Strategy tools: contextual factors impacting use and usefulness

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Strategy Tools:
Contextual Factors Impacting Use and Usefulness

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Abstract

Strategy tools are a common element of tourism and hotel management courses, journal articles and textbooks. In this paper we explore why practitioners do not find tools useful and hence reject their use as a strategy practice. Drawing on a cross-case analysis of qualitative data from three hotel companies, key findings suggest that strategy tools may restrict the deployment of experience-based knowledge, strategy practices are legitimised by top managers' perceptions and the lack of strategizing activities inhibits the potential for tool use. The industry context, including the unique ownership-management structure and institutionalised practices, also significantly influences the use and perceived value of tools. Practitioners are recommended to reconsider the ability of strategy tools to facilitate debate and act as boundary spanning objects and tourism researchers are encouraged to further study how practitioners use and value tools in order to create new ones based on practice rather than only on theory.

Keywords: Strategy tools; strategy as practice; industrial context; strategic analysis; hotel industry

1. Introduction

Strategy tools such as SWOT analysis, Porter's Five Forces framework and the Value Chain, are popular staples in business and tourism schools (Kachra & Schnietz, 2008) and strategy practitioners often acknowledge using them in their strategy work (Jarzabkowski, Giulietti, Oliveira, & Amoo, 2013; Knott, 2008; Oliveira, Rosa, & Antonio, 2008). Studies have established which specific tools are supposedly used (e.g., Clark, 1997; Frost, 2003) and the changing popularity of different tools (e.g., Pascale, 1990; Rigby, 2001; Rigby & Bilodeau, 2005; 2011). There is, however, a continued lack of understanding about how and why managers actually use and don't use these "knowledge artefacts" generally learned during their management education (Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, & Schwarz, 2006; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Wright, Paroutis, & Blettner, 2013). Such knowledge is critical since the concepts that shape an organisation's strategy discourse help legitimise certain strategies and influence how decisions are made and resources allocated (Whittington et al., 2003).

This lacuna appears to exist because most academics "seem wedded to a representational epistemology, conceptualising use as primarily a prescriptive application" (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2006, p.362). In response, this study examines tool use from what Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) term "the realism of experience" (p.1) by investigating how managers *actually* use and do not use tools in their strategy-making. It therefore falls exactly into the strategy-as-practice (SAP) research agenda (Vaaraa & Whittington, 2012). This practice perspective sees strategy as a type of work people do rather than only as something organisations have (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Being more concerned with a post-rational exploration (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2004) of the skills, techniques and tools that are used when creating strategy (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003) SAP provides a micro-level perspective of the actual practice and practices of strategy practitioners. SAP is particularly concerned with the *contextualisation* of these micro-activities (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015) since practitioners do not act "in isolation but are instead constantly drawing upon the regular, socially defined modes of acting that arise from the plural social institutions to which they belong" (Balogun, Jarzabkowski, & Seidl, 2007, p.199). This study thus examines the contextual influences on practitioners' actual use and rejection of strategy tools.

Both practitioners and academics need better knowledge about the relevance and role of strategy tools within specific contexts (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2006; Johnson et al., 2003). Such knowledge can improve managerial effectiveness by helping practitioners to better reflect on their specific strategy work processes and practices (Johnson et al., 2003). Studying why and how formal strategy tools are and are not used in the strategic management process can also help reveal what “is involved in being a competent strategist and how some practitioners are more influential than others” (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p.283). An understanding of practitioners’ experiences with tools can assist researchers and educators in updating their own research and pedagogical practices and to design better tools (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2013). For example, by determining how and why practitioners do not use these tools, academics can better recognize and address the limitations of tools not only with regards to their rational and analytical purposes, but also their practical implementation, thereby also addressing Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) recent call for a better understanding of practical (as opposed to scientific) rationality.

This paper seeks to contribute in a number of overarching ways to the applied SAP field. By examining why practitioners do not use strategy tools as part of their strategy-making activities, it responds to the call for studies about the usefulness of strategy tools in organisational settings and between different groups of managers (Wright et al., 2013). As it studies how and why strategists do not use tools, it heeds Carter, Clegg, and Kornberger’s (2008) warning that “by only focusing on what strategists do, SAP scholars could mistakenly neglect what is not done or practised and thus potentially miss some of the ‘strategic spaces’ in which strategy is constituted” (p.9). By drawing on empirical data about strategy making from companies in the single industrial setting of the international hotel industry, it provides an in-depth analysis of how a contextual setting shapes practitioners’ non-use of tools. The focus on the hotel industry is especially relevant since it is an industry which has, with mixed results, habitually incorporated findings and recommendations, including tools and concepts, from the broader general business environment (Okumus & Wong, 2005; Olsen & Roper, 1998). By studying strategists from an industry allied to tourism, we are also able to add to the nascent work of scholars investigating strategy at work within tourism organisations (see for example, Aldehayyat, 2011; Beritelli & Laesser, 2011; Devine & Devine, 2011; Hodari & Sturman, 2014; Stokes, 2008).

The paper firstly reviews previous research into strategy tool use and non-use. It then outlines the research design of the multiple case study approach employed. The findings from three firms, including interviews with 52 executives and managers, observations and document analysis, are then evaluated in light of previous research. The conclusion outlines the main contributions of the study and its limitations and forwards implications for practitioners, researchers and hotel and tourism management educators.

2. Tools and their use

Strategy tools can be physical, processual or conceptual, and previous studies have examined practitioners' use of, for example, documents (Vaara, Sorsa, & Pälli, 2010), PowerPoint (Kaplan, 2011), and analytical models and frameworks (Stenfors, 2007). The present study's fundamental interest lies with the use of popular academic and consultancy tools, and therefore focuses on the conceptual and analytical frameworks, matrices and models that are intended to help managers simplify and represent complex situations as part of the strategy formulation process. For the purposes of this paper we focus on tools such as Porter's Five Forces (Porter, 1980), SWOT analysis (Learned, Christensen, & Andrews, 1961), the Value Chain (Porter, 1985) and the BCG matrix (Henderson, 1979) which codify knowledge within structured approaches to strategic analyses, often through some form of visual depiction or propositional framework (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; March, 2006; Paroutis, Franco, & Papadopoulos, 2015).

