the external environment (including industry characteristics); b) the analysis of the internal environment (including agility mapping); c) the desired state of the company; d) the likely strategizing output (stability of the market position). The combination of strategy process characteristics leads to a strategizing profile (see section 6) that makes up the strategizing process (the outer dark blue layer). During the strategizing process, there is constant feedback with execution. The execution parameters are detailed on the right side of the chart. We use separate sections to detail the strategizing profile and strategy execution.



What our interview partners said

I think a vision should definitely be valid at least for 5 years per personal gut feeling because you need a certain time to really get going and to see the results. It's impractical to say, okay, here's my vision, and in 1 week, it's done. It takes a lot of time. (Interview 21)

Your North Star will require a certain transformation. So, this is what we were thinking. I want to be as concrete as possible, so what we've done as well is we've looked at what are the shifts we want to drive in the category, for instance? How do we want to reinforce our competitive advantages as another example? So all these things are requiring change if you want to put digital at the forefront of everything we are going to do in the future. It means it's a huge transformation on this front because you need to have the right capabilities, you need to have the right technologies, and you need to have the right understanding of what the digital potential means for this brand. (Interview 27)



5.2 Strategy Process Characteristics

The “North Star” influences how a company undertakes choices regarding each strategy process characteristic. In turn, the market environment (industry characteristics, industry life cycle, maturity, competitive situation) is likely to have an impact on choices so any chosen characteristic may be executed by following more traditional strategizing (left side) or move towards dynamic strategizing (right side).¹⁰

Figure 6: Four Blocks of Strategy Process Characteristics

Source: adapted from Bower (1970), Burgelman (1983), Mintzberg (1990), Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst (2006)



5.2.1 STRATEGY INITIATION



Strategy initiation considers the starting point for revising existing or creating new strategies.

Key question:

Why do we start thinking about changes in strategy?

Traditional approach

Most companies follow characteristic strategy-cycles with clearly defined timeframes for annual meetings and budgeting plans. These events are seen as the opportunity to think about strategy, typically from a high-level perspective. The incentive to change strategy can result from changes in the budget, poor results from previous periods, or arising challenges the company needs to solve. A traditional approach to strategy initiation occurs at specific and defined points in time.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA environment, companies may not have the time to wait for defined strategy decision points and instead change strategy whenever opportunity arises or necessity demands it. Companies that adopt a dynamic approach often have elaborate market scanning systems to identify trends to be ahead of the competition.

Measurement

The polar ends of the strategy initiation profile are defined by “fixed dates”, e.g., every year, every quarter (traditional) and situational opportunity, or incident-driven “whenever useful” (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

We use an annual process that starts sometime in May with market planning, and then ends with the formal decisions in the fourth quarter. In principle, it is still the same as it used to be in the last ten years ... When there are changes in the environment, we react very flexibly to this. How do we do that? Very simply, we sit down with the relevant people and then discuss it. Very hands-on, there are no committees, there are no working groups, but we react flexibly depending on the topic. And since the topics are always very, very similar, there is often a very similar group of participants for the respective topics and we are usually quick with that. (Interview 4)

Like you said, maybe larger disruptive things can actually, yes, it can be good to have different scenarios and so forth, but it usually locks you anyway mentally into a state and actually it's more for your survival. It's more important that, OK, there is an incident and you can adapt to that and learn from that as fast as possible, and the learning starts immediately. That is why actually minimizing the cycle, the learning cycle is a key thing. (Interview 22)



5.2.2 STRATEGY APPROACH



The **strategy approach** defines how much change is allowed.

Key question:

How much change do we want to allow in our strategy process?

Traditional approach

Strategizing takes place in an existing organization. If other organizational (structure) or individual parameters (mind-set, leadership) are supposed to remain stable, the degree to which the strategizing process may change is also limited. It is further assumed that once the strategy is formulated, available resources are sufficient to implement it.

Dynamic approach

Strategy formulation is based on the assumption that other design parameters of an organization can and need to be changed for strategy implementation. This may involve the extreme case that resource planning needs to be revisited or organizational structures modified. In principle, a dynamic approach to strategy acknowledges that the organization is agile and can change itself.

Measurement

The polar ends of the strategy approach are defined by “zero change in the organization”, e.g., strategy does not foreshadow any changes (traditional) and “changes in the organization are always possible”, e.g. ‘organization meets strategy’ (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

Agility in the strategy process is to deal appropriately with uncertainties. A strategy process is per se relatively open in terms of the result. And you have certain ideas about what should happen. But in the end it's like getting carried away, drifting or bumping into something and you have to turn back and take a different path. ... Anyone who is stuck in the processes and thought patterns will have a really difficult time getting out of there. (Interview 13)

It should be different types of discussions and how to integrate that into our strategy process, where we're not 100 percent sure yet, but a couple of things we know. One is that we want to turn a bit around the dynamics we see around strategy now where it's sort of strategy for our group, owned by a group, and then everyone turns around and challenges that strategy. And then strategy has to be owned by the new management and then everyone turns around and challenges that strategy. So it becomes a very much sort of, how do we challenge the strategy or how do we interpret the strategy in the best way? (Interview 24)

5.2.3 MEASUREMENT/KPIs



Do we use only financial **KPIs** or also add KPIs that relate to changeability and transformation? And how do we make sure they complement each other?

Key question:

How quickly do we react in changing KPIs?

Traditional approach

In many companies a financial approach to measurement dominates (revenues, sales, etc.), often complemented by non-financial indicators (customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, time to market, etc.).

