

Interrelating Strategy Process with Strategy Content

A Synthesis of the Contemporary Core of the Strategy Field

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Abstract

All business strategy *processes* must, to some degree, employ strategy *content* (the discrete models and theories of strategy). Yet while the concept of strategy process is now broadly viewed as ongoing and flexible versus rigidly generating a static plan, there is no consistency in linking the theories and models of strategic management to strategy process. Finding consensus on the relation between strategy content and strategy process has been elusive. For decades the process-content gap has been highlighted by strategy academics as an imperative problem. Furthermore, what constitutes to core of strategy content is indeterminate. Such lack of clarity and fragmentation might help explain the haphazard nature of strategy approaches observed in practice.

This paper addresses these gaps in three ways. First, it clarifies the problem of the process/content gap in the strategy field. Second, it constructs a simplified model which manifests the codependent process/content duality. This is accomplished by building a simple dimensional framework that links process with content. Third, the paper uses in-depth analysis of both scholarly literature and pedagogical content to make apparent what the contemporary core of strategy content is today.

The generic model which interrelates process and content is built in steps. First is a review of the strategy process literature and the strategy content literature. Widely accepted tenets that underpin process and content become two straightforward dimensions. These dimensions, in turn, fashion a simple matrix model of strategy process/content. The next step is a content analysis of literature to expose the theories and tools that exemplify the present-day core of strategy content. This step is essential for “filling in” the interrelation model with illustrative tools and models of those constructs most used today.

The proposed model does not purport to give strategic solutions, but instead addresses *strategizing* – in research, application, and pedagogy - by better orienting already well-understood and widely accepted core strategy concepts.

Synopsis

Strategic management has foundations in the 1960's with process-oriented conceptions such as Chandler's *Strategy and Structure* (1962) and Ansoff's *Corporate Strategy* (1965). From there, strategic management sought to answer how firms can gain competitive advantage and thus the field has developed numerous frameworks, theories, models and methods. As a result, two main bodies of literature emerged (Ketchum, et al 1996) that at times seem opposing or

inconsistent viewpoints (Summer et al. 1990). One body is the formation, testing, and evolution of discrete tools, theories, and models (the content of strategy). The purpose of these theories (e.g. population ecology, resource dependence) and models (e.g. five forces, value chain, SWOT) includes helping to explain or predict industry and firm performance and assisting with strategy formation. The other body of literature focuses on developing strategy (the process of strategy) and has varied interpretations. For instance, rationalistic-mechanistic (a sequential, rational, and analytical activity) or more organic (ongoing, emergent, and continually underway) with no “one best way”. Process research looks at "how" strategy is formed. Content researches and devises "what" is used to make decisions (Ketchen et al. 1996).

For decades now, an absence of solid consensus among scholars on how to bridge process and content has been highlighted as an imperative problem (e.g. Andrews 1980; Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001; Markides 2004; Porac et al. 2002; Whittington 2003; Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006; Ketchen, Boyd and Bergh 2008;). For instance, underlying any conception of “performing” strategy or thinking strategically, deciding which models and theories might be relevant as a process ensues is an open issue. Having many divergent perspectives can provide more insight, but the lack of any guidance on what content to use and when has resulted in a bewildering problem of strategic fragmentation (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001).

If we acknowledge both conventions as basic and essential to the discipline – strategy content *and* strategy process - then more clarity on how both streams interrelate and what to employ has importance to academics, business and pedagogy. This work adds value to the literature by building a model of process/content that interrelates previously divergent streams, and by developing a taxonomy of content that exposes the contemporary core. It proposes a model with this core content added so that the complexity of process/content interrelations can be clearly envisaged.