

The Black Box of Implementing Strategic Decisions

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ABSTRACT

In trying to strike the necessary balance between the two main processes of strategic decision (i.e., between making and implementing decisions), many researchers have moved their focus toward strategic implementation, which has become a growing trend in the strategic decision literature. Nonetheless, the strategic decision implementation process remains a mysterious black box, and researchers are still looking for an answer to the challenging question of “What are the core activities in implementing strategic decisions?” Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to plug this gap in the literature by conducting an extensive review of the literature on strategic decision implementation to understand this process better. The present research revealed three phases for conducting the SD implementation process and identified a number of factors inside each phase. Moreover, the paper proposed several future research avenues and implications for both researchers and managers.

KEYWORDS

Strategic Decision, Strategic Decision Implementation, Strategic Management

INTRODUCTION

Strategic decisions are those of utmost significance, determining the overall direction and, thus, the potential for a company’s future success. Senior executives typically make such choices and are few in number yet critical in nature (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Mintzberg et al., 1976). Strategic management involves three main processes: the strategy’s formation, implementation, and control or strategic decision. The present paper emphasizes the implementation phase of strategic decisions (SDs), which is still under-studied, despite its highly important influence on organizational performance (Al-Hashimi et al., 2022; Andrews et al., 2011; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018; Nutt & Wilson, 2010).

Despite the increasing interest in implementing strategic decisions during the last decade (e.g., Elbanna & Fadol, 2016; Elbanna et al., 2014; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018), few researchers have explored the activities of the implementation process itself. The greater part of the literature has focused on examining the antecedents of strategic implementation (Ali & Miller, 2017; Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Heide et al., 2002; Neilson et al., 2008; Umble et al., 2003), while a smaller fraction focuses on how the implementation is carried out (de Oliveira et al., 2019). This dearth of research has created a mysterious “black box” in the strategy literature called strategic decision implementation. “What is strategic decision implementation?” and “How does it work?” are questions still waiting for answers.

DOI: 10.4018/IJCRMM.323200

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This being the case, this paper aims to answer these questions by examining in depth the process of implementing strategic decisions. First, the paper reviews the literature to identify the concept of strategic decision implementation. Second, it aims to analyze how firms implement an SD.

We structure the remainder of this paper as follows: the review approach is described first, followed by an analysis of the strategic implementation research, which covers two aspects of strategic decision implementation: its concept and structure. Finally, the research limitations, future research directions, and practical implications are discussed in a concluding section.

THE REVIEW APPROACH

This review follows Noble's approach (1999) and Tawse and Tabesh's (2021) broad approach, which includes both implementation and implementation-related research to overcome the low number of papers explicitly examining SD implementation topics. Because the strategy implementation research has been fragmented across several management disciplines (e.g., marketing literature, organizational behavior, and project management) (Amoo et al., 2019), it was necessary to adopt this wide scope in the investigation.

To recognize the effective practices of SD implementation, the researcher conducted a literature search in two stages. First, we used several databases like ScienceDirect, ProQuest ABI, and EBSCOhost to search for papers. The search words were 'strategic decision' and their equivalents (e.g., project, initiative, choice of suppliers, information system selection, and new product development), and 'implementation' and its synonyms (e.g., execution, application, accomplishment, achievement, and realization). Second, cross-referencing was carried out to identify further articles. This way, the analysis included articles that considered strategic decision implementation despite not including it in their abstracts or keywords.

The shortlisted papers must be from peer-reviewed journals with an AJG rating of "2" or above or were at least B in the 2019 ABDC list (Fatima & Elbanna, 2022). The researcher had to use the two lists with this low rating to compensate for the scarcity of papers on this topic. This yielded 33 peer-reviewed papers, of which nearly 64.7% had an AJG rating of 3 or higher and 70.5% were rated A or higher on the ADC list. A summary of the empirical strategic decision implementation-related documents can be found in Table 2 in the appendix section.

ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH

The researcher analyzed the collected papers using the thematic analysis method, a systematic method of identifying the commonalities or themes across a data set concerning the research topic (Victoria et al., 2017). This section discusses the two dominant themes revealed: first, the conceptualization of strategic decision implementation and, second, establishing the structure for strategic decision implementation processes.

Conceptualization of Strategic Decision Implementation

The inherent variation in strategic decisions (e.g., organizational restructuring, supplier selection, acquisitions, joint ventures, internationalization, and designing product or service portfolios) makes it hard to find a unified and precise definition for implementing SD. Thus, some researchers have so far been satisfied with a generic and straightforward definition of 'strategic decision' along the lines of "translating strategic thought into organizational action" (Pearce & Robinson, 1985, p. 297) and "transfer[ring] a strategic decision into reality" (Harrison, 1996, p. 49). Others tailor it to the specific nature of a given decision, using a suitable synonym such as 'application' when it is an IT system, 'execution' for projects, and 'achievement' for strategic initiatives.

Though convenient, the previously mentioned definitions or synonyms do not describe how a decision is implemented (i.e., key activities), despite this importance. Indeed, one of the greatest barriers to implementation success is the “inadequate definition of key tasks in implementation” (Alexander, 1985). Moreover, some researchers have reservations about using synonyms interchangeably. For example, Noble (1999) clearly stated that execution and implementation are not synonyms because the emergent nature of ‘implementation’ allows it to be adjusted in response to changes, whereas ‘execution’ implies following the initial plans exactly.

The existing literature reveals no clear and unified definition. However, we summarize some examples of previous definitions, mostly cited from Noble (1999) and de Oliveira et al. (2019), in Table 1.

Some of these definitions were too broad to be operationalizable (e.g., Håkansson et al., 2012; Heide et al., 2002) or too narrow and limited to a single implementation aspect (e.g., Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Other definitions (e.g., Flood et al., 2000) were tautological (i.e., using execution/implementation in the definition) or included consequences or antecedents in the construct (e.g., Miller et al., 2004), when a definition ought to describe only the integral elements of the construct mentioning no related constructs (de Oliveira et al., 2019). Besides, these definitions mainly focus on strategies and not on strategic decisions.