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA environment, speed becomes an important factor for success. The speed component is especially relevant when it comes to adapting key performance indicators. In a VUCA world, companies that integrated indicators of change and transformation into their measurement instrument are likely to change their strategy content more quickly. At the same time, they need to be careful not to overstrain their employees with too much change.

Measurement

The polar ends of the measurement profile are defined by “very slow in adopting non-financial key performance indicators”, e.g., purely financial figures (traditional) and “quick to integrate non-financial indicators”, e.g. team changes, speed of transformation (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

There is a time-to-market KPI, for example. It's been in our top 10 for two years. I don't know if it's the top level, but there is already in the communication the proportion of agile projects versus the classic waterfall projects, so there are also such KPIs that also have a top priority. (Interview 4)

And now in the direction of willingness to change KPIs, yes, we ask this in the employee survey how willing to change people are. I believe that when you move in a company, it simply means that you have a certain willingness to change. I actually experience this in everyday life, so everyone feels like helping to shape things and then taking action. But of course there are also colleagues for whom it gets too much and where you have to create this framework and see that there isn't permanent change, because the colleagues then can't endure too much change either. (Interview 5)

We actually formulate strategies ... we actually have KPIs over ten years. And even country-specific. (Interview 9)

There is a complex of questions that revolves around the question of how well our employees think we can deal with uncertainties, etc., so yes we deal with uncertainty in our KPIs. (Interview 13)



5.2.4 FREQUENCY



Frequency relates to the question of how often strategy is formulated/adapted.

Key question:

How long are the intervals of strategy cycles?

Traditional approach

In a simple environment, or in rather stable industry settings, companies may prefer to have long planning cycles where strategy meetings are rather rare. Typically, this long-term planning is on the highest level of corporate strategy while it does not completely exclude that some lower-level strategies are controlled and adjusted.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA environment, strategy cycles shrink down. While some companies have experimented with short cycles, most of them realize that there is also a limit to permanent strategizing ‘on the run’ as it creates too much disturbance and internal chaos. Thus, dynamic strategizing means that people sit together in strategy meetings, but only as often as it is useful and potentially creates value.

Measurement

The polar ends of the strategy cycle portfolio are defined by “fixed and often long periods”, e.g., in infrastructure industries (traditional) and “flexible adjustment”, e.g., strategy meetings take place whenever necessary which could be quite often in industries with high product volatility or in emerging industries (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

Our owners said, well, we need this strategy meeting more often. And then we said, every three months is too quick. That costs too much when the entire management is out of order, so out of office and not available, so we came to a four-month cycle and said every four months two days strategy meeting with the strategy team. (Interview 1)

And agile then means we do it in very, very short cycles. And we're already noticing that, so now that I'm on the Executive Board, we'll deal with the strategy topic every two weeks and always pick up the next iterations there. And I can already remember when we made the old SBB strategy in 2016 or 2017, it was a quiet little room for about a year and then the golden book came, which also had to be communicated. And that's why it's already a fundamentally different approach. ... And that is also something that makes Agile what it is. That's the difference. In the old world we would have been writing for three years now and then we would have appeared in front of the public for the first time. (Interview 9)

5.2.5 HORIZON

SHORT-TERM

LONG-TERM

Horizon relates to the duration for which strategy should be valid.

Key question:

Do framing conditions require short-term or long-term planning?

Traditional approach

How long a strategy is presumed to be valid is closely linked to the previous criterion of frequency. If the perceived industry dynamic is low, it is assumed that the strategy content will remain valid for a long time. Obviously, there are industry-specific differences, e.g., when considering mature vs. nascent industries.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA environment, companies need to be prepared for the 'unknown'. It is highly unlikely that a strategy will be valid for a long time given rapid changes in consumer preferences, retail structures, or industry constellations.

Measurement

The polar ends of the horizon profile are defined by "up to 10 years" (traditional), e.g., there is no real perceived movement and "quarterly", as a perceived need to adapt the strategy content almost on an ongoing basis (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

I don't have the time anymore, I make a strategy for four years and then it goes in the safe. It used to be like that, it was still a secret then. Also for the employees. And after five years you saw if it worked. That doesn't work anymore. So the thing is ... I'm not saying that strategizing is a living object, but it's a known object, which of course also goes through a certain evolution. (Interview 9)

We have defined 10 key we call them must-win battles. It's like the ten transformational initiatives. If you want, let's call them like that. And these are the 10 projects or 10 initiatives. They are not projects. They are more programs or initiatives to be brought in a project We believe those 10 transformational initiatives are not valid for five years. What is important here is some of them are already in execution in the market. Some of them are in pilot phase. In a couple of markets before scaling up, some of them are in development in our head office and will be launched in two or three years. So we have a time aspect here that, I think, interesting for us because you could argue 10 initiatives is too many. But the time aspect lets you know that probably we can rely on three to deliver the growth of today, we can rely on three to deliver the growth of tomorrow, and we can rely on three others that will deliver the growth after tomorrow. But all of them require resources and focus now. (Interview 27)



5.2.6 PARTICIPATION



Participation relates to how many different people are allowed to have a say in the strategizing process.

Key question:

Is there selective participation by a few chosen people or is everyone free to join and contribute?

Traditional approach

In a traditional strategizing approach, participation often goes hand-in-hand with the responsibility and direction of influence (see points 7 and 8), that is, strategizing is in the hands of the top management and once finished is taken over by lower levels in the company. Typically, it is a very select group of people that are allowed to participate in the strategizing process.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA environment, knowledge is actively leveraged across different layers inside and outside an organization. Taking into account expert knowledge or evaluations from everywhere in the company helps to make sure that new trends are identified, discussed, and implemented.

