IT AGILITY RESEARCH REVIEW: THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND CATEGORIZATION OF LITERATURE

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IT AGILITY RESEARCH REVIEW: THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND CATEGORIZATION OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

Business agility has been studied by researchers since the beginning of 1990s. With the increased diffusion of information technology (IT) in business, IT is often been brought up as a factor pushing for agility as well as being a potential enabler for agility. As a result, IT organisations need not only to better understand business agility but also their own agility and their role in promoting and enabling business agility. However, agility in IT and its link to business agility is still an emerging topic and there is a lack of a comprehensive view of relevant aspects and themes contained in this topic. Through an extensive literature review and analysis we have arrived at eight dominating themes that researchers regard relevant and critical to IT agility and its interplay with business agility. These are: ‘Strategic Business-IT Alignment’, ‘Management and Leadership’, ‘Organization Structure and Culture’, ‘People, Skills and Capabilities’, ‘IT Infrastructure’, ‘IS Development and Delivery’, ‘System Capabilities’, and ‘Information Capabilities’. We have also categorized the reviewed literature in terms of these themes showing clearly that all these eight themes are well substantiated in research.

Keywords: Business agility, IT agility, IT agility themes
1 INTRODUCTION

It is often stated that businesses need to adjust and act swiftly in today’s highly dynamic business environment (Van Oosterhout et al. 2006). They must be alert to signals and indications from their internal and external environments, and also respond quickly and adequately (Seo and La Paz 2008). Thus, they need to become agile (Van Oosterhout et al. 2006). One of the factors gaining an increasingly strategic role in contributing to and even in creating business agility is Information Technology (IT) (Melarkode et al. 2004).

The agility of IT and its impact on business has been studied and investigated by many researchers and from a number of different perspectives. For example, many studies have suggested that highly capable and flexible IT infrastructure services can promote and strengthen the organisation’s ability to adapt successfully to changes in the external environment (Byrd and Turner 2001; Fink and Neumann 2007; Weill et al. 2002). Other studies have focused on the importance of IT business alignment to achieve IT enabled business agility (Prager 1996; Tallon and Pinsonneault 2011; Wagner et al. 2014). A third group of scholars link IT agility to agile and flexible IS development and delivery methods (Conboy 2009; Glaser 2008; Largent 2010; Lee and Xia 2005; Lee et al. 2006; Lyytinen and Rose 2006; Trux et al. 1999). It is noticeable that most of these studies focus on one or a couple of factors that they regard important to the agility of the IT organization and its connection to business agility. Also different researchers address different factors. This makes the overall picture of the key aspects of IT agility rather fragmented and incomprehensive. Another observation one makes from going through IT agility literature is that agility with respect to IT and its role in promoting business agility is still an emerging topic. E.g. Sengupta and Masini (2008) state that the construct of IT agility is still ill-specified and its contribution to organizational performance lacks further articulation. The lack of a comprehensive view of relevant IT agility perspectives together with the uncertainty around the construct and meaning of this topic make us believe that it would be beneficial to carry out some kind of systematic review of the existing literature in this area. Using literature review is a way of tackling an emerging topic that would benefit from further exposure (Webster and Watson 2002). Searching the literature for such a review, we could only found one structured review made by Tapanainen et al. (2008) to exploring and categorizing literature in order to discover the main factors affecting IT organization agility. Eight years have passed since then and we can clearly see that IT agility related research has developed further encompassing new perspectives as well as further exploration of already identified areas of relevance.

Given the above, the purpose of this research is to develop an up-to-date overview of the key relevant themes and perspectives affecting the agility of the IT organization and its role in enabling business agility. This overview is created by carrying out and reporting on a systematic literature review and analysis of prior research related to the agility of the IT organization and its link to business agility. The review provides a thematic analysis and classification of the existing IT agility literature based on the identified themes, which should help future studies in directing their focus and attention. Thus the research question to be addressed in this research is the following: What are the main IT agility related themes addressed by literature, and how can we categorize the extent IT agility research in terms of these themes? As stated above, the IT agility adopted by this literature review is primarily the IT function’s agility and its role in and impact on business agility.

