

# About Top Down and Bottom Up Perspectives on Strategic Alignment

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Directly after reading Claudio Ciborra's fantastic article I was surprised by this strong attack on the concept of strategic alignment. The introduction of the paper argued that the concept of strategic alignment was simply over, just because a few well-known authors had dropped the whole term from the title of their winning ICIS research paper. The paper also argued that the above concept, that may be close to truism, was far from being implemented in everyday business. Even more, it seemed to make also all other abstract (and simple) conceptual models obsolete, at least those who did not emerge from direct (and measurable) observation of real life. My feeling of the paper was that the criticism against just this specific alignment model was not quite fair. Strategic alignment deals with

a complex relationship, but this abstracted model itself is not such a simple static set of static boxes and lines as the introduction of Claudio's paper argued. At least, I expected a careful explanation of why the constructs of the strategic alignment model are of no value. An exact argumentation of the bugs in the model should have been expressed because the paper generalizes quite soon its criticism to cover also other top down models, and even the whole MBA teaching.

I know some earlier very excellent manifests of the author against top-down (conceptual) strategic models. Therefore, and because I liked the strategic alignment model, I had to stop and test my own implicit arguments. I have been using the model in my teaching, both in IS major student classroom teaching (which is not a typical MBA course, however) and also in numerous senior

executive and CIO seminars in real companies to discuss the very complex relationship between business and IT strategies. Also, I had commented a handful of IS doctoral thesis proposals trying to generate operational instruments to verify the model in empirical surveys.

Why do we need such a model? I have seen this model as a tool to restructure and understand better the complex interplay between IT and business strategies (infrastructures) in corporations, not only as a set of boxes and lines that should in a reliable way describe the real business world and activities of management. Abstract models of complex phenomena may be very useful in planning and design, quite independently of our ability to measure exactly the real life situations. This specific alignment model includes two domains, external and internal. Instead of the widely accepted earlier static concept of fit, the model is dynamic. It contains also another dimension, the functional integration. Because the model is not static, it is not simple. There is no reason to believe that the authors developed this complex model in vacuum, without their own perception of the real everyday business.

Secondly, the model separates four different hypothetical alignment perspectives on the basis of the dominant sub-domain. Business managers do not easily accept any other perspective than the traditional strategy execution perspective. The model helps to define the situations where the external IT infrastructure (i.e. Internet) may affect the organizational infrastructure quite differently from what is assumed in the business strategy.

Thirdly, the strategic alignment model has placed the IT infrastructure explic-

itly into the strategic framework. Research on IT infrastructure has quite clearly intensified after the publishing of this alignment model. I do not believe that the time of strategic alignment is over, if the winning ICIS research paper in 1996 did not mention the term alignment in the title of the paper. The winning paper was on the infrastructure capabilities, a topic directly within the core of the strategic alignment model.

After reading the body of the paper again, I started to think that the long introduction to the valuable new concepts (care, hospitality, and cultivation) did not benefit at all from the aggressive destruction of the strategic alignment model. These interesting new concepts deal with a different and more general "alignment". They deal with an alignment process, not the alignment concept itself. From the process perspective, abstract top-down concepts like the strategic alignment concept itself, may not be relevant. In other situations they may still be useful.

However, I think that only by mixing abstract top-down conceptual models and more detailed bottom-up approaches can we really learn to understand and manage complex phenomena like the interplay of strategies in companies.