A Context and Content Reflection on Business-IT Alignment Research

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors present the results of a recently performed literature analysis on the topic of Business-IT Alignment. They have thereby investigated 270 articles from the period 1993-2011 in a structured way. The articles were selected on the basis of three well-known ranking lists of publications in the Information Systems research domain. In the authors’ analysis they distinguish a context and a content point of view. The former one focuses on metadata analysis of the articles under consideration whereas the latter one uses text mining techniques to dive into the articles’ body of content. Finally, they discuss their results and present conceivable future research directions that should be tackled by alignment researchers and conclude their paper.

Keywords: Business-Information Technology Alignment, Content Analysis, Information Systems, Literature Review, Research Domains

INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades Business-IT Alignment represents a highly relevant topic in the IS (information systems) research field (Chan & Reich, 2007), which is important to both academia and practice. According to Tiwana and Konsynski (2010) Business-IT Alignment refers to the continuous and dynamic process of assuring a fit between business needs and IT (information technology). It is a key issue for IT executives and was ranked 3rd in 2010 after it was given persistent high ranks in the previous years as well (Luftman & Ben-Zvi, 2010). High relevance was recently also stated for business executives by Bartenschlager and Goeken (2009) who claim that “there is little published research that attempts to give methodological support”. This is also in line with Aggarwal who purports that “there is little agreement on the way of how to achieve alignment as well as how this topic should be researched” (Aggarwal, 2009).

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Despite the fact that the alignment term was introduced and coined nearly twenty years ago (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993), research activities are still very omnipresent. A recent Gartner report claimed the need for improved alignment practices (Mahoney & Kitzis, 2009). Business-IT Alignment represents a complex research issue that is not completely solved yet and where much research goes on. All this indicates that it is a concern that will still stay on the agenda for a long time. There are a myriad of reasons for such a permanent engagement. Researchers may follow behaviour or construction-oriented research approaches. Some may focus on strategic and others on tactical and operational issues. Also new application fields emerged. For instance, with the appearance of the internet and advances in related concepts and technologies new networked organizational forms (Camarinha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2005) such as Value Webs appeared that also need to be operationally aligned (Wieringa, 2008). Furthermore, new computing paradigms like Cloud Computing (Rochwerger et al., 2009) need also to be sufficiently considered in this context.

It is important to keep the overview on a research field up-to-date. This is due to the fact that the knowledge base continuously grows and that organisational and technological circumstances permanently change (vom Brocke et al., 2009). The last relevant overview on the field was performed already half a decade ago (Chan & Reich, 2007), so that there is a need to update the knowledge base. We follow thereby a structured literature review process, as suggested for instance by vom Brocke et al. (2009), Levy and Ellis (2006), and Webster and Watson (2002). We do so by reflecting the set of retrieved literature – amounting to 270 articles between 1993 and 2011 – from two distinct perspectives, namely a context and a content point of view. The context perspective represents a traditional literature analysis, which is based on identifying relevant authorships, quotation frequency, or analysing paper distribution over time. This metadata analysis is completed by the content perspective, where we aim to derive high quality information from the text itself by means of different text mining weights and measures.

The paper is structured as follows. First we discuss the alignment term and describe chronologically how the research topic emerged. Then we present our research design, including the methodology and the context and content analysis framework. Afterwards, we highlight the most meaningful review results, before we finally sketch a short future research direction for Business-IT Alignment and conclude our work.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Many alignment definitions have been conceptualized in the academic literature and a comprehensive enumeration is provided by Chan & Reich (2007). What all definitions have in common is to stress on the mutual relationship between the business domain and the IT domain. This general and all-encompassing view also constitutes our alignment perception in this paper. However, some of the definitions put their focus on strategy execution (e.g. Pyburn, 1983) and others concentrate more on structural aspects (e.g. Chan, 2001). Further it should be noted that there are several equivalent terms that are used in the literature for characterizing alignment. For instance, ‘fit’, ‘harmony’, ‘linked’, ‘integrated’, ‘fused’, ‘matched’, or ‘interwoven’ (cf. Luftman & Ben-Zvi, 2010) between the business and the IT domain are terms that are also frequently used for describing the desired mutual relationship. These alternative terms have therefore been used in our structured literature review process, as will be described in the next section.

The first appearance and coining of the alignment term cannot be equated with the actual genesis of the research field. Actually much research that is in line with the above described alignment understanding was performed long time before 1993. In the following we exemplary look at the two decades prior to the term introduction and shortly refer to relevant
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