2 RELATED RESEARCH

The organisation’s ability to sense and respond to environmental changes in a timely manner is by far the most common elements used by researchers in defining business agility, as in the following definition: The ability of firms to sense environmental change and respond readily (Overby et al. 2006, p. 120). As for the role of IT in business agility, there is an overwhelming belief among researchers that business agility can be enabled and improved through the right IT capabilities (Baskerville et al. 2005; Gallagher and Worrell 2008; Melarkode et al. 2004), or in other words through the right agile IT capabilities. The basic principle for this belief is that IT capabilities can help
an organization to configure and re-configure its resources and people quickly and flexibly to sense and respond to a changing environment, enabled by IS in general and IT infrastructure in particular (van Oosterhout 2010). The outcome is that business agility is enabled and sometimes even created by agility of information technology (Byrd and Turner 2001; Overby et al. 2006; Sambamurthy et al. 2003; van Oosterhout 2010).

Reviewing the existing literature, there does not seem to be an established common term around agility with respect to IT and/or the role of IT in business agility. Several terms and phrases are used in different contexts. Here is an overview of the main definitions of agility in respect to IT that we have found in our review.

Starting with IT infrastructure, Byrd and Turner (2000, p. 172) define IT Infrastructure Flexibility as “the ability to easily and readily diffuse or support a wide variety of hardware, software, communications technologies, data, core applications, skills and competences, commitments, and values within the technical physical base and the human component of the existing IT infrastructure”. Moving on to information systems, Lui and Piccoli (2006, p. 123) describe Agile Information System as “one that enables the firm to identify needed changes in the information processing functionalities required to succeed in the new environment, and which lends itself to the quick and efficient implementation of the needed changes”. Looking at definitions with a more holistic view of IT with regard to agility, Sambamurthy et al. (2007, p. 2) define IT-enabled Organizational Agility as “an IT-enabled intermediate driving force of a firm’s competitive success”. They see two types of IT-enabled agility with different roles in generating sustainable competitive advantage: IT-enabled entrepreneurial agility which aims at creating new ideas and their applications beyond the boundaries of the organization, and IT-enabled adaptive agility which is about the organization’s capability of coping with uncertainty and recover rapidly from disruption. IT Agility as defined by van Oosterhout (2010, p. 38) is “the ability of Information Technology to support an organization to swiftly change businesses and business processes beyond the normal level of flexibility to effectively manage highly uncertain and unexpected, but potentially consequential internal and external events. In order for Information Technology to be agile it needs to support and align the three dimensions of business agility -- sensing, responding and learning”. Finally, Tapanainen (2012, p. 14) defines IT Agility as “the ability of the IT function to sense external changes and respond internally and externally to requirements so arising”. Based on this, he sees IT agility as an umbrella concept being composed of IT Function Agility (internal response dimension) and IT Business Partnership Agility (external response dimension). An agile IT function according to Tapanainen (2012, p. 14) is “one that can sense changes in the organizational environment (and beyond), and is capable of adjusting and responding internally to those changes”. An agile IT business partnership is an aligned partnership that continues to develop according to environmental requirements in order to provide the external response component in IT agility (Tapanainen 2012).

The view of IT agility adopted in our research is in line with the definition of Tapanainen (2012) encompassing both the agilities of the IT function and the IT business interaction.

In their IT organization agility literature review, Tapanainen et al. (2008) identified 24 articles, published between 1990 and 2007, exploring different factors related to agility in the IT function. They grouped these articles into these five factors/categories: IT organization structure (e.g. skilful management of outsourcing and centres of excellence), IT workforce (e.g. the capability of IT professionals to be sensitive to changes and act accordingly), IS development processes (e.g. an iterative approach in the development of information systems), IT management and leadership (close relationship between IT and business management), and IT infrastructure (e.g. modularization to foster interoperability, and linking people together with technology).