Measurement

The polar ends of the participation profile are defined by who could join the strategizing processing, either “only very few selected people”, e.g., normally board level people and/or strategists are involved (traditional) and “everybody who is interested”, keeping the group of participants totally open (dynamic).



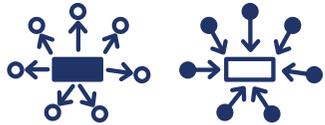
What our interview partners said

Can everyone contribute to the strategy? Yes. So there are very, very regular calls for everyone who wants to work there to do it. There are corresponding forms of organization in which it is also a bit formalized how to do it. But everyone has the opportunity to work on the strategy. (Interview 6)

We really feel this is a very special experience. We invited the entire workforce to contribute to the strategy and anyone could apply. We then advertised and said who would like to participate? ... advertised, really the chairman of the board of directors advertised and then we had 110 applications. (Interview 13)



5.2.7 RESPONSIBILITY



Responsibility relates to where (by whom) the final decision-making takes place.

Key question:

Where and by whom does decision-making take place? It is often a question of headquarter vs. subsidiaries making decisions.

Traditional approach

Typically, strategizing is undertaken by the headquarters or strategic centers of firms. In the traditional strategy process business-level objectives are derived from corporate strategy and subsidiaries are the implementers of strategy decided on somewhere else.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA environment, decision-making is delegated as much as possible to the frontline of where the results of a strategy materialize. This could be people in client-facing functions, or more generally, in the local subsidiaries of a multinational company. However, in a dynamic strategizing process, people may need some guidance and should not be overstrained.

Measurement

The polar ends of the responsibility profile are defined by “completely centralized”, e.g., no responsibility outside the central group (traditional) and “decentralized”, e.g. everybody who is close to strategy implementation and the customer (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

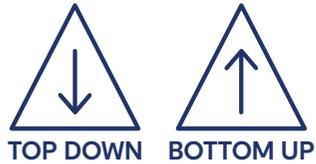
And self-organization and personal responsibility naturally come into play in the teams ... And the employees' ability to do this has also gradually developed. We have let go more and more. But we also noticed that it can backfire if you leave the teams too much to themselves. (Interview 1)

The decision is done on our management team level. I think you need to have someone to call the shots in the end and who is also, well, sticking out his head in terms of if something goes wrong, who can be beaten if the shareholder wants to find someone to beat. (Interview 21)

We need to empower those who are so close to the customer and close to the operation and those who actually have the competence to interpret and come up with the best possible answer within that. And then leave it, leave the discussions there instead of funneling those discussions all the way to the top. Rather, at the top [we should] have the questions around how do we generate value long term as a company? (Interview 24)



5.2.8 DIRECTION



Direction relates the direction in which the influence goes.

Key question:

Is there a top-down or bottom-up influence in the strategizing process?

Traditional approach

Strategy in the traditional approach (the planning school) is formulated at the top and then communicated to lower levels in the hierarchy to implement it. Strategizing is a management function, not necessarily a team function and the way strategy content is evaluated depends on the mindset and experience of the management board.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA world, influence on the strategizing process may come from different arenas in the organization – strictly bottom-up to generate diversity. The focus is not on one level in the organization, but on the ‘right level’ that should be allowed to exert influence. Focus on the right levels of the organization.

Measurement

The polar ends of the direction profile are defined by “completely top-down”, e.g., nobody outside the management team is involved and “completely bottom-up”, e.g., everybody can influence the strategizing process (dynamic).



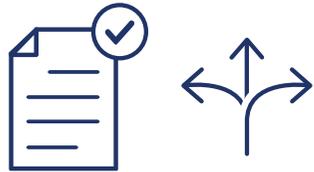
What our interview partners said

Let's put it this way, the CEO sets the process, that's his right, that's also his responsibility to the board of directors. But the actual work is again very, very spread out in the sense that it's actually always a top-down, bottom-up story. For example, we from IT digitization are also involved in this process because we provide the technology impetus ... From a management point of view, it's always the case that everything that comes from the bottom up now tends to be too expensive overall. (Interview 9)

Strategizing is clearly bottom-up. There is no such thing as a top-down strategy. Of course, the overall strategy, the brand, all that is a common direction. Another direction is that we say we want to increase industrial efficiency for a more sustainable world. It's a kind of mission or vision that we all share here. But the strategy itself is really done at the business unit level ... We expect that too. With us, a BU manager must be an entrepreneur and not a department manager with four administrative employees. We are not an administration in that sense, we have to be entrepreneurs in our business units. And then you have to be agile, then you will be successful. (Interview 10)

The decision is done on our management team level. This is pretty much what I said. I think you need to have someone to call the shots in the end and who is also, well, sticking out his head in terms of if something goes wrong, who can be beaten if the shareholder wants to find someone to beat. (Interview 21)

5.2.9 INSIGHT



Insight relates how knowledge is generated from data.

Key question:

Are there specific procedures to generate data and transfer them into knowledge (big data)?