2.1 The use and usefulness of tools

The common consensus within the literature is that most strategy concepts and tools are developed to help managers deal with the uncertainties they face when analysing and evaluating strategic choices (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Strategy tools, such as frameworks and matrices, have long been noted for their inherent aim to help sort and structure information and thoughts related to strategic issues, and as such to help practitioners simplify, synthesise and diagnose large amounts of information (Dutton, Fahey, & Narayanan, 1983; Morecroft, 1992). March (2006) refers to strategy tools as "technologies of rationality" (p.211) since they offer models of causal structures, provide spaces for collecting data, and establish decision rules for selecting among alternatives. Previous studies have, understandably, tended to ask managers about their use of tools in an almost single-dimensional way, perceiving them as merely analytical artefacts. From a practice perspective of strategy, however, it is clear that they play other roles which can only be uncovered if the tools are studied in their situated usage. For example, in reality tools might not be used ‘by-the-book’ (Whittington, 2010) and may be changed by the practitioner (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015; Jarzabkowski, 2005). Conceptualising strategy tools as socially and contextually embedded therefore provides greater insight into their actual use and role in strategy making.

The classical view of strategy advocates that strategy making is still the preserve of top managers (the traditional ‘strategists’). There is, however, much evidence to suggest that this view may no longer be appropriate since, for example, middle managers are often the interpreters and sellers (Rouleau, 2005), ‘sensemakers’ (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 2005) and drivers (Mantere, 2008; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008) of organisational strategy and change. Middle managers may thus go beyond their operational responsibilities and influence strategic activities as well as champion strategic ideas. Regnér (2003) found a more inclusive approach to strategy making in his observations within four Swedish multinationals. In these organisations, strategy ideas were deeply rooted in two diverse managerial contexts and locations – the centre and periphery – where top management and strategic planning staff as well as middle and lower level managers were all involved in strategy creation.

Strategy tools, irrelevant as to who is using them, can act as boundary-spanning objects (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009) since they can help mitigate the communication problems that result from the effects of geographic and hierarchal decentralisation and divisionalization. For example, they may help provide a common interface and language between diverse groups and individual actors, and therefore mediate strategizing activities across organisational levels (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Stenfors, Tanner, & Haapalinna, 2004). In this sense, strategy tools can be perceived as a type of ‘processual toy’ (Eden, 1992) which group members can use together interactively to facilitate their understanding and use of new meanings. Stenfors et al. (2004) similarly found through their study that the most commonly cited benefits of tools were related to the social world, including improved work processes and communication. The use of tools during meetings and workshops was seen as particularly beneficial since they were said to help open up discussions and raise different insights. Strategy tools can therefore help establish a shared context (Osterlund & Carlile, 2005) in which dissimilar strategists at different organisational levels can more successfully collaborate. However, their capacity is not only practical but also political. As boundary-spanning objects they may assist actors in gaining support for particular views (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009) and may help resolve relational and political differences (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt, 1988).

While some well-known techniques and tools may be used because they are valuable for analysing different situations and for communicating coherent decisions (Cummings & Angwin, 2004), social pressures to conform (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) may also be a key reason why certain tools continue in popularity. For example, since pre-existing concepts already come with reasons as to why they should be used, it may be easier for the practitioner to justify their sustained use (Seidl, 2007). Replicating the choices of other successful organisations may also be seen as less risky during turbulent times (Thompson, 1967). Similarly, firms facing intense competition may copy an existing tool or activity if doing so helps to minimise the benefits it provides the competition (O'Neill, Pouder, & Buchholtz, 1998). In addition, the use of tools in strategy making may signify the user as a strategist (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) and convey an appearance of rationality. Strategy tools therefore may be more than just ‘technologies of rationality’ (March, 2006) and may instead function as technologies of ‘intended rationality’ (Dodgson, Gann, & Phillips, 2013).

Many of the tools practitioners use may in fact be adopted as a result of organisational or industry norms and standards. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), many ideas and practices become the standard within a field due to political influences (i.e., coercive isomorphism) and professionalization (i.e., normative isomorphism). They suggest that organisations tend to model themselves according to the practices of other organisations in their field which they consider to be more successful or legitimate. Similarly, practitioners help to establish the perceived acceptability and usefulness of certain practices as they endeavour to define their appropriate work methods and ‘to establish a cognitive base and legitimization for their occupational autonomy’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 152). Practices that are institutionalised therefore include those which firms are unlikely to abandon since they are integrally important to the firm’s values and cognitive structure (Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000).

2.2 The rejection of tools

There are numerous reasons why strategy practitioners may reject existing strategy tools. A commonly suggested explanation is that academic research and its associated knowledge artefacts (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Shrivastava, 1987; Van de Ven, 1992; Walsh, Tushman, Kimberly, Starbuck, & Ashford, 2007) are out of kilter with those actually doing strategy, in other words, academia is said to value rigour whilst management prioritizes relevance (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Hambrick, 2004; Marcus, Goodman, & Grazman, 1995; Mintzberg, 2004). Bettis (1991) for example, suggests that a "normal science straitjacket" (p. 315) is the key reason that strategy research has limited influence on management practices. March (2006) similarly argues that technologies of rationality, such as the prescribed use of tools, may satisfy our "academic obligations to defend a utopia of the mind against the realism of experience" (p.211).

Another reason for rejection lies in the frustration of using tools. Rigby's (2001; 2003; Rigby & Bilodeau, 2005; 2011; 2013) studies of the popularity of general management tools suggest that although practitioners think that by using the 'right tools' their companies are more likely to succeed, over 80 percent of executives surveyed believed that most management tools do not deliver what they promise. He interprets this to mean that while companies do use a lot of tools, their experience with them has been unsatisfying and unsuccessful. More recently, Wright et al. (2013) found that tools were not considered useful by their graduate students when they were difficult to use and/or did not provide sufficient guidance on decisions. The researchers also noticed that when actors were frustrated with "bad tools," the strategic analyses being undertaken were less effective.

Academics have long noted that strategy tools may also be rejected because of their own inherent shortcomings and inability to aid practitioners. Varadarajan (1999), for example, recommended that many analytical frameworks, tools and techniques should be discarded by practitioners and academics as they are outdated. Sheth and Sisodia (1999) noted that in such cases these tools serve "more to impede and inhibit us than to illuminate reality in a meaningful and useful way" (p.72). They suggested that such tools also act as blinders that prevent practitioners from seeing the bigger picture. Hill and Westbrook (1997) argued that ideas and tools that were once valuable may continue to influence the field long past their time of usefulness and thus "hold an unmerited position in the thinking used in education, management development, consultancy, and in the real work of managing businesses" (p.52). They go on to say that the use of such tools not only produces negative results, but their use may also inhibit practitioners from adopting newer and better tools and techniques. In using frameworks practitioners can themselves become 'framed' (Dunbar, Garud, & Raghuram, 1996; Worren, Moore, & Elliott, 2002) as they become too familiar and comfortable with certain ways of assessing situations and therefore fail to consider alternative ways of doing so. Such framing processes may make managers more confident in their decisions, which can in turn make action easier, however these tools may not lead to the best actions or decisions since they tend to repeatedly result in the same beliefs and actions. Such over-usage and institutionalised use (Priem & Rosenstein, 2000) implies that tools can become restrictive paradigms and thus limit creative and innovative thinking and action (Thomas, 1984), thereby reducing a firm's ability to remain competitive and successful.