Another point to note is that the chronological order of the definitions does not show that ‘implementation’ is cumulatively evolving in its definition from a simple and ambiguous term to become increasingly precise and distinctive. The fragmentation of implementation research and the fact that each researcher is developing a “disciplinary-specific” definition that suits their research questions may be to blame for the lack of consistent development of the definition over time (Amoo et al., 2019).

Accordingly, we need a broad definition to include the entire phenomenon (i.e., all its essential features) and narrow enough to exclude surplus connotations (Suddaby, 2010) and frame its boundaries appropriately. Based on the above discussion, one can define strategic decision implementation as the complex, context-driven process that actualizes a strategic decision through a set of dynamic, intertwined activities of (1) championing the chosen decision; (2) empowering the organization; (3) accomplishing and adopting action tasks; (4) monitoring and sustaining results.

Defined in this way, implementing strategic decisions has the following characteristics:

1. It is one of the strategic decision (SD) management processes.
2. It involves evolving, progressive activities rather than a rigid sequence of actions.
3. It is purposeful, meaning it is related to, but not constrained by, a predetermined plan to account for the emergent nature of implementation.
4. It is not only the execution of a decision but also the realization of its intentions. While execution means following a plan precisely, the implementation may include adaptation or even a fundamental decision change if that will better serve the organizational goal.
5. It incorporates the sustainability feature to secure medium-term/long-term results.

STRUCTURING THE STRATEGIC DECISION IMPLEMENTATION

Structuring the process of strategic decision implementation refers to the outline of the distinctive and identifiable process components (e.g., tasks, actions, procedures, and activities) that lays down the structure of the SD implementation process and specify how the process is performed. Like strategic decision-making, we believe strategic decision implementation is a process, meaning it is not a single action but rather a set of sub-actions. For example, Noble’s well-cited definition introduced implementation as a process involving the communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans.” Hence, one needs to reveal the process itself to examine its influential factors and outcomes. Therefore, this section further explores the sub-practices of the implementation process

Table 1. Definition of implementation/execution

Study	Construct of Implementation	Conceptualization
Andrews (1980, p. 40)	Strategy implementation	"Implementation of strategy comprises a series of sub-activities that are primarily administrative"
Kotler (1984) cited in Noble (1999,p.120)	Implementation	"Implementation is the process that turns plans into action assignments and ensures that such assignments are executed in a manner that accomplishes the plan's stated objectives."
Bonoma (1984, p. 69)	Strategy implementation	"turn drawing-board strategy into marketplace reality"
Hrebiniak and Joyce (1984, p. 90)	Strategy execution	"a process by which large, complex, and potentially unmanageable strategic problems are factored into progressively smaller, less complex, and hence more manageable proportions"
Hrebiniak and Joyce (1984, p. 90)	Strategy implementation	"Implementation is a series of interventions concerning organizational structures, key personnel actions, and control systems designed to control performance with respect to desired ends"
Pearce II and Robinson (1985, p. 297)	Strategy execution	"translating strategic thought into organizational action"
Nutt (1986, p. 230)	Strategy implementation	"Implementation is a series of steps taken by responsible organizational agents in planned change to elicit compliance needed to install changes"
Nutt (1986, p. 233)	Strategy implementation	"Implementation is a procedure directed by a manager to install planned change in an organization"
Floyd and Wooldrige (1992, p. 155)	Deliberate strategy implementation	"the managerial interventions that align organizational action with strategic intention"
Noble (1999, p. 120)	Strategy execution	"the communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans"
Flood et al. (2000: 2) cited in de Oliveira et al. (2019)	Strategy execution	"the successful implementation of strategic decisions"
Heide Grønhaug et al (2002, p. 217)	Strategy implementation	"putting the formulated strategy to work"
Raffoni (2003, p. 1)	Strategy execution	"The execution phase forces you to translate your broad-brush conceptual understanding of your company's strategy into an intimate familiarity with how it will all happen: who will take on which tasks in what sequence, how long these tasks will take, how much they'll cost, and how they'll affect subsequent activities"
Dekluyver & Pearce (2003) cited in Schaap (2006, p. 15)	Strategy implementation	"Implementation is a hands-on operation and action-oriented human behavioral activity that calls for executive leadership and key managerial skills."
Miller et al. (2004, p. 203)	Strategy execution	"all the processes and outcomes which accrue to a strategic decision once authorization has been given to go ahead and put the decision into practice"
Schaap (2006, p. 14)	Strategy implementation	"Implementation is operationally defined as those senior-level leadership behaviors and activities that will transform a working plan into a concrete reality."
Rumelt (2011, p.61)	Strategy implementation	"The third step [of a good strategy] is the design of a configuration of actions and resource allocations that implement the chosen guiding policy"
Hakonsson et al. (2012, p. 182)	Strategy implementation	"the realization of strategy and what the firm does"
Hrebiniak (2013, p. 6)	Strategy execution	"a disciplined process or a logical set of connected activities that enables an organization to take a strategy and make it work"
Wheelen and Hunger (2017, p. 192)	Strategy execution	"the sum total of the activities and choices required for the execution of a strategic plan"
de Oliveira et al. (2019, p. 9)	Strategy execution	"the process, and related procedures, of (i) informing – and of being informed by – managers and employees about company challenges as well as of (ii) translating the strategic plan (either explicitly stated or else just assumed by top level managers) into specific actions and (iii) establishing consistence among distributed company efforts and among respective resource-allocation decisions, in search of coherent movement for alignment between organizational effort and strategic intention in pursuit of corporate objectives."
(Amoo et al., 2019)	Strategy implementation	"The realization, execution, or putting into action of the organization's strategy through programmes, projects or tasks. Strategy implementation is concerned with the translation of strategy into organizational actions through organizational structure and design, resource planning and allocation, and the management of strategic change."
Elbanna et al. (2020)	Strategy implementation	"The process used to put the strategy into practice."
(Tawse & Tabesh, 2021)	Strategy implementation	"Dynamic, iterative, and complex process" comprised of various "activities by managers and employees to turn strategic plans into reality in order to achieve strategic objectives"

through three phases (see Figure1), corresponding to those in the project management life cycle (Westland, 2007).