Traditional approach

A common way to generate insight is from market research data. Data collection often follows predefined categories and, at regular intervals, changes that happen in the market, the industry, or the broader environment are checked. Following checklist and monitoring indices creates the information that is turned into knowledge.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA world, an extrapolation of historical data into the future is hardly possible. It may be the case that data categories used in the past are not applicable anymore. Thus, insight is generated through broad unspecified search procedures to allow for exploration. This involves the use of qualitative techniques to generate insight, e.g., Delphi studies, focus groups, expert interviews, etc.¹¹

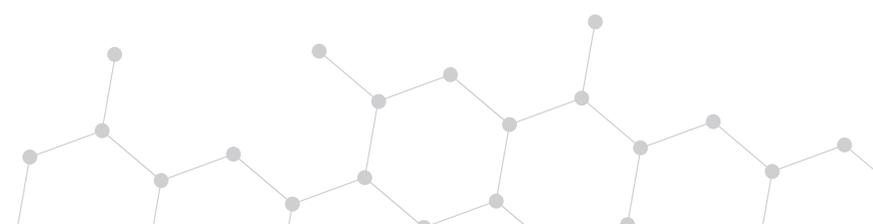
Measurement

The polar ends of the insight profile are defined by “completely predefined checklist”, e.g., not allowing for adding further external criteria (traditional) and “completely open”, e.g. formulating a broad set of categories that are modified ‘on the run’ (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

I'll tell you a classic now, before I rely on my competitor coming around the corner with quarterly figures and telling me, well watch out, my sales have increased, my deliveries have increased, I can, for example, I can take service providers and their logistics centers look at them from above and see that there is a lot of traffic at the moment. And I don't have to wait until he comes out with the quarterly figures, but I say okay, if I look at it for a month, more trucks than usual roll out of the yard, so something is happening in that respect. It starts off in some way. And that is then more agile in that we say we can process real-time information, we can also anticipate real-time information, that we say we have a proxy and what could that stand for? In this case, trucks driving from the yard for more goods turnover, for more sales. And then we think about it in advance, what could be the reason for it now? Are they on to something else or whatever. (Interview 2)



5.2.10 ANALYSIS



Analysis relates the way data is analyzed.

Key question:

How much subjectivity is allowed in the analysis?

Traditional approach

There is a huge history of analyzing data from the past, preferably through quantitative analysis, and with the intention to extrapolate data to future scenarios. The procedures applied are mainly objective based on quantifiable data. This approach may well work in simple environments with little change.

Dynamic approach

In VUCA environments, it is not only information that becomes less accessible – because it is not structured in categories –, the analysis is also different. Rather than focusing on objective numbers, subjective elements come into play and tools, such as text analysis, including emotional analysis with highly subjective interpretations may give rise to emerging trends that may otherwise remain undetected. This also requires very different skills to interpret data.

Measurement

The polar ends of the analysis profile are defined by “objective indicators”, e.g., statistical analysis with well-known methods (traditional) and “subjective evaluation”, e.g., bringing in insights based on personal experience, background, preferences (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

That means that the analysis does not go backwards into the past in order to draw conclusions, but for me the analysis goes more into the future, i.e. into the trends. Also to understand, what are the symptoms out there? What are the drivers behind it and how do they affect us? How do we get that strategically built in for us? (Interview 11)



5.2.11 SOURCE



Source relates to where the data comes from.

Key question:

Do we look beyond our industry boundaries?

Traditional approach

Benchmarking is a typical tool used to compare a company against its competitors. Competitors typically share a couple of characteristics and it is easier to identify the criteria for comparison. However, benchmarking mostly implies running after other best practices while potentially ignoring first mover advantages that come from searching for data outside the box.

Dynamic approach

In a VUCA world, we find not only companies but also industries merging with data coming from different sectors, people, countries, and interest groups. In order to be ahead of the competition, it is essential to be open to these data sources.

Measurement

The polar ends of the source profile are defined by collecting data “only within our own industry” (traditional) versus “beyond our own industry boundaries” (dynamic).



What our interview partners said

Well, for me the strategy work ..., to put it a bit rudely, is no longer ivory tower work of the past in top management, where you had the knowing people who then took care of the strategy, but for me it's a very much broader interdisciplinary process, where people with external skills also sit at the table with the relevant stakeholders, they can also be customers or partners or whatever. (Interview 11)



6. Diagnosing the Right Strategizing Process

Orchestrating the strategy process means finding a balance between traditional and dynamic strategy elements. Some companies prefer to maintain a rather traditional profile, others adopt elements on the dynamic side. There is no single profile that works best for all companies and therefore it is very important to analyze how agile the company currently is, how the framing conditions may determine the way the strategy process is approached, and where the company wants to be. Figure 7 shows an example of a profile chart for three selected companies with different sizes and industries.

Once the diagnosis of the strategy process characteristics is done and a company has identified its as-is and to-be positions (agile strategizing), the question of execution becomes preminent. While it may have already been difficult to identify the best position per strategy characteristic, especially as the 'traditional strategizing world' is often still anchored in people's minds, strategy execution may even be more challenging as it taps into the very essence of change. Therefore, we formulate certain artifacts that can help on the route towards transformation.

