Chapter 15
The Theory and Application of Process Research to the Study of IT Strategy-Making

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents an overview of process research and places a particular emphasis on reviewing the process method. Some insights into the nature of process are presented. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the process method in detail. Some of the methodological challenges involved in conducting process-oriented inquiry are highlighted. Appropriateness of the method to study strategy-related issues is presented which interlocks well with its suitability to investigate issues of interest in relation to IT strategy-making. Application of the process method cycle of research steps is recommended to distil rigorous and relevant theory. Alternative process research sense-making strategies are revealed at a very high-level only. Narrative analysis is presented as a viable sense-making approach to theorize process data and key features of this analytical strategy are revealed. Emerging issues and opportunities that intersect with the IT strategy-making construct are discussed.

INTRODUCTION
Process research is made distinct by two types of inquiry, the variance method, and the process method. The source of process research can be traced back to the ontological distinction of how the world is organized. Democritus observed the world as being made up of stable components whereas Heraclitus perceived reality to be a world made up of meandering processes comprised of fluctuating activities that continuously evolve and bring about changing outcomes. Democritus favored the variant perspective on process. In contrast, Heraclitus saw process from an interactionist point of view; this is referred to as the process method. The chapter offers some background distinctions to make clear some key differences between the variance and process approach. This leads into the

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main focus of the chapter which is to present our perspective on process which views reality as a dynamic state of interactional occurrence which brings us to discuss the theory of method, the process method. Embedded within the process method are many challenges that need to be considered as part of a qualitative study, particularly as it relates to studying IT strategy-making. The challenges discussed refer to: variance and process methods; complexity; context, content and process; boundaries and multiple levels; generalizability; frame of reference; vocabulary; and outcomes. One of the great strengths of the process method is that it allows us to inquire into social action such as management behavior as it relates to strategy-making. Embedded in good strategy-making are processes that unfold over time. By tracking strategy over time it is possible to trace the sequence of events and detect the generative mechanisms that shape its trajectory. It was posited by Chandler (1962) that strategy drives structure and IT is a stimulating force by which to bring about transformation through social enactment (Scott-Morton, 1991). IT strategy-making relates to the organizational perspective on the involvement in, deployment, use, and management of IT (Chen et al. 2010). Essentially, IT strategy-making reflects management’s view on the role and orientation of organizational IT (Armstrong and Sambamurthy, 1999; Earl, 1989; Galliers, 2004; McLean and Soden, 1977).

If we are to truly understand the mechanisms that drive and shape IT strategy-making in terms of development and eventual outcomes; then it is necessary to inquire into the interactional nature of participant involvement to trace decision-making processes as they relate to the deployment, use, and management of organizational IT. Hence, application of the process method as a qualitative research approach is well suited to study IT strategy-making and this is explained. We then turn to the application of the method for conducting a process study and outline the process research cycle (Pettigrew, 1997). A range of sense-making strategies exist to theorize process data and these are briefly presented for completeness. In studying IT strategy-making by way of the process method, our preference is to adopt the narrative analytical technique to make sense of data. The final section is concerned with future and emerging trends that intersect with IT strategy-making and items of recent interest are discussed. Of noteworthy interest, opportunities for future research are implicitly stated. The first theme deals with the combined quantitative and qualitative multi-method approach. Additional themes of interest as they emerge or warrant further exploratory interest in relation to studying IT strategy-making include: philosophical perspective on critical realism; digital business strategy; business level implications for IT strategy-making; social capital effects on strategic IT; IT capability reputation; IT-enabled transformation – understanding and relevance; building on critical success factors for IT performance; leveraging strategic partnerships to adapt; exploring the strategic IT alignment conundrum; and finally, the opportunity to technologically advance application of the process method.

**BACKGROUND**

Depending on one’s own ontological and epistemological point of view, this can influence and shape how process is to be identified. Much depends on how we view organizations, whether we see them as things or processes. The distinction between things and processes was traced back to the ancient past by Rescher (1996). The differing philosophies between Democritus and Heraclitus were found to distinguish in terms of whether we view reality as being made up of stable material substances or processes composed of varying and fluctuating activities. Democritus framed reality as being a stable substance that does not change but instead develops and adapts in relation to other dimensions and properties that serve only to reorder its temporal position. In contrast, Heraclitus