The Initiating Phase

Detaching the initial phase of implementation from the decision-making process seems very problematic. However, some researchers believe that overlapping between implementation and formation is unavoidable because firms' strategies are always evolving, and managers implement decisions constantly. For instance, Hickson et al. (1986) considered that implementation comes after the CEO or board officially approves a decision. Therefore, we can recognize this as the post-authorization stage of a strategic decision (Anchor & Aldehayyat, 2016). Nutt (1998), however, claimed that we should make no assumptions about where the activities are implemented since these actions can occur at any stage in a strategic decision process. Similarly, Klingebiel and De Meyer (2013) declared that decision-making, including strategic decisions, could emerge during implementation in response to new uncertainties.

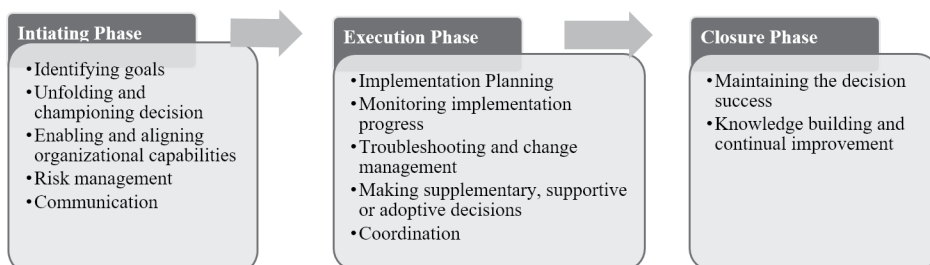
The following points should be considered to reconcile the discussion of when the implementation of a strategic decision should commence:

- The official approval of a decision is the preliminary borderline between decision formation and implementation.
- All implementation actions taken in the formation phase will be part of it if they serve as a means of information gathering (e.g., in the trials and initial installation of systems).
- All decisions (i.e., whether strategic or not) made in the implementation phase are part of it unless they cancel the original one or trigger an alternate path of implementation.

Having determined the starting point of the initiating phase, we must establish the actions taken during the phase. The phase usually starts by defining goals and communicating decisions to those concerned (de Oliveira et al., 2019). It also involves the actions needed to commit employees to the decision, develop competencies and align organizational capabilities, policies, or culture to support deliberate decisions (Brenes et al., 2008; Crittenden & Crittenden, 2008; Elbanna et al., 2020). Furthermore, some risk management is required in this early stage to identify the most critical organizational vulnerabilities that might not survive the implementation process (Sull et al., 2018). If they did not, communication would be important during the initiating phase.

Communication functions not just as a means of information processing but also as a process of engagement that alerts the organization's attention to strategic risks and opportunities (Shepherd et al., 2017). Effective communication during SD implementation is essential because people at different organizational levels rarely talk the same language and thus may have a different understanding of organizational priorities and tactics. According to Alexander (1985), one of the main reasons for

Figure 1. Phases of strategic decision implementation



the failure of strategic decisions is slow communication from top management. In contrast, shared communication creates a common understanding regarding prioritized strategic actions, enhancing the implementation process (Rapert et al., 2002). To this end, managers could also use communication tactics to reduce resistance and risk aversion among their employees and, by this means, attain more of the implementation goals (Fidler & Johnson, 1984). Similarly, Kim and Mauborgne (1998) state that communication between top managers and employees about strategic decisions would encourage employees to voluntarily and actively cooperate in implementing these decisions.

The Execution Phase

This phase includes completing tasks necessary to achieve the decision, monitoring implementation progress over time against the strategic goals (Brenes et al., 2008), troubleshooting, and managing change (Hrebiniak, 2006; Ibbs et al., 2001). Because of the complexity of implementation, which involves many activities and actions, the present study cannot cover all the technical and behavioral practices possible in the execution phase. However, the following actions are the critical activities that the literature emphasizes, and the implementation scholars have frequently mentioned. These sub-activities are implementation planning, sub-decision-making, monitoring, change management, and coordination.

Planning the Implementation of Strategic Decisions

Implementers must plan the appropriate courses of action to achieve the SD's desired results. Usually, each organization or implementation team adopts a certain style in making their SD action plans, named their implementation style. Andrews et al. (2011) defined implementation style as the approach organizations adopt when implementing strategies. Adopting a certain implementation style may increase or reduce the chance of a successful strategic decision. For instance, Nutt (1999) examined 356 strategic decisions from different firms and found that intervention was the least used. However, the most successful implementation tactic, followed by participation (i.e., gaining stakeholders' acceptance), while edicts (i.e., using power to enforce a decision) and persuasion (i.e., relying on experts' arguments) are the least successful ones.

The concept of implementation style (i.e., the execution style) has many dimensions. Håkonsson et al. (2012) considered four executive forms, namely producer, leader, maestro, and manager, based on delegation and uncertainty aversion. Their study confirmed that implementation success depends on aligning these styles with the type of strategy.

On the same lines, strategy implementation research is a closely linked area from which one can borrow useful insights since the strategy is a pattern of strategic decisions. In this area, Andrews et al. (2011) introduced two implementation styles (i.e., rational and incremental) and a hybrid one (i.e., logical incremental). The rational implementation style accompanies a top-down and centralized control, with staff following predetermined actions to carry out the plans that have been adopted. The incremental implementation style tends to be less centralized and more bottom-up; it supports the piecemeal progression and adjustment of plans as situations arise. The writers reported that adapting the mixed approach (logical incremental) increases the likelihood of superior performance. Hickson et al. (2003) also attained these results and found that a dual approach results in the greatest success.

Beyond these few broad notions, our knowledge of how managers decide to adopt or follow a prefixed course of action and how to determine a reasonable middle ground between following initial plans and learning by doing while implementing an SD is incomplete (Lewis et al., 2002). It is worth mentioning here that many researchers adopted a contingency approach when studying the links between the implementation style and strategic accomplishment. They called for either a match between the execution-style and the given strategy (i.e., strategic decision) (Håkonsson et al., 2012) or an alignment between the style and the conditions inside the organization (Nutt, 1983).