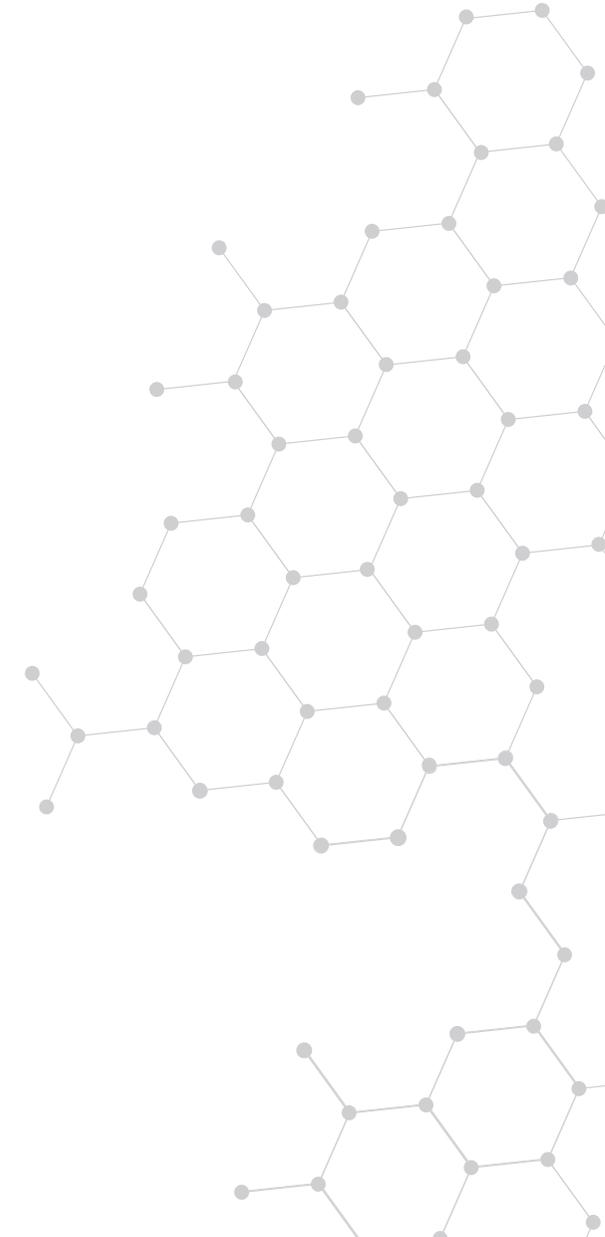
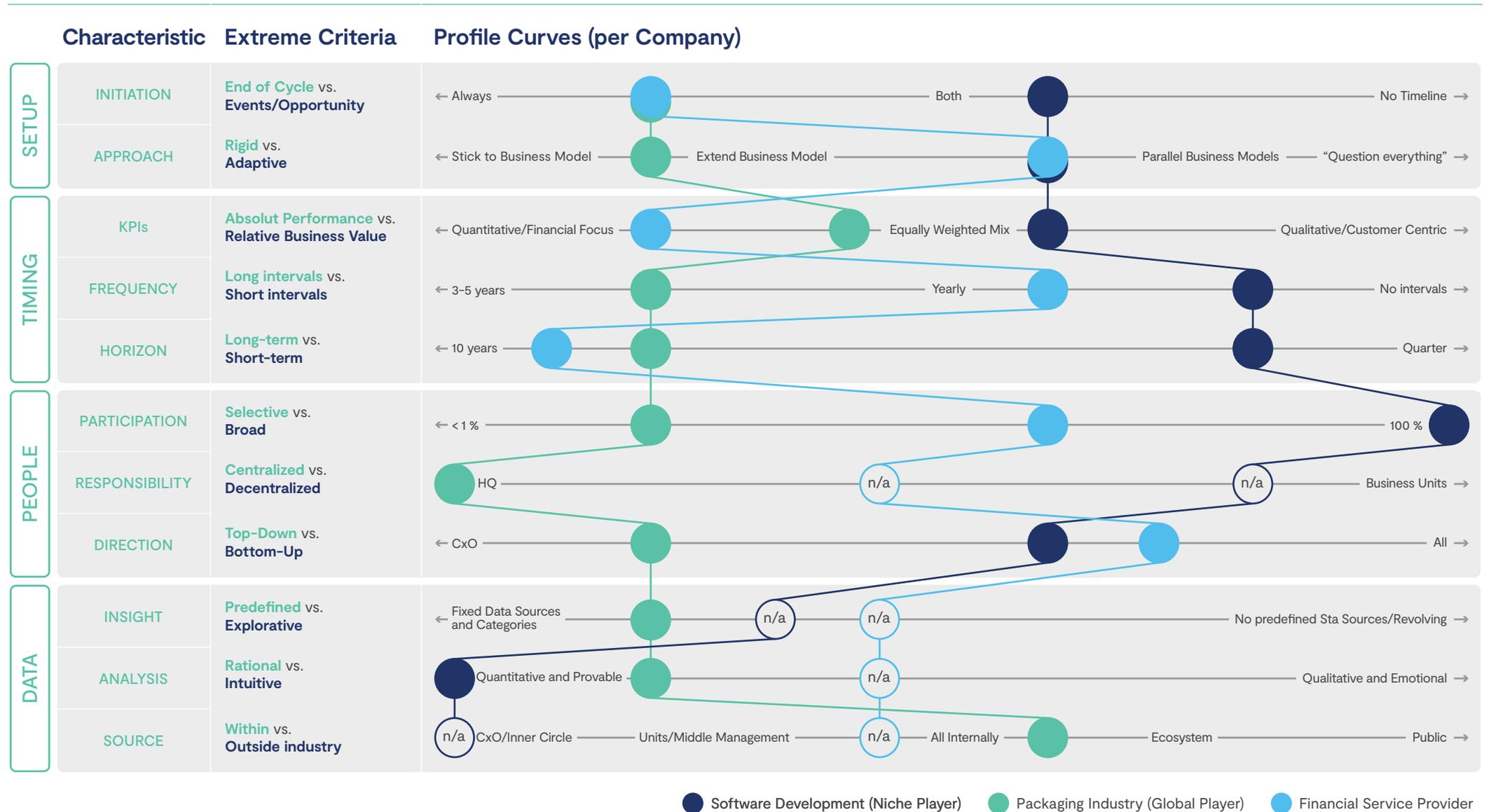