Researchers have found that the popularity of strategy tools is not consistent across different industries (Aldehayyat & Anchor, 2008; Clark, 1997; Frost, 2003; Rigby, 2003; Rigby & Bilodeau, 2005; Stenfors et al., 2004). Certain tools may have limited utility due to the fact that they were usually developed in order to answer very particular questions or to analyse very specific situations (Furrer & Thomas, 2000) or industrial contexts (Narayanan & Fahey, 2005). Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2006) note, for example, that dissatisfaction with certain tools could arise because a practitioner's organisation may compete within different environmental conditions than those for which the concept was originally intended. Concerns have also been raised about whether strategy tools might be obsolete under changing industry conditions (D'Aveni & Gunther, 1995). There is a further danger that in periods of great uncertainty, decision-making 'disasters' may stem from oversimplification or misrepresentation encoded in tools (March, 2006). Stenfors and Tanner (2006) note, as well, that evaluating the usefulness of a tool is not possible through traditional evaluation means since most strategic situations are unique, and because "the context in which the tool is used becomes of great importance and cannot be separated from the tool in the process of evaluation" (p.22). It is this belief, that industry contexts are important variables affecting strategy tools and their usefulness (Whittington, 2006), which duly influenced this study.

3. Research design

Most studies that have explicitly studied strategy tools have been conducted to identify which and when tools are used rather than how or why they are or are not used (Frost, 2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Knott, 2008). Findings have usually been gathered through the use of list-based surveys even though such a method may not correctly identify which tools managers are actually using. For example, based on the 10 interviews conducted with top managers, Knott (2008) identified that (1) practitioners may not think of popular and generic business practices as tools, (2) that they do not consider to have used tools if it was only part of their initial inspiration for a project, and (3) that they cite having used a tool even when the use was either not formal or only used to a very limited extent. As such, he believes that survey-based studies are not “a measure of actual activity, but simply a gauge of what is fashionable talk” (p. 29). Believing, therefore, that the use of tools cannot be separated from the real-life context and ‘situatedness,’ an exploratory and descriptive study was undertaken focusing on how and why tools are used and not used. Similar to the research designs employed by other SAP researchers (e.g., Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003; Regnér, 2003) a multiple case study method using a qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate. Although research on the use of strategy tools sometimes draws on the views of business school students due to the difficulty researchers experience in gaining access to practitioners and their organisations (e.g., Wright et al., 2013), we believed that a richer and more accurate understanding of the usefulness of tools would be acquired through field work with practitioners during their strategy making activities.

3.1 Research Sites

We chose to investigate companies in the hotel industry, a context we knew well and where the increasing influence of inter alia stakeholders, as well as consolidation and globalisation pressures, meant that we would find much strategizing as companies looked to jockey for the best competitive positions. Based on theoretical sampling procedures (Yin, 2003), multiple companies were selected as cases, thus responding to the SAP literature calling for studies across several organisations (Balogun, Huff, & Johnson, 2003; Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 2006). Three companies met case selection criteria which included being primarily involved in the operation of hotels and being large enough to have a structure comprising top and middle managers as well as corporate and hotel-level managers and staff. It was particularly important that tool use was evaluated across different hierarchical levels as most previous studies have queried only top managers (Clark, 1997; Frost, 2003; Knott, 2008; Oliveira et al., 2008). Since strategy is increasingly part of middle and lower-level managers' work (Wooldridge et al., 2008) including in the hotel industry (Ghorbal-Blal, 2011), this study responded to suggestions that strategizing activities be studied across multiple organisational levels within individual firms (Hambrick, 2004; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

In order to gain greater support for the research (Balogun et al., 2003), corporate executives were asked to assist in the identification of on-going strategic projects which would form the unit of analysis in which to investigate the situated use of strategy tools. Criteria were established for the specific project to be evaluated. First the project had to be fundamental to the growth of the company. Given the reliance on 'asset-light' means of growth amongst hotel companies (Slattery, Gamse, & Roper, 2008) this would likely necessitate a strategy involving expansion to new markets or with new products. Second, the strategic project had to be current in order for an ethnographic methodology to be employed so the progress of the project would be researched as far as possible in real-time but where, via interviews, further recall and interpretation of activities could be gained (Balogun et al., 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2000). Third, there needed to be strong insider support (Langley, 1988) as the study required access to internal documents and interview respondents, as well as observation of meetings, all involving the development of a major strategic project which had competitive implications.

Three company cases and corresponding projects were selected which met these criteria. The selected company cases - Alpha, Beta and Gamma - between them owned, managed and franchised hotels, and were based in the USA, Europe and UK respectively. Two were publicly listed and one was privately held. Whilst one company operated more than ten brands in over 60 countries, another company operated only two hotel brands in 20 countries. The third case operated two brands in a domestic setting. The largest firm comprises nearly 4,000 hotels in its system, while the smallest over 20 properties.

The corresponding projects investigated involved a variety of strategic initiatives. As one of the world's largest hotel companies, the vast majority of properties operated by Alpha are located in the USA where the company was founded. Often credited with having originated the concept of 'asset light,' it now has little equity interest in its portfolio. As a senior manager in Industry Relations explained "Wall Street rewards us for not being in the real estate business and for only focusing on running hotels." The research focuses on Alpha's decision to revise its European expansion strategy since until then it had failed to deliver targeted portfolio growth.

Beta has a long history in Europe, having originated from a country seen as the epitome of hotel-keeping. Known for its luxury hotel brand, its primary business is the management of hotels on behalf of third party owners. The ownership of Beta has varied over the years; it was privatized in the 1990s and then purchased by an unrelated, foreign investment entity. The research centres on a major strategic initiative involving a private equity group as a joint venture partner entailing the establishment and operation of a new regional brand.

Gamma, a UK-based hotel company, was founded in the early 1990s, sold numerous times over the following 10 years, and was currently owned by a UK investment firm. Most management team members were responsible for functional areas within both of the company's brands. The company's properties were located in the United Kingdom and except for a few that were held on long-term leasehold agreements all were owned and managed by Gamma. The research centres on the CEO's decision to reposition one of its brands in order to improve performance.