Decision-Making During Implementation

Strategic decisions create waves of sub-decisions (Mintzberg et al., 1976), and for a decision to be successful, these sub-decisions must be adequate. For example, a firm that develops a new product must select product design and prices, negotiate with suppliers, and produce and market the product effectively.

Furthermore, managers make goal-supportive decisions to implement the approved strategic decision (e.g., scheduling, allocating resources, and distributing responsibilities and roles). Nevertheless, managers occasionally make adaptive decisions during implementation in response to emerging events. In this respect, several empirical studies have shown that strategic decision-making during implementation is crucial in defining project outcomes (Dvir & Lechler, 2004; Lewis et al., 2002), with managers aiming to balance adapting and following a predetermined course of action. Moreover, some researchers considered that decisions during implementation differ from those made earlier, even if they reach the same strategic level. For example, Klingebiel and De Meyer (2013) observed that managers follow decision-making messiness and problem-solving adhocism during implementation according to their awareness and the uncertainty of events.

Another important point to observe is that most implementation decisions concern either the allocation of resources or resolving operational processes (e.g., Mariadoss et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2015). Interestingly, several researchers discuss allocating resources from two perspectives: fairness and efficiency. The first group then focuses on the ethical dilemmas facing decision-makers in allocating resources (means-oriented), while the second group concentrates on maximizing the outcomes of the allocated resources (goal-oriented). While the latter type of research may reveal the direct impact on implementation outcomes, the former is still, in some ways, valuable. There is compelling evidence in the literature that the ethical behaviors of organizations may have long-term consequences on their performance (e.g., Karaosmanoglu et al., 2016).

Monitoring the Implementation of Strategic Decisions

Effective monitoring procedures and superior control systems (de Oliveira et al., 2019) are essential for continually monitoring the progress toward the strategic goals of decisions under execution. Etzioni (1965) defines control systems as a means organizations use when executing decisions to check whether the current performance agrees with the organization's quantity and quality specifications. Researchers have usually divided management control systems into preventive (i.e., feeding-forward), concurrent, and feedback controls. The contribution of control systems to the success of strategic decisions can take two paths. First, during the formulation stage, they enable firms to scan their environment effectively (i.e., they feed-forward); second, during the implementation process, they provide feedback and hints for correction.

Aside from the purpose of gaining legitimacy in the public eye, firms adopt control systems to overcome agency problems that might hinder the progress of implementing a decision. For example, employees may deviate, shirk or behave opportunistically because of asymmetric information, a divergence of means, and a lack of goal concurrence. Hence, firms use monitoring systems (e.g., accounting systems and boards) to control their coordinating actions (Fama & Jensen, 1983) and maintain congruence and conformity for implementing the intended decisions.

Unfortunately, researchers have not thoroughly investigated the role of control systems in the implementation, which primarily focuses on how a type of strategy influences the design and use of such systems (i.e., the fit between strategy and systems). However, the match does not guarantee the success of implementation. For example, despite possessing appropriate management control information, Japanese organizations could not connect the existing management controls to strategic priorities (Daniel et al., 2011). However, the few studies that focus on the relationship between the control system and implementation have pointed out the critical role control systems play in the success of implementation. For instance, Kreutzer et al. (2015) asserted that organizational control,

using both outcome and behavioral controls, effectively remedies the negative side of organizational politics in strategic initiatives. Similarly, Pearce and Robinson (2003) considered control systems one of the fundamental mechanisms for effective strategic implementation. Moreover, Riccaboni and Luisa Leone (2010) reported that formal and informal controls are vital for successfully implementing sustainability-oriented strategies.

Implementation Change Management

Changes during the implementation process are inevitable. On the one hand, changes are required to cover some implementation gaps between the current status of the organization and the optimal status for a decision to materialize. Brenes et al. (2008) considered that the new strategy (i.e., the strategic decision) should align with the organizational culture, business processes, information systems, and structure. Likewise, Crittenden and Crittenden (2008) called for a good fit between the organizational, managerial, and structural levers (e.g., programs, systems, and policies) and the intended strategy if the implementation is to succeed. However, it is often challenging to make these necessary adjustments. One might assume that the greater the changes, the greater the resistance to change would be, which could hinder the success of the new decision (Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018).

However, the implementation team sometimes needs to change the execution plan to improve the execution performance because of poor quality planning or in response to unanticipated problems or environmental shifts. They can increase the likelihood of decision success to a certain extent by making adjustments, although making too many changes is not recommended. According to Dvir and Lechler (2004), the number of changes in plans or goals during implementation influence success.

Whether they are gap-bridging changes or performance adjustments, changes in implementation beyond doubt affect decision outcomes, for good or ill.

Coordination During Implementation

The implementation teams must coordinate the SD implementation. Kargar and Blumenthal (1994) concluded that one of the leading causes of failure is the ineffective coordination of activities among implementers. Furthermore, Riccaboni and Luisa Leone (2010) considered coordination an essential success factor in strategic implementation. Similarly, Beer and Eisenstat (2000) identified several barriers to successful implementation, one of which is poor coordination. More recently, Tawse and Tabesh (2021) identified coordination as vital for effective implementation.

Furthermore, some crucial drivers of effective coordination are team cohesiveness, the clarity of roles and priorities, shared goals, and a common understanding Okhuysen and Bechky (2009). For instance, Cronin & Weingart (2007) and Miller et al. (1998) asserted that teams with high cognitive diversity experience difficulties in communication and coordination, increasing the likelihood of a failed execution. Likewise, Neilson et al. (2008) stated that determining who provides the input and who decides (i.e., assigning roles and decision rights) is one of the building blocks of effective implementation. Moreover, Hrebiniak (2006) asserted that unclear responsibilities could hinder the coordination among units and put the organization's implementation plan at risk. In the same way, Fahey and Randall (1994) asserted that coordination among middle managers becomes increasingly tricky when top management cannot clarify the firm's priorities, expected work standards, and long-term outputs. Similarly, Sull et al. (2018) stressed that setting common strategic priorities guarantees that units at all organizational levels will work in coordination.