Eight years have passed since this review was done and the IT agility research has progressed further since then. The fact that our review contains 22 articles published after 2008 is one indication of that. In addition, with IT becoming an even bigger and more strategic driver and enabler for business development, such as through an increased industrial digitalization, the concept of IT organization agility and its interplay with business agility has both broadened and deepened compared to a decade
ago. For those reasons we believe there is a good justification and a need for a renewed as well as a deeper review of IT agility research with the purpose of obtaining a more comprehensive and up-to-date map of relevant themes and subjects in this area.

3 METHOD

The review of prior literature was conducted in a systematic way and was mainly inspired by the approach recommended by Webster and Watson (2002) when it comes to searching, identifying, and analysing relevant literature. Here is how the review was done.

Step 1. Initial agility literature review - To start with we made an initial scan and review of literature related to the concept of business agility as well as its link to IT. Already at this stage, we adopted a view of agility in IT as being the IT function’s agility and its role in promoting and creating business agility. This created a good basis for searching and identifying relevant literature for the review.

Step 2. IT agility literature search, screening and selection - The process that led to the selection of relevant IT agility source material was carried out in the following four iterative sub-steps.

Step 2.1. Search for articles - Articles were searched in the major databases and journals, as well as through Google Scholar. The main key words used in this search were agility, flexibility, adaptability, agile, flexible, adaptable, and adaptive. To delimit the scope to agility in the IT context and its link to business, terms like Information Systems, Information Technology, IT Organization, and IT function were added. Even phrases containing these key words and terms like “IT-enabled business agility”, “link between IT and business agility”, and “IT organizational agility” were also used to look for and find relevant articles. Articles that only dealt with business agility without the involvement of IT were excluded from the review; however some of these articles were used to set the scene addressing business agility as explained in Step 1.

Step 2.2. Screening articles for selection - Found articles were screened first by title, then by abstract, followed by conclusions, and finally by full text. In the case of books, they were screened first by their title, then table of contents, and finally by some relevant text selections. Articles were then selected based on our early adopted scope of IT agility as being the IT function agility and its role in and impact on business agility.

Step 2.3. Search for articles among the references - References from selected articles were scanned using the same key words and phrases as in the first sub-step. These articles were then screened for selection in the same way as in Step 2.2.

Step 2.4. Use the Web of Science citation index - Another set of material was identified by looking for articles that cited chosen articles from the previous steps. Found articles were screened in the same way as in the previous steps. After a number of iterations of these four sub-steps, we finally arrived at 53 articles/sources dating between 1991 and 2015. Here are final number of articles included per journal/source.

Step 3. Analysis of selected IT agility source material - In this step we adopted the concept-centric review as recommended by Webster and Watson (2002) where selected articles were reviewed, scrutinised, analysed and categorized in terms of the different perspectives and viewpoints in which they brought up, discussed, investigated, and offered solutions for IT agility. Quite early in the literature review process we could discern a number of apparent themes in which IT agility was brought up and addressed by researchers such as IT infrastructure, system development, and IT-business alignment. Based on our adopted concept-centric approach for analysing the literature, an initial list of relevant topics/themes was created. As we continued to analyse the literature, break down the content of articles into different ingredients, the items in the list of themes were continuously expanded, collapsed, adjusted, and/or regrouped before we arrived at our final list of themes. For a theme to be part of the final list it was essential that the theme was brought up by several researchers, well-substantiated in the text of the articles, as well as examples of how it is related to IT agility were given. At the end, eight well-defined themes emerged where each article/source could contribute to one or several of these themes.

4 LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

Key IT agility themes - Our review identified eight themes as being the most prominent ones that researchers have linked to IT organization agility and its role in enabling business agility. These are: ‘Strategic Business-IT Alignment’, ‘Management and Leadership’, ‘Organization Structure and Culture’, ‘People, Skills and Capabilities’, ‘IT Infrastructure’, ‘IS Development and Delivery’, ‘System Capabilities’, and ‘Information Capabilities’. Here follows a short description of each one of these themes including its main elements and references.