3.2 Data Collection

Whilst there was no precedence for the most appropriate data collection methods for this study's specific focus, the decision was made to rely on documents, interviews and observations since, in part, these multiple methods are often employed in other SAP studies examining practitioners' strategizing practices (see Balogun et al., 2003). Due to its dominant position in SAP research (Hendry, Kiel, & Nicholson, 2010), a large focus was placed on the interview method. These research methods were deemed particularly appropriate since, as Johnson et al (2007) note, when researching strategy practices it is imperative to (1) undertake observations to capture the in-vivo experience of doing strategy, (2) conduct interviews and other forms of interaction with organisation members in order to understand the interpretations that people place on these activities, and (3) to collect the artefacts of strategizing such as minutes of meetings, reports, slide presentations and objects.

Interviews with 52 managers in the three case companies formed a critical part of the data collection process. Respondents were drawn from across the project teams and included the

Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer and Executive, Senior and Vice-Presidents and Directors from many different functional areas. Following Langley's (1988) advice, other employees and managers were tracked down when identified as appropriate and interviewed. These included hotel general managers, graduate trainees and personal assistants. Following the same semi-structured outline, respondents were interviewed ‘on-site’ (i.e., company headquarters and at hotel properties) and asked to discuss their strategizing activities with reference to the specific project being investigated. Whilst an interview outline was followed, and sets of similar questions were asked to all respondents, the main idea was for each to ‘tell a story’ about the firm’s strategy process. Specifically related to the strategic project they talked about the project itself and their specific role, and in more depth they discussed the usefulness of strategy tools in the strategy process. Formal interviews were recorded wherever possible and transcribed. Informal interviews were also conducted whilst on site in the firms.

Interviews were augmented with the collection of documents such as internal memos, meeting minutes, company reports and presentation material. Observation also took place with the aim of better understanding the firms and their behavioural processes and contexts (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998). These observation periods (spanning three years) allowed actual events such as meetings and strategy presentations and workshops to be experienced in real time. By interspersing interviews throughout the observation period, we followed the suggestion of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) and made use of temporary breakdowns in the strategy process in order to allow practitioners to reflect on their work and thus reveal their internal logic of practice. Observations were recorded in a free-association form (Denzin, 1989).

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis comprised four main stages. The first level involved data reduction (Eisenhardt, 1989). Interview transcriptions, observation field notes and collected documents were input into the qualitative data analysis software programme NVivo. In so doing, the data was structured into more manageable units for analysis and thematic coding (King, 1998). This enabled vignettes to be developed which thickly described each company and its approach to strategy, thus establishing detail about the situated activity (Jarzabkowski, 2005) of strategy making. The second level employed within-case analysis. Tracing through all the data, a chronologically ordered ‘decision story’ (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt, 1988) was constructed depicting the different stages of the investigated projects, the main agents involved and the instances and circumstances of strategy tool use (we were able to interpret 'templates' and 'frameworks' as relabelled strategy tools). The third step was to conduct analyses across the three cases. Given our interest in practical rationality, we looked for families of resemblances (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) in order to find similarities and differences in the empirical phenomenon being investigated. The last stage was an interactive process whereby the empirical data was evaluated against the existing literature. Using and adapting the conceptual categorization of key authors such as Orlikowski (2000), Burgelman (1983), Star and Griesemer (1989) and Carlile (2002), we were able to construct an integrative framework enabling the analysis of our data on strategy tool use and non-use. Key phrases and statements within the data were located manually thus creating themes which emerged from the between-case data. During the iterative process of comparing the data with previous literature, findings from different source data were triangulated. An attempt was made to balance description and interpretation, analysing the data until a point of saturation was reached (Eisenhardt, 1989). In line with Johnson et al.'s (2007) recommendations, findings in the descriptive narrative accounts of the use of strategy tools were compared with the 'received view' (p. 72), i.e., with the normative accounts promulgated in practitioner sources and business school teaching.

4. **Findings and Discussion**

Before discussing our findings in terms of the non-use and rejection of strategy tools it is worth reiterating that we did find managers, both in the centre and periphery of the three case organisations, who found strategy tools useful. Similar to the outcomes of other empirical enquiries, standard strategy tools were used, albeit flexibly and with some improvisation, to help managers deal with the uncertainties faced when making strategic decisions (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Although some of the tools resembled standard strategy analysis frameworks, they were often not represented as 'by-the-book' (Whittington, 2010), were sometimes adapted (Jarratt & Stiles, 2010; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Lozeau, Langley, & Denis, 2002) almost beyond recognition, (McCabe & Narayanan, 1991) and their use was often 'veiled'.

Most of the findings, however, pointed to less affirmative elements of strategy tool use which meant that tools were rejected as strategy making artefacts and mechanisms. These latter findings are the focus of this paper and they are organised into three thematic areas: (1) the organisational approach to strategy formulation and strategy practices, mainly as a result of top management perceptions and actions, (2) the lack of tool legitimacy, and (3) contextual influences resulting from industry characteristics. The following discussion is structured around these three areas.

4.1 *Organisational approach to strategy formulation and strategy practices*

Top executives are often said to be the organisational members most likely to use strategy tools since they have more strategic responsibilities (see Hill & Westbrook, 1997; Hodgkinson et al., 2006). This study's findings revealed, however, that the three firms' CEOs not only refrained from using any of the conceptual strategy tools commonly identified as the most popular (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), but in addition their views about strategy, strategy making and strategy tools discouraged the use of such tools within their firms. As a respondent in Beta suggested, "[We are] the wrong company to study if you want to see how strategy gets made…it's just [CEO name] and his ideas that we have to accept and implement." Top strategists may often use strategy tools to help structure their thinking and guide the strategic decision-making process (Balogun et al., 2007). This is not, however, the situation in the study's firms where the CEOs considered the idea that conceptual tools can aid one's strategic thinking as "silly" (CEO, Beta) and "ridiculous" (CEO, Alpha). To them, tools imply rules and structure while 'real strategic thinking' is about breaking rules and avoiding such structure.

According to the CEOs, strategy making should be built around insights gathered from personal experience. They believed that formal tools, including models and frameworks, were more appropriate for, and perhaps more commonly used by, 'novices' who lack professional experience and/or confidence in their know-how. Alpha's CEO, for example, instructed his top executives and their teams to create solutions based on their experiences in the industry and at the company, and not through tools, especially as most top executives had been with the firm for several decades. When a more recently hired executive in the Finance department who had been given a "mandate to challenge conventional thinking" suggested that the firm change the planning process to include more formal procedures and tools, he met with the following reaction:

> “The people just gagged. Gagged! And not only that, almost said ‘What the hell are you thinking? We don’t do that here’.”