The Closure Phase

As with the initiating phase, the ending point of implementation is not open to universal consensus among researchers. Some researchers believe that implementation ends when the tasks are completed, physically and contractually. Other researchers, including the present author, believe that a post-implementation phase exists, which aims to maintain the decision success (e.g., the long-term maintenance in mega projects, the confirmation stage in innovations (Rogers, 1995), and the

freezing stage in change initiatives (Lewin, 1947). This stage could include the documentation of the implementation mistakes and successes and continual improvement from these lessons as more effective processes and teams (Ibbs et al., 2001). Furthermore, a closure phase is essential for decision sustainability after execution. According to Bhattacharjee (1998), new product development can be successful only if it is embedded in the firm (i.e., accepted by employees) and its adopters continue to use the product over time (i.e., product commitment). This notion gained the support of many change management researchers, such as Lewin, who advised that once we unfreeze the existing status quo and set the desired change, we must stabilize change by freezing the new equilibrium as the new status quo.

Finally, a point to note is that most of the studies included in the review emphasized the middle phase of implementation (i.e., the execution phase), researching the pre- and post-phases scarce. Interestingly, most researchers who focus on post-implementation are studying the implementation of IT systems (e.g., ERP systems). A good explanation for this is that the value and success of an IT application or any technology depend heavily on the number of users after they launch. One can infer from this that the relative importance of each phase depends on the decision at hand. It could be in the post phase of implementing an IT system, the execution phase in a construction project, or the initial phase of a CSR initiative. Researchers may focus their efforts on what they perceive to be a crucial phase in the decision implementation, but they should not neglect other phases because they are all equally important for achieving success.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the strategic decision-making literature, the area of strategic decision implementation is devoid of thoroughly designed research. In this regard, this paper is a modest attempt to shed light on the components of the SD implementation process, which has remained a complete mystery or a puzzling black box for scholars. The researcher tried to define the concept and decipher its structural components accurately.

Theoretical Implications

According to MacKenzie (2003), “constructs are the building blocks of theory” (p. 324), and the failure to develop a definition for the construct will not create a coherent theory. Thus, a construct’s appropriate conceptualization and operationalization are very important steps in developing empirical and theoretical research (de Oliveira et al., 2019). Despite the dearth of scholarly work, the researcher tried to the best of her ability to define the concept of the SD implementation process. However, the construct still needs more refinement and further empirical investigation. In other words, more scholarly work like that of de Oliveira et al. (2019) and Tawse and Tabesh (2021) is needed to create a breakthrough in this area.

Furthermore, the current investigation revealed that strategic implantation is a wide-open field for theories other than the typical ones, like the contingency and upper echelons theories. The unfolded implementation procedures and activities mean that new theoretical perspectives or several lenses of existing ones are needed to address the distinctive and complex nature of the SD implementation process.

Practical Implications

This study carries various implications for business managers. First, it helps managers to understand what the implementation process involves and how to increase the chances of its success. Second, the research highlights the usefulness of using risk management, change management, and strategic alignment as essential managerial methods of successful SD implementation.

Furthermore, managers should not overlook the initial and closing stages in implementing their strategic decisions. If gone through correctly, the initiation phase could secure a good starting point for the firm and orient it in the right direction. It sets the groundwork for the implementation

activities by creating employee awareness, aligning the firm's capabilities with the execution tasks, and taking proactive measures to enhance implementation success. Taking the necessary time to outline the decision and prepare the organization for its implementation may play a more critical role in SD success than in the SD execution itself. Equally, the closing phase is essential for safeguarding the current success and facilitating future successes through cultivating the knowledge from this decision experience.

Research Limitations

Regrettably, the most substantial limitation of this paper is the modest number of reviewed papers (i.e., 33 papers), but this results from the small size of the current SD implementation literature rather than a weakness of the search method used. Indeed, the small size of the current SD implementation literature was the biggest obstacle. It pushed the research to other fields for exploration, such as project management, change management, and organizational behavior.

Another limitation is related to the practices and activities of the SD implementation. We cannot claim that the proposed model is inclusive or comprehensive enough to encompass the entire SD implementation process. There could be other activities in the SD implementation process that this paper overlooks.

Despite the concerns mentioned above, the current research makes it possible to create a common understanding of strategic decision implementation as a process of actions that can be organized loosely in different stages or activities. Nonetheless, the research gaps in this area are serious and require substantial scholarly work from strategic researchers.

Future Research Avenues

The next step for strategic researchers is to *test the proposed construct empirically* to validate and refine its measures. Then, researchers can use this comprehensive measurement to assess how SDs are implemented in Qatar and the GCC countries. The region is worth investigating because the GCC countries are experiencing rapid economic growth and massive strategic projects in both the private and public sectors (Al-Hashimi et al., 2022). One would be interested to see the impact of the poor or excellent implementation of these countries' strategic projects. The obtained results could also provide more insights into whether there are significant differences in the SD implementation action between Western and Eastern organizations.

In addition, since SD management, including SD implementation, is context-driven, we should examine this process in the organizational context. Therefore, future research could investigate *the contextual factors* that contribute to the success or failure of SD implementation. Here, the biggest challenge could be the creation of a contextual model that is rigorous and conclusive enough to depict the implementation process accurately within the organizational context. There is a need for an integrative model that recalls the frameworks of Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst (2006), Papadakis et al. (2010), and Shepherd and Rudd (2014) but puts the implementation process of strategic decisions at the center of SD research (i.e., the model cornerstone).

Another recommended research task would be to explore *implementation as a critical organizational capability* because the current strategic management research has largely failed to focus on this. However, some researchers have introduced implementation as an organizational competency (Pryor et al., 2007). A good attempt to fill this void emanates from the marketing field. For example, based on organizational learning theory, Huber (2011) developed and empirically tested a scale to measure a firm's strategic implementation capability. The proposed strategic implementation construct has four dimensions: pattern maintenance, goal attainment, integration, and external interface.