Figure 7: Profile Chart of the Startegy Process



7. Strategy Execution

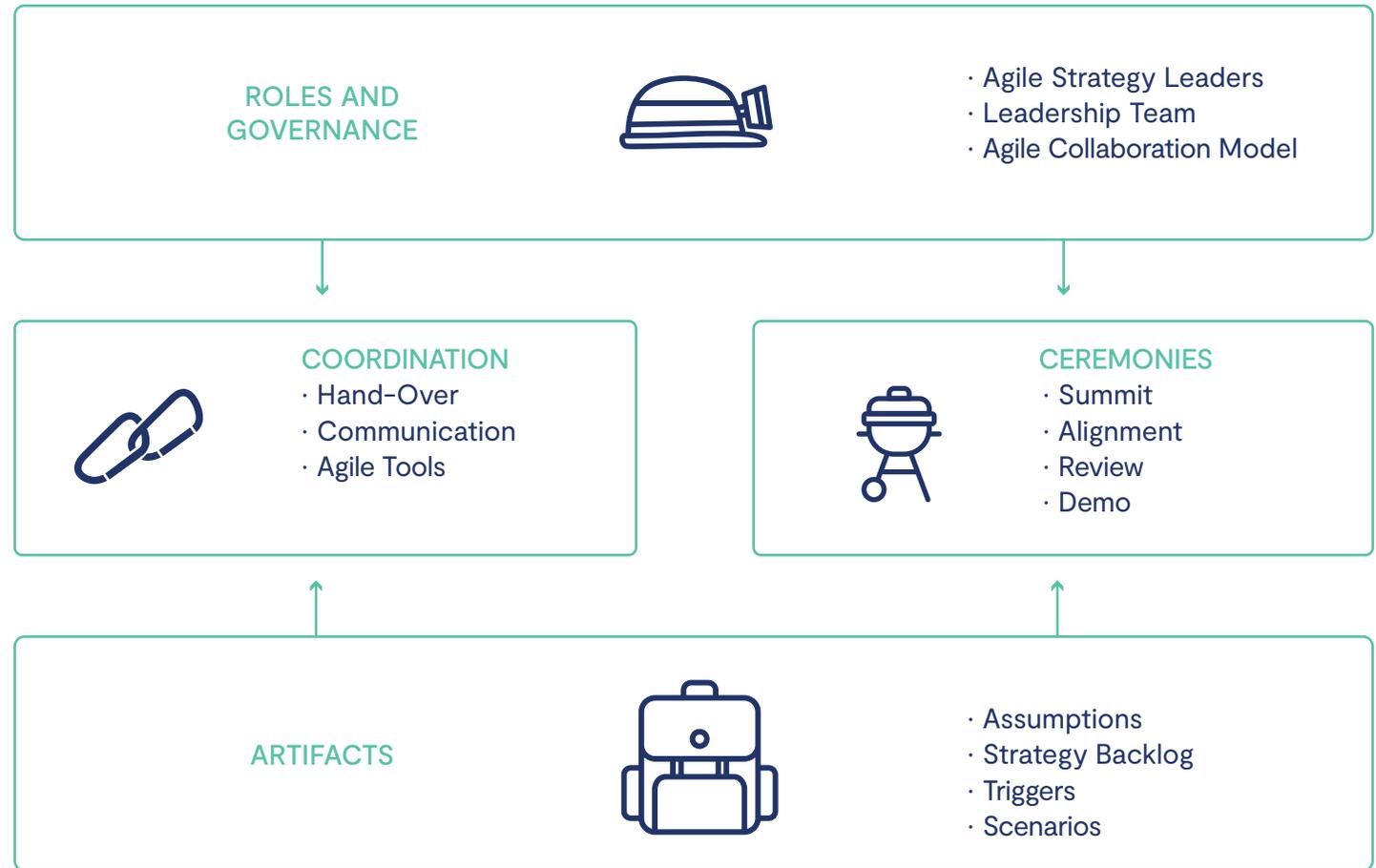
The strategy execution process should ideally follow agile principles, i.e., an agile project approach with appropriate tools. As with other projects, the outcome of defining the strategy process may not be fully clear from the outset, either.



What our interview partners said

To me, agile strategizing is how we approach uncertainty. When you don't know what the perfect outcome should be or you're not certain about all the answers from the start, you need to have an iterative approach to get there. I think it's many different things, but learning the learning and having a process around structured learning is an important part of that, at least to me. (Interview 24)

Figure 8: Strategy Execution



The strategy execution process is determined by several elements (Figure 8). It requires agile strategy leaders as much as coordination and artifacts to facilitate implementation.



7.1 Roles and Governance: Finding the Right Leaders

Agile strategizing requires agile strategy leaders. These leaders need to fulfill very different tasks than leaders had to fulfill in the past. At its core, agile strategy leaders need to be able to choose between traditional and dynamic elements of the strategy development process by reflecting on how their company is operating in the environment and industry. At the same time, they need to have the ability to provide guidance when required; engage in reflective action; step back from their current focus, gain a broader, deeper perspective, then re-focus and take action that is informed by this new perspective. Thereby, the frequency with which they move through cycles of reflection and action increases, as does strategy effectiveness in complex, rapidly changing environments.¹²

Finding the right people for agile strategy roles – which may only be a few selected people – can be a huge bottleneck as some of our interview partners mentioned:



What our interview partners said

And then you need to adjust the organization just to make sure also that you embark the right people with you. Because the people who made the success 10 years ago, some of them might be the right people to make the success, from now on, but some others might not. They might not be tuned to respond to that challenge. So there is this human aspect [which] is also very important. (Interview 27)

A major difficulty for people we talked to was the insight that traditional leadership roles, especially from the top management, are tremendously changing. The strategy process no longer depends directly on the CEO, which means changing established hierarchies; strategy execution is no longer undertaken in silos, but cuts across the organization; and finally, there is a real need to empower project owners so that they can develop and implement what they consider important. These changing tasks should not lead to the impression that management tasks are becoming less, they are just distributed differently and leaders still have personal responsibility. This requires a new 'agile collaboration model'.