Similarly, Gamma’s CEO distrusted ideas that came through the use of formal tools. He believed that they lacked the incorporation of industry experience and in-depth familiarity with the firm’s unique characteristics. Such views are consistent with past research which has found that practitioners believe that the use of tools can prevent them from deploying knowledge-based experience (Grant, 2003). Although practitioners often combine strategic concepts with the practical knowledge they have gained from previous experiences (Schön, 1982), these CEOs saw tools as rigid instruments that do not lend themselves to personal experience, or alternatively, restrict one from drawing on such knowledge. Their rejection of tools supports previous observations that the complexity of strategic decision-making means that strategists may be better served through experience-based insights rather than technical formality and analytical detachment (Grant, 2003; Hayes & Abernathy, 1980).

Valuing experience over formal analysis and tools influences the strategy creation process since such values affect a firm’s thinking style which can lead to organisational paradigms about how strategy should be made (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998). Beta and Gamma were repeatedly described as ‘entrepreneurial’ since their strategic management process and decision-making styles were predominantly based on the CEOs managing the process and making the majority of strategic decisions themselves. Both CEOs describe their strategies as being grounded in ‘vision’ and ‘intuition’ with Beta’s CEO specifically commenting that he considered the use of tools as a distraction that “prevents real leaders from engaging in real strategy work.” Both CEOs commented that using tools hindered their ability to have an overall vision for the company. They perceived them as too simplistic to encompass the whole strategic situation facing their respective firms. Such views are consistent with some criticisms levelled at analytical frameworks which suggest that they prevent top managers from seeing ‘the big picture’ since they focus on narrow topics (Sheth & Sisodia, 1999).

Rational approaches to strategy formulation and decision-making, based in part on conceptual tools, was often seen as ineffective across the three firms. For example, the use of extensive analysis and consultancy tools was blamed for the near bankruptcy of Beta, while the current CEO’s vision was commonly cited as having saved the firm. Similarly, a dedicated Strategy

Department's extensive environmental scanning techniques and tools did not help Alpha to foresee the challenges they faced in the early 1990s. The rejection of tools as analytical "crutches" (CEO, Beta), reflects Whittington, Molloy, Mayer & Smith's (2006) suggestion that the traditional view of strategy has perhaps failed practitioners not because of its deliberateness, but because of its tendency to be overly isolated and logical.

That top strategists in the three organisations prioritised experience over formal analysis when formulating strategy was not surprising in light of the literature which suggests that hotel industry practitioners generally demonstrate a preference for a 'hands on' management style as opposed to more structured analysis (Okumus, 2004). For example, the three CEOs were much more focused on issues of immediate concern as opposed to long-term plans, and as such did not see the need for formal strategizing in order to create their firm's overall direction. Alpha's CEO, for instance, was described as a "highly tactical person" who believed that if "you take care of the short-term the long-term falls into place" and that a focus on immediate concerns assists colleagues to "keep their eye on the ball." This emphasis on short-termism is consistent with previous research which has found it to be of greater concern than long-term planning in the hotel industry (Olsen, Murphy, & Teare, 1994; Teare, Costa, & Eccles, 1998; West & Olsen, 1989).

Executives at all three firms maintained that their primary responsibility, and one which occupied the majority of their time, was to focus on their "day jobs" as opposed to creating 'big picture' plans. At Alpha, the CEO ordered that the functional EVPs be responsible for their departmental strategies, which he preferred to title "tangible action plans," rather than rely on a centralised Strategy Department (which he disbanded years earlier) or the adoption of conceptual planning techniques. Similarly, the CEO of Beta generally avoided involving department heads in any kind of strategic planning so as to keep them focused on the company's more immediate problems. At Gamma, the practitioners' sole responsibility was to take care of their functional departments, with the CEO being quoted as proclaiming "I say - you do." Olsen et al. (2008) suggested that within the hotel industry the processes involved in formal strategic management are seen as distractions from tangible pursuits, and this is clearly evident at all three firms.

Previous research has found that strategy tools are often used at strategy workshops (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Schwarz, 2009). However, within the three firms cross-functional meetings were either largely episodes where the leader communicated strategies (Beta), tended not to involve "Strategy" developments (Alpha), or were eschewed in favour of informal and impromptu conversations (Gamma):

> "I think, as a company, we might be slightly unique in that we do have these informal discussions and [name of CEO] very often will get the management team together like that so we can just chat . . . That's about it as far as how formal our strategy process is, if we have one at all." [Respondent in Gamma]

The lack of strategy workshops, and correspondingly limited strategy tool use, can also be explained by industry practitioners' general views that formal strategy exercises such as environmental scanning, which are a typical component of such episodes, are a waste of time (Olsen, Tse, & West, 1992). The industry is characterised, due to its roots in entrepreneurialism, as one where action and active problem-solving are valued and where 'soft activities' such as scanning are seen as distractions from the achievement of tangible objectives (Olsen et al., 1992). Thus, formal meetings and workshops, as examples of 'soft' activities, are rejected, thereby limiting opportunities for tool use.

According to Whittington et al. (2006), the pace of strategy formulation often prevents the analytical detachment required for practitioners to engage in the prescribed use of many tools. This is seen to be the case by practitioners, particularly at Beta and Gamma, where a formal strategy process was considered an obstacle to the fast decision-making required to remain competitive and proactive. This was important at both firms since they believed that their uniqueness comes from anticipating and creating customer preferences and market opportunities rather than imitating competitors. This perspective contradicts Stenfors et al.'s (2004) finding that many of their respondents thought that using tools hastened the strategy process through faster analysis and planning. It is, however, consistent with the views of their other respondents who noted that there was little time to use tools efficiently and that the use of tools occupied time that could instead be spent on solving actual business problems. Furthermore, the hotel company executives' focus on short-term objectives and solutions was evidence that these hotel firms were committed to tangible, short-term goals, meaning that the time necessary to properly use tools for analytical and decision-making purposes would contradict such goals. Thus, contrary to Langley's (1990) finding that formal analysis is often used to procrastinate strategic decision-making, this study found that tools were often rejected for this very reason.

Mintzberg (1994) notes that while analytical planning is about thinking in terms of boxes and what fits in them, the very nature of creative thinking as part of strategy formulation means that one must move beyond such boxes. His argument is clearly evident in the study's findings. Many of the practitioners, for example, saw diagram-based tools such as 2x2 matrices as particularly dangerous since they had no desire for their intended strategies to fit pre-established models since this would reduce their ability to differentiate their strategies from their competitors who used such tools. Both Beta and Gamma's CEOs believed that because most firms relied on the same tools, they ended up with the same strategies, brands and problems. They therefore saw the use of strategy tools as counterproductive to the creation of unique strategies and novel competitive methods. The findings, therefore, largely contradict Knott's (2006) suggestion that the thinking associated with tool use can be expansive and creative and that the use of tools may be most appropriate when innovative and proactive solutions are required. Instead, the views of practitioners in this study support Mintzberg (1994) when he notes the systematic bias in formal planning techniques which involve 'narrow rationality,' leading one away from human expressions of creativity and intuition and towards incremental rather than quantum changes.