Another interesting area for research is the *interlinking between the twin processes of SD management: strategic decision-making process and implementation*. According to Elbanna et al. (2016), organizational leaders must explore how to deepen the connection between strategy formulation and implementation to guarantee that strategic decisions are fully and appropriately incorporated

into organizations' actions. Furthermore, some researchers confirmed that certain strategic decision-making outcomes influence successful implementation, such as decision speed, quality of decision (Shepherd et al., 2021), TMT's political actions, and commitment (Shepherd et al., 2020). Thus, one should know how these two processes interact with each other to increase the success rate of strategic decisions. Future models could measure the activities and outcomes of both processes to assess the consequences of one process on the others.

This study proposes three phases of implementation that researchers should consider in their research design, and they should pay more attention to the closure phase since securing the sustainability of implementation is an overlooked long-term indicator of success. After all, phasing the implementation could bring more profound insights and sharpen the researcher's diagnostic view to reveal the roots of failure.

In conclusion, we hope the present paper will open the door for similar attempts to operationalize the construct for the SD implementation process and empirically test its context and outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author of this publication declares there is no conflict of interest.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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APPENDIX

Table 2. Summary of empirical strategic decision implementation-related literature

Study	Description	Variables Studied	Methodology	Main Findings	Decision Focus
1. Alexander (1985)	Implementation problems in strategic change.	Eleven problems regarding clarity of goals, tasks, and responsibility; inadequate leadership and communication; absence of advocates and key formulators; delays, crises, and unanticipated problems.	Survey/ interviews. Sample: 93 strategic business units medium/ large firms) from the Fortune 500 list. (questionnaire); 25 governmental agency heads and 21 presidents (interview).	The high-success firms in the sample experienced fewer of the following strategic implementation problems: the implementation time was longer than planned, unanticipated major problems, distracting crises, poor leadership and direction by executives, uncontrollable external environmental factors, the inactive role of key formulators in implementation, resignation of advocates, top management's slow communication, the inadequate definition of key implementation tasks, ambiguity statements of overall goals, and poorly defined responsibilities.	Yes
2. Kargar and Blumenthal (1994)	Implementation problems.	See Alexander (1985).	Survey. Sample: 37 presidents of small commercial banks in the USA.	Following Alexander's (1985) research design, the researchers recognized four implementation problems facing small banks: 1.Uncontrollable external environmental factors. 2.Poor leadership and direction by executives. 3.Inactive role of key formulators in implementation. 4.Ineffective coordination of activities.	Yes
3. Miller (1997)	Success factors of implementation.	Backing, specificity, assessability, cultural receptivity, priority, familiarity, propitiousness, resource availability, structural facilitation, and flexibility.	Case study Sample: 11 strategic decisions from six firms.	The most important factors (realizers) are employees' backing, clear objectives, specific planning, external circumstance, and a favorable climate. The less important factors (enablers) are relevant experience, resource availability, implementation priority, flexibility, and structure facilitation.	Yes
4. Nutt (1998)	The relationship between implementation tactics and decision success.	Implementation tactics, resistance (i.e., stakeholder support), scale and disruptiveness of the decision, manager's leverage, decision success.	Case study. Sample: 376 strategic decisions from different sectors (public, private, nonprofit, and other firms).	The analysis revealed four distinctive tactics: intervention, participation, edict, and persuasion. The intervention was the most successful approach, regardless of the situation facing the implementing managers. The second most successful was participation.	Yes
5. Kim and Mauborgne (1998)	The influence of procedural justice on the team performance.	Procedural justice, team performance, knowledge sharing, and voluntary cooperation.	Exploratory field study (2 rounds of interviews). Sample: first round, 48 senior managers from 8 firms. Second round, 21 managers from the first round.	Employees' perceptions of process fairness during strategic decision-making will have positive team performance implications because it can enhance voluntary cooperation and knowledge sharing during implementation and vice versa.	Yes
6. Nutt (1999)	The relationship between implementation tactics and decision success.	The managers' tactics in setting directions, uncovering options, and implementing decisions. Decision Success (measured by its long-term use /a two-year period).	Interviews. Sample: 356 strategic decisions from medium- and large-sized firms in Canada and USA.	The study identified key tactics managers use at different decision stages, including four implementation styles with different success rates. The most successful styles (i.e., intervention and participation) were the least often used, and the least successful ones were the most often used (i.e., edicts and persuasion).	Yes

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Table 2. Continued

Study	Description	Variables Studied	Methodology	Main Findings	Decision Focus
7. Beer and Eisenstat (2000)	Barriers to successful implementation.	Leadership Top/lower level), Vertical communication, Coordination, Clarity of strategy and priorities.	Case study Sample: 12 cases.	Researchers developed intervention methods in an organization's fitness profile, identifying six barriers (silent killers) of successful implementation: unengaged senior managers, unclear strategy and conflicting priorities, ineffective TMT, and unskilled down-the-line leaders.	Yes (strategy)
8. Lewis et al. (2002)	The relationship between project management style and performance within the context of uncertainty.	Performance (innovation and efficiency), uncertainty (technical and commercial), and Styles of Project management (emergent and planned).	Survey study. Sample: 80 projects in a USA firm from the chemical industry, followed over two-year periods.	Top performers blend the two approaches to cope with fluctuations. Technical uncertainty moderated the relationship between managerial style, within-budget performance, and technical knowledge. Commercial uncertainty moderated the relationship between managerial style, on-time performance, and commercial objectives.	Yes (project)
9. Rapert et al. (2002)	The effect of vertical communication on strategic consensus and performance during implementation.	Vertical communication and strategic consensus performance (gross revenues, net operating income, and growth in net revenues).	Survey (each questionnaire answered by a pair, comprising a CEO and a marketing executive) Sample: 322 general service hospitals in the USA.	Vertical communication enhanced strategic consensus by converging the strategy-related perceptions across the functional divisions inside the firm. Accordingly, this shared understanding, especially between the marketing executive and the CEO, would improve the performance during implementation.	Yes (strategy)
10. Cooke-Davies (2002)	The success factors of projects.	The success factors for projects are listed in the key findings section.	Secondary data (Human Systems' project management knowledge networks). Sample: 136 mostly European projects between 1994 and 2000.	They found 12 factors, including: effective risk management (visibility, informedness), documentation of project responsibilities, less than 3-year completion), a mature change control process, accurate performance measures, and cooperation of project management and line management functions.	Yes (project)
11. Heide et al. (2002)	The barriers to successful strategy implementation.	Resource, political, personnel management, cultural, communication, organizational structure, and learning barriers.	Case study/ structured interviews. Sample: 42 managers and staff in a single ship belonging to a Norwegian ferry-cruise firm.	The results showed that the most critical and frequent barriers to implementation are communication barriers, followed by Organizational structure barriers and learning barriers. The vertical communication between lower-level managers (ship managers) and staff exhibited the biggest deficiency.	Yes (strategy)
12. Hickson et al. (2003)	The strategy implementation styles.	eight explanatory variables (i.e., familiarity, specificity, assessability, acceptability, resourcing, receptivity, priority, and structural facilitation), Moreover, the success of implementation is measured by a six-point scale of achievement (i.e., satisfactory performance over time).	Cases (semi-structured interviews) Sample: 55 decision cases from 14 organizations.	The analysis recognized two distinctive styles: experienced-based and readiness-based. Either could be successful depending on the context (i.e., familiarity and receptivity); however, combining the two into a hybrid approach resulted in the highest success.	Yes (strategy)