1. IT-Business Alignment - This theme focuses on IT-Business mutual engagement (Glaser 2008; Rockart et al. 1996), integrating business and IT strategies (Glaser 2008; Melarkode et al. 2004; Navedo-Samper et al. 2013), business involvement in setting strategic goals for IT (Tallon 2008), and understanding and promoting business value of IT across the entire organisation (Melarkode et al. 2004; Prager 1996; Wagner et al. 2014). Alignment is seen as a sensing capability (Luftman and Ben-Zvi 2011) as well as key for mobilizing resources and responding to unpredicted changes (Seo and La Paz 2008; Tallon and Pnisoneaunt 2011; Tiwana and Konsynski 2010).

2. Management and Leadership - This theme focuses on the leadership’s understanding of the value of and need for agility (Crocitto and Youssef 2003), leadership’s commitment to innovation and change (Crocitto and Youssef 2003; Tallon 2008), dynamic organisational strategy and vision (Desouza 2006; Prastacos et al. 2002), efficient and flexible planning and budget processes (Desouza 2006; Glaser 2008), business aligned IT investment portfolio governance (Gerth and Rothman 2007; Kim et al. 2000; Tiwana and Konsynski 2010), and flexible outsourcing strategies (Lacity et al. 1995). The agility of the organization is regarded as a systemic organisational value and strategy which has to be driven and championed by management at all levels and in many different ways (Crocitto and Youssef 2003; Navedo-Samper et al. 2013).

3. Organisation Structure and Culture - This theme focuses on organizational and cultural openness (Ashrafi et al. 2006; Seo and La Paz 2008), workforce empowerment (Breu et al. 2002; Lui and Piccoli 2006; Tsourveloudis and Valavanis 2002; Wang et al. 2014), distributed decision-making authority and flatter managerial hierarchies (Prastacos et al. 2002; Tsourveloudis and Valavanis 2002), strong and positive organisational identity (Wang et al. 2014), and knowledge management and sharing as well as organisational learning (Ashrafi et al. 2006; Crocitto and Youssef 2003; Seo and La Paz 2008). Meeting business needs based on continuous change requires that IT organizations have the ability to significantly change their operating philosophies, culture and behaviours, formal structures, and work processes (Prager 1996).

4. People, Skills and Capabilities - This theme focuses (in addition to IT skills) on behavioural, communication, and social capability and flexibility skills (Ashrafi et al. 2006; Bassellier and
Agility in ISD is related to the ability and speed of innovating with the use of IT to react effectively to new opportunities or threats if system changes take time and are costly to make and to implement (Fink and Neumann 2007). This theme focuses on the ability to change and adjust system capabilities and features as and when required (Boar 1998; Fink and Neumann 2007; Glaser 2008; Prager 1996), and efficient and effective support and maintenance arrangements (Fink and Neumann 2007). Information systems are considered by many scholars as important prerequisites to agility in the sense that they constitute a critical and fundamental part of any change required for business agility (Coronado Mondragon et al. 2004; Goldman et al. 1995). Most probably, an organisation won’t be able to use IT to react effectively to new opportunities or threats if system changes take time and are costly to make and to implement (Fink and Neumann 2007).

8. Information Capabilities - This theme focuses on access to the right information at the right time (Breu et al. 2002; Desouza 2006; Prager 1996), ability to accommodate change related to access and use of information (Fink and Neumann 2007), well-developed and flexible information infrastructure (Fink and Neumann 2007; Tsourveloudis and Valavanis 2002), and information interoperability and network communication (Evgeniou 2002; Tsourveloudis and Valavanis 2002). Information and the ability to process information in an efficient and effective manner allow organisations to reduce uncertainty and make more accurate decisions, contributing thereby to both the sensing and responding dimensions of agility (Huang et al. 2012; Seo and La Paz 2008). The organization’s ability to find and analyse information, in a context of rapid business change, and in a quick and cost effective manner, is a critical competency of success (Evgeniou 2002).