7.2 Coordination, Ceremonies and Artifacts

Strategy project tools facilitate coordination and communication through defined ceremonies (e.g., daily standups, summits, etc.). If an agile strategy project is consistently implemented, it requires the use of agile tools and processes. Often, this involves the use of Scrum or other methods for the project design.

Strategy artifacts refer to the overall surroundings of a strategy to be successfully formulated and implemented. These conditions may differ for an agile strategizing process that is much more challenging than a traditional one. Artifacts may influence certain processes, types of documents, dashboards, principles or quality assessments that ensure progress (Figure 9 highlights several Scrum typical ceremonies).

Figure 9: Typical Scrum Ceremonies



8. How to Launch an Agile Strategy Project

An agile strategy project has two layers. First, a process or methodology project, where a company becomes familiar with the way to change its strategy (i.e., the process domain resulting in knowledge about how to make the strategy development process more agile). Second, a content project of developing strategy in an agile way (e.g., new product development, international expansion, etc.) Ideally, the two should go hand-in-hand (Figure 10).

Figure 10: The Content and Process Domain of an Agile Strategy Project

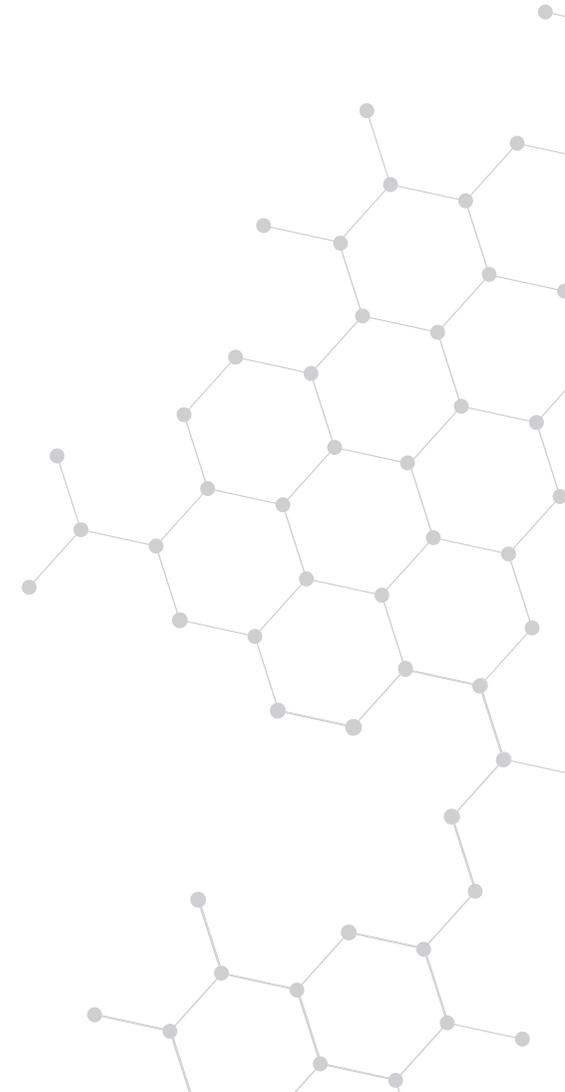


Several companies have made the move towards implementing agile projects, but only a few of them are consistent in employing agile methods and principles in the strategizing and the strategy implementation project. In this model, we want to emphasize that the strategizing process should also follow agile methods. Traditional strategy and project methodologies will be limited. In the short run, adopting an agile project approach may cause further uncertainties as strategy people need to be trained in agile methods and have to adopt an agile mindset they have not been used to in the past. However, if agile strategizing consistently follows agile methodologies, companies will find it easier to deal with ongoing changes.



What our interview partners said

The development process of our strategy development was already agile. And then also worked in an agile set-up and even with the board in iterations. We always (did) this with the help of working hypotheses, which completed one iteration, discussed these hypotheses and then went into the next round and then went through the strategy development in four iterations, starting in January. The farewell was then in mid-September. The development process was already agile. (Interview 24)



9. Summary

Based on our interview study with top-level strategists across different industries and countries, we were able to develop a new “Agile Strategizing Model” and provide guidelines for the implementation of the model. It is fair to say that not every strategy will benefit from this approach. Thus, it is important to conduct a diagnosis first that identifies how agile the organization is and what type of strategies would benefit most from being developed in an agile way. The companies we worked with were all convinced of the promises of adopting an agile strategizing approach. Sometimes though, it takes more efforts to convince people of the benefits as does an agile transformation of the whole company.



10. About the Research

10.1 Basic Information



MATURITY OF THE COMPANY



SIZE OF THE COMPANY



10.2 Interview Analysis

All interviews were conducted by two interviewers in the language of the interviewee (English or German) and translated into English. Complemented by notes, information in the public press, and company information, short cases were developed that provided the background information for the positioning of each company in a profile chart (data triangulation). All interviews were coded with the help of criteria from the strategy process and existing strategy elements (e.g., drivers, formulation, execution, etc.). After finishing the analysis of the interviews, all participants were invited to a management workshop to discuss findings and to compare results.



11. Glossary

Agile Manifesto

The Agile Manifesto was written in 2001 by seventeen independent-minded software practitioners, who wanted to provide an alternative to linear waterfall-methods of software development. The four values of the manifesto are: (1) Individuals and interactions over processes and tools; (2) Working software over comprehensive documentation; (3) Customer collaboration over contract negotiation; (4) Responding to change over following a plan.¹³

Agile Leaders

Based on a study of 604 individuals, Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs identified five levels of leadership agility, each of which corresponds to a stage of adult ego development: (1) expert; (2) achiever; (3) catalyst; (4) co-creator; (5) synergist.¹⁴

Agile Methods

Meanwhile, a variety of agile tools and methods is available. The most well-known are Scrum, LeSS, SAFe.¹⁵

Agile Strategizing

is the process to proactively adapt strategy content to the environment and/or create a new environment by using a strategizing process that flexibly changes between more

traditional elements (that also work in a simple environment, e.g., participation in strategy formulation) or more dynamic elements (that are necessary in complex environments, short strategy formulation cycles). Agile strategizing implies undertaking choices between traditional and dynamic strategic elements along the strategy development process.