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Table 2. Continued

Study	Description	Variables Studied	Methodology	Main Findings	Decision Focus
13. Umble et al. (2003)	The success factors of implementation.	The success factors of implementation are listed in the key findings section.	Case study. Sample: Huck International, Inc. from 1998 to 1999.	The paper listed the following success factors: top management commitment, well-defined strategic goals, effective project and change management, data accuracy, excellent implementation team, education and training, relevant performance measures, and resolution of multi-site issues.	Yes
14. Dvir and Lechler (2004)	Planning factors (changes and planning quality) and contextual factors affect the project's success.	Project success (customer satisfaction and project efficiency) Planning factors: quality of planning (budget, schedule, and scope), goal changes, and plan changes. 12 contextual factors (e.g., Strategic importance, Level of experience of the team, Parallel projects, and Technological risk).	Survey answered by project managers, team members, and the projects' external consultants. Sample: 448 projects in Germany.	The number of plan or goal changes heavily affected the success of the implementation. The negative impact of goal changes almost negated the positive impact of planning quality. The quality of planning increased efficiency, while goal changes reduced customer satisfaction. The experience level and strategic importance affect the planning quality, while parallel projects, personnel constraints, technological risk, and breakthroughs affect the goal and plan changes.	Yes (project)
15. Brenes et al. (2008)	Key success factors in implementing the strategy.	formulation; execution; control and follow-up; management and human resources, and corporate governance.	Survey. Sample: Latin American firms.	Successful companies valued all five components more than the less successful ones did.	Yes (strategy)
16. Neilson et al. (2008)	Antecedents of effective implementation.	Antecedents (decision rights, information, motivators, structure). Implementation effectiveness. (How quickly a firm translates its strategic decision to action?)	Survey (17 traits of organizational effectiveness in implementation strategy). Sample: more than 26,000 employees from 31 countries.	Four building blocks to improve strategy execution: decision rights, information, motivators, and structure. To succeed in execution, firms must first focus on: ●Clarifying decision rights: who decides, and who gives inputs? ●Ensure information inflow: managers build cross-unit networks. Then reorganize the structure and realign incentives to support the new strategy.	Yes
17. Crittenden and Crittenden (2008)	The success factors of implementation.	Structure levers and skill levers are listed in the key findings.	Case study. Sample: a company database Comprising 124 organizational stories (29 long case studies and 95 short vignettes).	Identifying eight strategic implementation enablers or levers as follows: Structure levers: supportive systems, policies, actions (e.g., collaboration), and programs (e.g., organizational learning and continuous improvement). Skill levers: effective leadership, resources allocation, corporate culture, and monitoring/ rewarding. The writers called for a good fit between those levers and the intended strategy (i.e., strategic decision) for the implementation to succeed.	Yes

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Table 2. Continued

Study	Description	Variables Studied	Methodology	Main Findings	Decision Focus
18. Andrews (2011)	The moderating effect of organizational structure on the relationship of the organizational social capital and performance.	Organization's Social Capital: relational (actors' trust); structural (actors' connections); and cognitive (actors' shared goals and values). Performance: inspectors rate the firm's services in education, benefits, social care, housing, environment and libraries, and leisure. Organizational structure (decentralization, specialization, and formalization).	Secondary panel data (Comprehensive Performance Assessment by the Audit Commission). Sample: over 100 organizations in the public sector between 2002 and 2005.	Only relational and cognitive dimensions positively relate to performance, but the structural dimension is not. Organizational structure moderates the relations of the previous two dimensions with performance: Decentralizes/ strengthens the relational influence and weakens the cognitive influence. Specialization strengthens the relational impact and turns the neutral impact of structural into a negative. Formalization does not have any moderating effects	No
19. Riccaboni and Luisa Leone (2010)	The success factors of sustainability strategy.	Success factors of implementing sustainability-oriented strategies.	Case study. Sample: Procter & Gamble (P&G).	The success factors include integrating the planning and monitoring systems, decentralized structures, coordination across business units, and a combination of formal and informal controls.	Yes (strategy)
20. Daniel et al. (2011)	Using a firm's control system in implementing its strategies.	Strategy Control system.	Longitudinal study (survey) Sample: 130 respondents from Japanese automotive and electronics industries.	Japanese manufacturers' strategy and control systems integration has become weaker over the last 15 years. Managers have had the management control information but have not connected this to their strategic priorities.	Yes (strategy)
21. Klingebiel and De Meyer (2013)	Types of adaptive decision making.	Decision maker's awareness of a future event and the uncertainty of the event.	Case study (archival Information/ interviews). Sample: 121 decision episodes within a single initiative (a joint venture of three firms).	The type of adaptive decision-making process varied according to the managers' awareness and the uncertainty of events. For example, the process involves problem-solving.	
22. Elbanna et al. (2014)	The effects of team trust, participation, organization past performance, speed, and uncertainty of implementation on the quality of decision implementation.	Quality of decision implementation, team processes (i.e., participation and trust), organization past performance, speed, and implementation uncertainty.	Survey Sample: 116 firms in Turkey.	This paper confirmed that trust, participation, and past performance positively influence the quality of decision implementation, while the implementation speed and uncertainty have negative effects, and other factors gain control (such as firm size, environmental munificence, decision familiarity, and agreement).	Yes
23. Mariadoss et al. (2014)	The moderating role of risk aversion between Strategic Intent and performance.	Strategic Intent Performance (ROI) Slack R&D Investment Risk preference .	Survey Sample:130 manufacturing firms.	Strategic, aggressive firms will increase their ROI because they favor decisions that lower their slack and investment in R&D. A firm's risk aversion moderates the relationship between performance and strategic intent, in a higher risk aversion strengthens the relationship.	Yes