4.2 Legitimisation

Practitioners searching for personal or occupational legitimacy are often said to rely on tools and techniques deemed credible by their colleagues, organisational communities and superiors (Seidl, 2007), as these are recognised or perceived to be acceptable and/or appropriate means for evaluating strategic options and making strategic decisions (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2006). Within the three organisations, however, the opposite was true. The general consensus was that there is more respect for strategic decisions that are based on personal experience and insights than on those established through formal tools or processes. Instead of adding credibility to a strategist or strategic decision, the use of tools was perceived to diminish this since 'gut feelings' and 'instinct' were often more valued than more formal and analytical methods. Thus, although social pressures to conform often drive organisations to adopt known and used management techniques (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the opposite was found to be true for formal strategy tools and techniques. The practitioners' rejection of tools can thus be seen as an institutionalised practice (Carter et al.,2008) since it is important to their firms' value systems, is passed down by the CEOs, and is unlikely to change.

The criticism of tools and formal analysis was found to be linked to practitioners' past involvement with tools, which had often proved frustrating and ineffective. This is reflective of Rigby's (2001) findings that many practitioners believe that tools often do not deliver what they promise. In all three firms the failure of certain past strategies were associated with the fact that those responsible for the strategy formulation had relied too heavily on tools to structure the process and deliver the results without being critical enough of the ensuing recommended strategies. At Beta, for example, the failed strategy was described as the result of employing an expensive consultancy firm which facilitated the experience and duly "signed off" on the strategic plan, but which had failed to consider longer term implications. Gamma's CEO, meanwhile, blamed the company's former owner's use of strategy tools for having nearly destroyed his key brand since it used standard kinds of tools and criteria and thus "pigeonholed [it] into some model of how hotels should be and (should) compete." According to Alpha's SVP of Business Intelligence, academic and consultancy tools within the firm had:

> "A bad reputation from a lot of the 70's and 80's McKinsey kind of engagements that were all these, you know, big pie-in-the-sky stuff, and that didn't ultimately resonate with operations."

While tools may help practitioners to understand what is happening in their firms and environments, they are rarely designed to produce a right answer or miraculous solution (Ambrosini & Jenkins, 2007). However, within both Alpha and Beta the tools, and those responsible for using them on the failed projects, were blamed for not having designed the right strategy. These unrealistic and exceedingly optimistic expectations of the usefulness of tools have thus served to create an almost hostile environment where strategy tools are held in contempt by the firm's top management. This finding, and Mintzberg's (1994) suggestion that the limitations of some tools has as much to do with the short-sightedness of the people using them as with the tools themselves, therefore extends Rigby's (2001) survey result by demonstrating that the notion that tools are thought to have failed to meet promises may be a result of practitioners having too high expectations of them. These hopes are perhaps falsely raised by the tool's proponents, including academics, consultants and fellow practitioners.

Within all three companies strategy tools were largely considered ‘too academic’ and ‘not practical,’ with the CEOs all saying that they wanted their management teams to avoid this approach in their strategy-related work:

> “They think it’s a bit academic. I mean, the focus at [Alpha] is on what do we do … There’s not much patience here for the theoretical and the academic, and I think that our people out in the marketplace, they just want to know what to do. . . . We’re striving to be less academic and very much more real world” [Alpha respondent].

Like some of Knott’s (2008) interviewees who explained that their organisations did not value ‘textbook’ tools, executives in the three firms were reluctant to be seen relying on academic concepts since these were not respected by their CEOs and other superiors. “People here want to be seen as executors, and they don’t want to be seen as ‘templatisers’” (VP-Marketing, Alpha). At Beta there was the oft-repeated story about how the CEO had saved the company from failure and how he blamed consultants and their tools for its near downfall:

> “We are not using strategic/academic concepts or tools … when no strategic model is telling you how to come back from hell, how can you structure your vision and what management style can you adopt to make people believe in you and subsequently in the company?”

Similarly, the fact that Alpha’s former Strategy Department had been eliminated for its perceived failures meant that for many interviewees the academic tools and techniques commonly used by this department were not something with which they wanted to be associated. As a result many people were ‘gun-shy’ about using, and being seen to use, such tools. Similar to Grant (2003) findings that some practitioners are sceptical of the jargon associated with tools, Alpha’s managers were told to remove any academic terminology from strategy presentations since this was perceived to obscure their own created ideas. Both Beta and Gamma’s CEOs also used many colourful euphemisms when describing the relevance of academic ideas, suggesting in essence that their work was not practical and served no valuable purpose. Thus, while the strategy literature tends to suggest that particular strategic practices are often considered as more legitimate when they have been created or endorsed by academics and consultants (Whittington, 2003), this study found the opposite to be true: strategy tools associated with academics and consultants were considered *less* legitimate by top management.

Even though the use of tools may be justified and supported as a result of the endorsement of respected consultancy firms and academics (Johnson et al., 2007), and from previous research and anecdotal information demonstrating their utility (Seidl, 2007), within the three firms the general view was that none of this provides tools, or their users, with any credibility. Instead, the use of externally-created strategy tools was seen to be detracting from practitioners' credibility as strategic thinkers. Using tools was interpreted by many respondents to mean that he/she was not knowledgeable or experienced enough to strategise without them. This includes not only well-established tools but also modern techniques and approaches that practitioners had heard of or read about, even though previous research suggests that utilising new tools may also enhance a strategist's credibility since it represents a modern and progressive approach (Lozeau et al., 2002).

4.3 Industry Structure

Much of the SAP literature suggests that strategy practices may not be relevant for all industries and that industry differences may render certain tools more or less useful. Many strategy tools are also thought to be valuable only within the specific industrial or national contexts in and for which they were created (Furrer & Thomas, 2000; Narayanan & Fahey, 2005; Porter, 1991). As such they may not be applicable for different levels of environmental uncertainty, national contexts or industry sectors (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Martinez, Priesmeyer, & Menger, 1999). Across the three firms practitioners often cited the industry's specificities as reasons why they and their firms rejected strategy tools.

The hotel industry structure is fragmented, capital intensive, and involves extensive quantities of real estate that are usually owned by investors rather than hotel companies (Olsen et al., 2008). These characteristics aided some practitioners to rationalise their rejection of specific strategy tools and the use of tools in general. The adoption of an asset-light strategy had led Alpha and Beta to manage and franchise, but not own, the vast majority of their properties and meant that they were not free to make all strategic decisions they might consider important. Similarly, although there were many strategic initiatives that they wished to implement at the property level, they were not able to do so without the buy-in and financial commitment of hotel owners and investors:

> "It's about selling the idea, the concept, to third parties who need to come along with you in order to execute because (Alpha) on its own, cannot executive anything." (SVP-Development)

In other words, as Brookes and Roper (2012) have noted, the fee-based model had resulted in the hotel companies being largely dependent on the cooperation of stakeholders such as franchisees and property owners in order to implement strategic choices. While previous research has shown that franchising imposes restrictions on discretionary strategic decision-making at the unit level (Roberts, 1997), the current findings suggest that this is also true for corporate entities in the hotel industry, and that this negates some of the benefits of formal studies involving strategic planning tools and techniques.