Artifacts

is something that is created for support. In agile strategizing or agile management, artifacts relate to documents, templates, specific deliverables, procedures or processes.

Dynamic Strategizing

refers to a strategizing approach that is very different from planning in that each element of the strategy process accounts for the limits of linear forecasting in VUCA environments. In its extreme form, it resembles Mintzberg's 'emerging strategy' that arises from unplanned actions and initiatives and is more flexible.¹⁶

North Star

A combination of vision, mission and values that guide the long-term direction of the company.

Strategy

Strategy has been defined very differently. Originating from the Greek (στρατηγία stratēgia), "art of troop leader; office of general, command, generalship", it is a general plan to achieve one or more long-term or overall goals un-

der conditions of uncertainty.¹⁷ The strategy as plan view has long been dominant. Strategy guru Henry Mintzberg defined strategy as a pattern in a stream of decisions to contrast with a view of strategy as planning.¹⁸

Strategic Agility

is defined as the ability to remain flexible in facing new developments to continuously adjust the company's strategic direction, and to develop innovative ways of creating value.¹⁹

Strategizing

is not something that an organization has but something its members do. In this sense, 'strategizing' is the 'doing of strategy'. Strategizing comprises actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity.²⁰

Strategy Process

can be described as comprising three main elements: the strategists, the issue, and the sequence of actions. These elements influence the way strategy process characteristics are shaped.²¹

VUCA

Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic, Ambiguous environments. The U.S. Army War College introduced the concept of VUCA to describe the more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous multilateral world perceived as resulting from the end of the Cold War.²²

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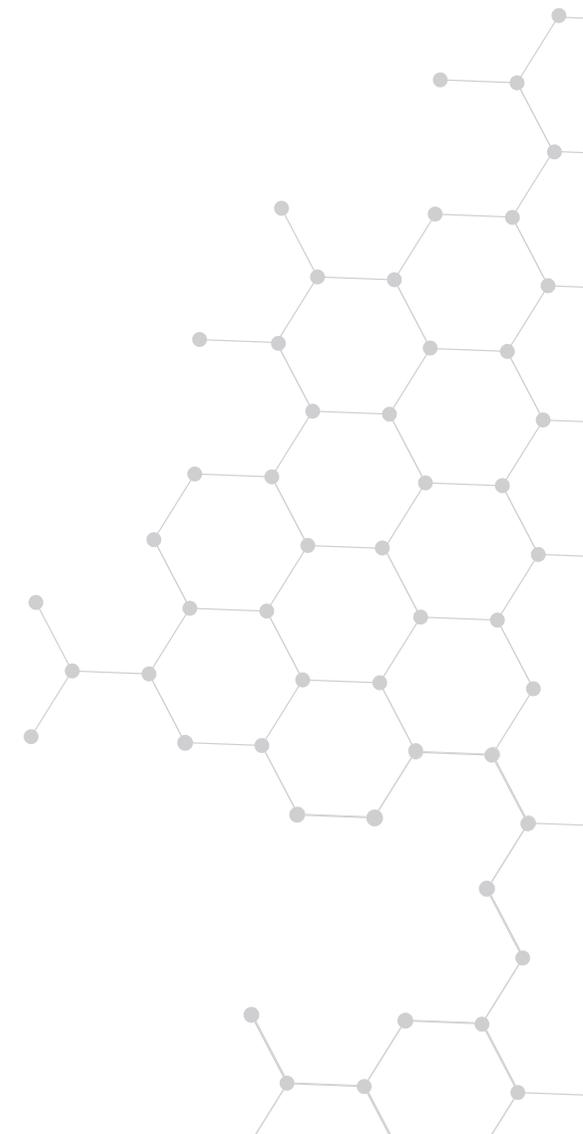
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13. The Company

Management consulting with pronounced technology expertise

Detecon is the leading, globally operating technology management consulting company with headquarters in Germany, which has been combining classic management consulting with high technological competence for over 40 years. The focus of its activities is on digital transformation: Detecon supports companies from all areas of business to adapt their business models and operational processes to the competitive conditions and customer requirements of the digitalized, globalized economy with state-of-the-art communication and information technology. Detecon's expertise bundles the knowledge from the successful conclusion of management and ICT consulting projects in over 160 countries.

Detecon is a subsidiary of T-Systems International, one of the world's leading vendor independent providers of digital services and subsidiary of Deutsche Telekom.

From concept to implementation

With its consulting approach, Detecon addresses current and future requirements in the digital age. The concept features top consulting that covers the entire spectrum from innovation to implementation. Groundbreaking digital consulting demands ever greater technology expertise and a high degree of agility that incorporates flexible, but precisely fitting networking of experts for complex, digital ecosystems in particular. At the same time, it is more and more important in digital consulting to accompany clients from innovation to prototyping to implementation.

This factor prompted Detecon to found the Digital Engineering Centers for Cyber Security, Analytical Intelligence, Co-Innovation, and Industrial IoT in Berlin in 2017 as facilities that extend the added-value chain of consulting and accelerate the realization of digital strategies and solutions by means of prototypes and proofs of concept.

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Notes

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