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Table 2. Continued

Study	Description	Variables Studied	Methodology	Main Findings	Decision Focus
24. Kreutzer et al. (2015)	Using organizational control to limit the negative effect of organizational politics.	Organizational control; organizational politics; performance of strategic initiatives.	Survey. Sample: 184 firms in Europe that have strategic growth initiatives.	The writers conceptualize organizational politics under two dimensions: managerial (i.e., suppressing critical voice) and group politics (i.e., encouraging favoritism and nepotism) Organizational control diminishes the negative influence of organizational politics in fulfilling the initiative. The combination of behavioral and outcome controls will increase the effectiveness of the organizational controls.	Yes (strategic initiative)
25. Anchor and Aldehayyat (2016)	The effects of institutional factors on the strategic decision implementation in emerging markets.	Institutional context (the political and economic) and strategic decision implementation.	Survey. Sample: 43 general managers in Jordanian industrial companies.	The most critical strategic decision implementation problems in Jordan are, first, deficient information systems for controlling activities; second, distracting crises, followed by ineffective coordination of implementation and uncontrollable external environmental elements. The success of Jordanian firms is associated with the amount and frequency of their experience with strategic decision implementation issues and their use of formal strategic planning. Institutional factors are more influential during strategic decision-making than the decision implementation is.	Yes
26. Zhang et al. (2015)	The optimal outcomes of resource allocation decisions.	Resource allocation decisions, efficiency, and equity.	Mathematical modeling. Sample: a major healthcare organization.	This paper used developed integer-program models to examine resource allocation decisions regarding efficiency and equity in a Long-Term Home Care (LTHC) system. They arrived at optimal solutions that maximize these two metrics and compared them with ordinary solutions offered by common allocation policies (e.g., a first-in-first-out policy).	Yes
27. Elbanna and Fadol (2016)	The influence of implementation comprehensiveness on the effectiveness of strategic planning.	The comprehensiveness of the strategic plan implementation, participation, effectiveness of the strategic planning, Strategy formulation mode, and political behavior.	Survey. Sample: 231 senior and middle managers from public organizations in UAE.	The comprehensiveness of its implementation, which is affected positively by the formulation mode and participation, significantly influenced the effectiveness of the strategic planning and negatively affected political behavior.	Yes
28. Karaosmanoglu et al. (2016)	The moderate effect of ethical corporate identity on the relationship between CSR motives and customer extra-role behavior.	CSR motives, customer extra-role behavior, and ethical corporate identity.	2X2 between-subjects experimental design in two studies done in two unlike within contexts High / Low CSR fit setting). Sample: study 1: 126 students and study 2: 120 students. All undergraduate and graduate students from a Turkish University.	When consumers think a firm is conducting a CSR activity with a public-serving motivation, they respond with more extra-role behaviors. This relationship is moderated by the firm's ethical identity (consumers of firms with explicit ethical identity adopt high extra-role behavior regardless of CSR motivation).	No

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Table 2. Continued

Study	Description	Variables Studied	Methodology	Main Findings	Decision Focus
29. Ali and Miller (2017)	A meta-analysis review of ERP system implementation.	ERP system implementation.	Meta-analysis Sample: 215 research papers.	They concluded that top management support, good project management teams, and communication are the most important implementation success factors.	Yes
30. Marlow et al. (2018)	The relationship between team communication and performance; and the effect of task and team characteristics on this relation.	Team communication and team performance (creative performance, decision-making performance, and generic task performance). Team characteristics (virtuality, team familiarity, tenure, and leadership structure.). Task characteristics (interdependence and task type).	meta-analysis Sample: 150 studies.	Team communication has a positive impact on performance. However, this relation was not affected by the average team size, tenure, age, or gender composition. The impact of communication quality on performance was stronger than communication frequency's. Information elaboration and knowledge sharing are the most effective types of communication, while objective frequency and self-report frequency have the weakest impact. The high familiarity and lower virtuality of teams strengthen the relationship between communication and performance.	No
31. Lampaki and Papadakis (2018)	The moderating impact of trust on the impact of organizational politics on strategic decision implementation.	Trust, organizational politics, and strategic decision implementation.	Survey Sample: 228 middle managers working in 114 private firms in Greece.	Organizational politics during SD implementation negatively affects the success of SD execution. The trust of middle managers in the TMT moderates the above relationship (i.e., high trust creates positive politics).	Yes
32. Elbanna et al. (2020)	Strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation role in firms' performance and effectiveness.	Strategic planning (Practice and Intensity), strategic implementation (Extensiveness and alignment), accountability, strategic control, and firm performance.	Survey Sample: 182 Semi-government firms in UAE.	The intensity of strategic planning significantly impacts firm performance, while the practice of planning does not. They positively related strategic implementation to firm performance. Strategy evaluation, accountability, and controls positively impact firm performance.	Yes (Strategy)
33. de Oliveira et al. (2019)	Strategy execution construct.	Unfolding, coordination, communication, control and feedback, development of human resources policies and employee competences.	Survey Sample: 276 firms from the clinical laboratory Industry.	The results showed the validity of the proposed strategy execution construct and suggested that its indicators can check execution success.	Yes (Strategy)