Various examples of how this industry structure affected the use and perceived value of generic strategy tools were encountered during the research at both Alpha and Beta, whose hotel portfolios comprised a vast majority of hotels with third-party owners. At Alpha, for example, several executives pointed to this structure as one reason why they did not use the BCG matrix. A traditional use of portfolio-planning matrices would imply that the firm could examine its different brands against one another and objectively decide which ones it should invest in ("Rising stars") or withhold funds to ("Dogs"). Unlike a consumer goods firm that could stop manufacturing, selling or marketing a particular product,

> ". . . because we work with owner partners, we have a fiduciary responsibility to our owners to help them maximise their return on their assets that we manage, it just isn't viable for us to be thinking about a certain brand as being a brand that we're cashing out on . . . if we owned (all of) them, I think we would have more freedom to look at it differently" (SVP-Marketing, Alpha).

The practitioners also suggested that while the use of this type of tool could point to investment being needed in order to strengthen the likelihood of a brand becoming a 'Star', this investment would generally need to be made at the property level by individual hotel owners. From the experience of the hotel firms the tool did little to demonstrate to owners that their capital investments would lead to direct financial improvements for their individual businesses which is a key imperative since owners often put the interests of their own properties ahead of the brand (Bender, Partlow, & Roth, 2008). In other words, the standard strategy tools did little to help the companies convince franchisees to implement strategic changes and investments, and as such they were not often used for communication purposes with owners and managers. However, because many investments are necessary for the brand but not necessary for a third-party owner, Alpha and Beta were required to convey to their stakeholders the strategic reasons as to why the latter needed to contribute to the brand's success. With hotels owned by large investment funds and financially astute organisations, Alpha and Beta relied almost exclusively on financial tools and quantitative data analyses to converse with owners about the capital investment requirements necessary to ensure the success of respective brands. Observations that owners' influence and involvement in decision-making has grown over the years (Gannon, Roper, & Doherty, 2010) was thus found to also extend, albeit perhaps without their knowledge, into reasons why hotel companies refrain from using certain tools. That is, even internal decision-making processes and practices were affected by the firms' strategic content decisions such as its ownership/management structure.

Fragmentation was another industry characteristic found to reduce the perceived value and practical application of tools such as positioning charts, SWOT analyses and Porter's Five Forces framework. The firms needed to simultaneously compete against other multi-unit companies globally, whilst at the same time competing against a unique set of local rivals. Informants at the two largest firms pointed out that while their past efforts to use a positioning-chart analysis sometimes suggested that on a global scale a certain brand was becoming uncompetitive versus that of a competitor, the value of using the tool had become rather limited since the underlying analysis or tool's communication power could not be used to justify that this was the case for an individual hotel unit belonging to a particular owner. Harrington (2005) similarly notes that geographic distribution impacts strategic decision-making. Thus, while certain capital investments or other changes were deemed necessary in order to reposition specific brands, such actions were clearly not necessary for all hotel owners since not every property was underperforming its competitors. Such situations confirm that the 'bricks and brains' (Gannon et al., 2010) separation not only results in challenges to achieving integrated global strategies for hotel firms (Whitla, Walters, & Davies, 2007), but also impacts upon the pragmatic validity of some strategy tools.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that organisations often replicate the practices of successful competitors, and this implies that specific strategy practices and techniques may develop as industry standards (Spender, 1989). This study found, however, that hotel firms purposely did not emulate competitors' formal strategizing practices, contradicting Gunn &

Williams' (2008) survey results which suggested that senior managers rely on those tools most popular in their industry. At Alpha, for example, a common perception was that competitors were outdated in their strategy work due to reliance on well-established techniques that did not accurately capture the nuances needed to successfully devise new strategies. For them, the strategists within the industry were seen as complacent and accustomed to repeatedly using the same tools and techniques as had been used several decades ago to analyse competitive situations and brands. They believed that these approaches, arguably institutionalised within the industry, did not provide users with a sustainable competitive advantage. Their views suggest that managers recognised the inertia and competency trap characterising large hotel chains which often deploy a consistent set of routines (Ingram & Baum, 1997). Alpha's practitioners went on to comment that this reliance on established but ineffective tools may be a result of the fact that new tools which better reflect the industry's contemporary challenges and competitive dynamics have yet to be created and disseminated. Thus it is not just academics (e.g., Becker & Olsen, 1995; Okumus & Wong, 2005) but also practitioners who note that management techniques for the hotel industry have not been created to parallel the changing needs of the industry's managers, and this lack of development contributes, in part, to the rejection of tools as a whole rather than just to any one specific tool. Thus, while firms may copy existing tools from their competitors in order to minimise the benefits these afford them (O'Neill et al., 1998), this study found the opposite to be true since the practitioners opined that tools used by competitors provide a disservice rather than any competitive advantage as a result of being antiquated and inappropriate.

A tool's relevance is said to be limited to the firms or industries whose characteristics are in line with its assumptions (Porter, 1991). However, while the practitioners provided only a few concrete reasons for why they thought certain generic tools did not fit the industry or were particularly difficult to use, there was a consistent perception that the industry and firms were too unique to use standard tools, and unlike Haspeslagh (1982) who found that the BCG portfolio matrix was adapted to sectorial contexts, this was not evident in this study. These findings begin to help explain why some previous studies have found that service sector firms make little use of most strategy analysis tools (Aldehayyat & Anchor, 2008; Glaister & Falshaw, 1999).

5. **Conclusions**

The study has contributed in a number of ways to our knowledge about the usefulness of strategy tools, learnt first-hand from practitioners. The findings about why and how strategy tools are not used responds to calls within the practice literature for empirical evidence about why the use of certain strategy practices are resisted and absent (Johnson et al., 2007) as well as for studies that reveal what is not practiced and why it is not (Carter et al., 2008). It similarly builds on the limited previous research which has explored reasons why practitioners do not find tools useful (Wright et al., 2013) and how context helps shape strategy practices (Jarratt & Stiles, 2010; Whittington, 2006). We discuss our key findings, and their contributions to researchers, educators and practitioners, below.