Categorization of literature by themes - Table 1 shows the categorization of the selected literature into the eight IT agility themes. The table is sorted by date of publication of the articles/sources.
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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Str. Business-IT Alignment</th>
<th>Management &amp; Leadership</th>
<th>Org. Structure &amp; Culture</th>
<th>People, Skills &amp; Capabilities</th>
<th>IT Infrastructure</th>
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Table 1: The categorization of the reviewed literature into the eight identified IT agility themes
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our extensive literature review and analysis reveals eight dominating themes that researchers regard as most relevant to IT agility and its interplay with business agility. These are: ‘Strategic Business-IT Alignment’, ‘Management and Leadership’, ‘Organization Structure and Culture’, ‘People, Skills and Capabilities’, ‘IT Infrastructure’, ‘IS Development and Delivery’, ‘System Capabilities’, and ‘Information Capabilities’. This outcome can be seen as further development of the review results of Tapanainen et al (2008). We can see that Tapanainen’s five areas (Organization Structure, Workforce, Development Processes, Management and Leadership, and IT Infrastructure) are contained within our themes which we believe have a broader and deeper coverage compared to Tapanainen’s. E.g. our theme of ‘Organisation Structure and Culture’ contains aspects such as organizational openness, organizational culture and identity, as well as organizational learning, all of which are critical to agility that are not found in Tapanainen’s equivalent theme. Likewise, our theme of ‘Management and Leadership’ includes elements that are not found in Tapanainen’s equivalent such as leadership’s understanding of the value of and need for agility, leadership’s commitment to innovation and change, and dynamic organisational strategy and vision. The same thing applies to our theme of ‘People, Skills and Capabilities’ where our review has identified the importance of business domain knowledge both at the operational and strategic level for the agility of the IT function and its business partnership. As for our theme of IS Development and Delivery, there is a clear focus from researchers on ISD teams and methods that can handle ongoing business and technology changes, something that is not very visible in Tapanainen’s equivalent theme. Furthermore, we have identified three additional themes that are not explicitly found or emphasized in Tapanainen’s work, namely ‘Strategic Business-IT Alignment’, ‘System Capabilities’, and ‘Information Capabilities’. As for Business – IT alignment, our review has shown that this topic is probably the most critical aspect of IT agility as scholars regard it as paramount for IT organisation’s ability to sense changes in the business environment and respond adequately. Alignments elements such as business and IT strategy integration, business involvement in setting strategic goals for IT, as well as understanding and promoting business value of IT are brought up frequently by researchers as key elements of the organization’s sensing capability, mobilizing resources, and responding to unexpected changes. As for information systems, scholars have demonstrated that information systems’ business functionality, technical features, together with the organization’s ability to change and adjust these features fairly quickly and to reasonable cost is critical to the responding capability of agility. The justification of adding the Information Capabilities theme lies in that availability, access, retrieval, utilisation of business information, together with the organization’s ability to accommodate change related to those aspects, are all key factors brought up by many articles as strong contributing elements to both the sensing and responding aspects of agility in our information age. There is another difference between Tapanainen’s and our approach related to the way the classification of the agility themes has been done. Tapanainen grouped the reviewed 24 articles into five topics/groups where each article was only placed into one group. As for our approach, the identification of the eight themes was a result of analysing, scrutinizing, and breaking down the content of each one of the 53 articles/sources into various sub topics where a single article could and in many cases did contribute to several themes. This level of scrutinizing the content of the selected articles have allowed us to capture more, broader, and deeper factors resulting in a much more comprehensive and refined thematic analysis and categorization of the literature.

In terms of contribution, our extensive literature review and analysis has identified eight relevant themes to IT agility and its interplay with business agility. The number, breadth, and depth of these themes (See Table 1) shows that IT agility is a multi-faceted and multidimensional construct included in almost all aspects of the IT function, which confirms the view that IT agility is a comprehensive concept. The categorization of the reviewed literature in terms of these themes including the number of articles per theme shows clearly that all themes are well substantiated in research. We believe therefore that these themes and the categorization of the extant literature provide a useful topic map for future research in this area. We also think that this outcome can constitute a good foundation for creating a framework around IT agility. This is in fact our next research project in this area.
References