5.1 Key findings

Firstly, the findings elaborate on the literature suggesting that strategy tools may restrict the deployment of experience-based knowledge (e.g., Grant, 2003). This is contrary to the extant SAP literature which suggests that top managers are more likely to use strategy tools because they have greater strategic responsibilities and higher degrees of strategy-making experience (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2007). Instead, our findings advocate that top executives often reject strategy tools because using them restricts their ability to draw on their own knowledge and strategizing experience. The view was that frameworks narrowed strategic thinking (Worren et al., 2002), inhibiting innovative ideas and action. Furthermore, our findings suggest that these executives reject the use of tools for the very reasons academics and consultants recommend them. These include their perceived lack of legitimacy, the need for creative and fast decisions, and the unwillingness to structure strategic thinking. Since top executives were found not to use tools, the study's findings suggest that Knott's (2008) view that the reported use of tools by top managers through list-based surveys may only be 'fashionable talk' is credible and warrants further investigation.

Secondly, the study contributes to the nascent work on the strategizing practices and roles of middle managers. Rather than the practitioners being labelled as strategists due to their use of tools (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) many of the case study firms' middle managers interpreted being a competent strategist to mean the rejection of strategy tools. Their rejection of tool use was in large part due to the influence of their superiors, and thus the findings elaborate on Hodgkinson and Wright (2002) suggestion that the support of top managers is necessary to legitimise certain strategy practices. In this sense, the view of senior executives that strategy tools had serious shortcomings and an inability to aid in decision-making permeated throughout the case firms. The practitioners' rejection of tools can thus be seen as an institutionalised practice (Carson et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2008) since it is important to their firms' value systems, is passed down by the CEOs, and is unlikely to change.

Thirdly, the study found that there were few instances of strategy meetings and workshops, thus inhibiting the potential for strategy tool use (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Schwarz, 2009). If more strategizing activities had taken place within the firms, the social and communicative benefits of strategy tools might have counteracted past frustration with the prescribed analytical functions of strategy tools. The domineering (albeit respected) leadership style of the senior executives – requiring all organisational members to support their own views about strategy tools and their approach to strategy making - was certainly one of the reasons why there was reluctance to perceive the positive use of tools as boundary-spanning objects (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009), enabling effective collaboration amongst strategists at different organisational levels (Osterlund & Carlile, 2005). There thus appeared little space for "multiple viewpoints, translations and incomplete battles" (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p.413) in the process of strategy making, as it was all about 'I say – you do' as an approach to strategy.

Fourthly, the findings also begin to answer the question of whether generic strategy tools created in and for the manufacturing sector are and/or can be used in the hotel industry by illustrating that some strategy tools are rejected due to specific industry contextual characteristics. In particular, the industry context influenced the use and perceived value of tools due to its unique ownership-management structure and the institutionalised practices where value is placed on practical work, short-termism and quantitative data. This, in part, rendered the use of selective strategy tools as inappropriate, affirming previous concerns about the validity of certain strategy tools across industries (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Okumus & Wong, 2005). Okumus & Wong (2005) suggested that industry contexts are important variables affecting strategy tools and their use, and this study found that industry context renders certain tools more or less useful and that not all tools are meaningful for all people or contexts.

The study also contributes to the strategic planning research in hotel management and tourism as it provides a new insight into the role and identity of actors involved in strategy making and offers further evidence that the context of strategic management is important. Taking a practice approach and exploring qualitative data about the actions and views of managers *in situ,* we would argue that the paper has provided some escape from the confines of restrictive/over-institutionalised "old sense" interpretations of the strategy world (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014).

5.2 Recommendations for Researchers and Educators

For strategic management researchers in tourism and hospitality it is suggested that more efforts go into building theory on practice rather than practice on theory. This study's findings demonstrate that the practical reality of strategy making very often contradicts prescriptive advice, and through further in-depth studies where researchers work in close proximity to practitioners, they will continue to better reflect the reality. Based on the findings suggesting that practitioners perceive strategy tools as being solely for analytical purposes and as part of a rational decision-making process, and in line with the SAP focus on practice, educators are advised to facilitate their students' learning about the social and 'divergent' approaches with which strategy tools can be used. These include their value as boundary spanning artefacts and 'processual toys', which groups of strategists can use together interactively to improve strategy work processes and communication.

Tourism and hotel management educators are also advised to ensure that their students are aware of the fact that strategy is not necessarily practiced in the business context as prescribed by textbooks. Unrealistic expectations could otherwise cause students to underestimate the value of their education and learning if they associate organisational or industry norms as reasons to believe that the concepts and tools they learned are unimportant rather than as valuable ways for them to develop their analytical and synthesising capabilities. Involving more practitioners in the classroom is also recommended as a way to ensure that students learn not only the theory but the way things 'really work' before graduating so that they can better adapt themselves and their knowledge set to their firms' expectations and requirements. This would also assist educators themselves with being able to link the theory to real world applications in their courses and, controversially, to step away from holding conventional strategy tools in an unmerited position of importance in strategic planning teaching.

Phillips and Moutinho (2014) suggest that after four decades of strategic planning research in a hotel management and tourism context, there remains limited attention on the various characteristics of practice and subsequently criticise this applied area for not keeping pace with mainstream literature on strategy. Whilst we may have been the first to specifically explore SAP in hotel firms, the very much wider industrial context of tourism appears to still display some paucity in strategy research taking a practice perspective and we would encourage more researchers to investigate the strategizing practices of practitioners in tourism organizations.

5.3 Managerial Implications

Wright et al. (2013) conclude that managers need peripheral vision; they need to constantly think in dualities and to look at issues from different angles. They have to also differentiate and then integrate complex bundles of issues. Strategy tools are, they say, therefore useful at helping practitioners to perform better analysis and arrive at superior decisions. Therefore, although not a panacea for favourable performance, practitioners should be more willing and able to employ relevant strategy tools. Managers are also recommended to reconsider the various possible roles and benefits of strategy tools beyond their "technologies of rationality" functions. The practitioners in this study tend to perceive tools as only analytical devices while not aware of the other applications such as their ability to facilitate debate and discussions and as boundary spanning objects across hierarchies and departmental divisions. These latter benefits may help mitigate some of the communication, coordination and relational challenges that result from the effects of hierarchal decentralisation which characterise the asset-light nature of hotel companies.

One caveat to mention here is that some of the top executives investigated in this study had not acquired knowledge of strategy making via formal management education routes and had not been privy to the use of theoretical resources, which undoubtedly biased their views on strategy tools. If one was to replicate our research in the future it is likely that executives would be more professionally-educated given the focus is currently much more on the 'business' of hotels. For now, it is important that practitioners recognise that recent hotel and tourism management graduates are eager to put their education to use in explicit ways that demonstrate their learning and the value of their education. One such way is to be able to employ strategy tools.

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