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STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NATIONAL CULTURE

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Abstract

It is generally acknowledged that successful exploitation of technology for competitive advantage requires the strategic alignment of organisational goals with information systems strategies. Globalisation and increasing cross-cultural and multi-national deployment of information systems makes it imperative to understand how differences in culture at the national level impact organisational efforts to achieve strategic alignment. This paper explored the impact of national culture dimensions on strategic alignment through analysis of the literature. The findings suggest that dimensions of national culture influence strategic alignment through interactions with organisational level factors. Managers have to evaluate and take the potential influences of national culture dimensions into account when designing strategies aimed at strategic alignment.

Keywords: Strategic alignment, national culture, information systems

1.0 Introduction

Increased competition in a global marketplace has made it necessary for organisations to invent strategies to stay competitive. It is generally acknowledged that successful exploitation of technology for competitive advantage requires the strategic alignment (SA) of organisational goals with information systems (IS) strategies. SA is recognized as one of the most important concerns in annual surveys of business and IS executives (Luftman, 2011; Luftman and Ben-Zvi, 2009, 2010), but remains a difficult challenge to overcome.

Cross-cultural and multi-national IS deployment has amplified the value of culture as a variable in IS research. For example, Leidner and Kayworth (2006), in a review of culture in IS identified six themes: culture and IS development; culture, IT adoption and diffusion; culture and IT use and outcomes; culture, IT management and strategy; and the impact of IT on culture. The use of IS typically developed in Western cultures (Calhoun, Teng, and Cheon, 2002) in cross-cultural contexts makes it

imperative to understand how differences in culture at the national level impact organisational efforts to achieve alignment between business goals and IS strategies. Distinct research streams have emerged for SA as well as national culture in IS. However, there is inadequate research examining the association between the two constructs. Yet, understanding the linkages between national culture and SA is of value to both researchers and practitioners as a result of trends towards globalisation and cross-cultural IS use. Research by Silvius, De Haes and Van Grembergen (2009) suggests national culture plays a significant role in SA. As more and more firms become or even start as multinational corporations, the case for an exploration of the impact of national culture on SA is further strengthened. Therefore, this paper explores the impact of national culture dimensions on organisational efforts to attain SA. It is part of an on-going cross-cultural research project that seeks to explore the impact of national culture on SA within organisations in two distinct cultural contexts. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: first, it discusses SA and describes the strategic alignment model. Next, it examines the culture construct, followed by a presentation of Hofstede's dimensions of national culture. It continues with a conceptual exploration of the impact of national culture on SA. Finally, it considers the implications for organisational efforts to achieve SA and outlines a trajectory for future research.

2.0 Strategic Alignment

SA is the degree of fit and integration among business strategy, IT strategy, business infrastructure, and IT infrastructure (Henderson and Venkatraman, 1993). Previous research highlights the importance of SA to organisations. For example, many studies have concluded that it is essential for deriving value from IT investments and gaining competitive advantage because it promotes the target use of IT to gain strategic and competitive advantage. SA is also important because it helps improve organisational performance by enhancing efficiency and effectiveness as well as offering direction and flexibility to take advantage of new opportunities (Avison, Jones, Powell, and Wilson, 2004; Bergeron, Raymond, and Rivard, 2004; Chan and Reich, 2007; Chen, Hsu, and Huang, 2009). However, Palmer and Markus (2000) found no linkage between SA and firm performance.

There are various dimensions to SA, including intellectual, social, cultural, and structural (Schlosser, Wagner, and Coltman, 2012). According to Reich and Benbasat (2000), the intellectual dimension denotes the existence of good and interrelated business and IT plans. The social dimension relates to the understanding and commitment of business and IT managers to an organisations business and IT plans. The social dimension is important to the understanding of SA, accordingly, some authors (see Reich and Benbasat, 2000) recommend that researchers investigate it together with the intellectual dimension in order to discover the intricacies and challenges of SA. Chan (2002) stresses the need for cultural fit between business and IT and for SA to be culturally supported in order for IS strategic planning to be successful.

2.1 The Strategic Alignment Model

Many frameworks have been proposed for SA. However, the most widely cited remains the Strategic Alignment Model (SAM) by Henderson and Venkatraman (1993). It is a framework for aligning business and IT strategies of organisations that enables managers to leverage IT to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

The model (see Figure 1) has twelve components within four domains: business strategy and IT strategy (strategy domain), organisational infrastructure and processes and IT infrastructure and processes (infrastructure domain).

Business strategy is defined in terms of business scope (issues that impact the business environment e.g. competitors, suppliers, products), distinctive competencies (unique capabilities and core competencies of the business) and business governance (how the organisation is managed). Organisational infrastructure and processes include administrative structure (managerial structure of the organisation such as centralised, decentralised, or federal) business processes (activities that the business uses for its operations) and human resource skills (how employees are hired, trained, and motivated). IT Strategy involves IT scope (range of information technologies that the organisation deploys to support its business strategies), systemic competencies (aspects of IT strategy capabilities that support business strategies), and IT governance (how IT decision-making authority is distributed).

IS infrastructure and processes include IS architecture (application, software, hardware, and network choices, policies, and priorities), IS processes (IT related

activities that facilitate the management and maintenance of IT infrastructure) and IS skills (recruitment and training of competent employees).

The model is founded on two building blocks of strategic fit and functional integration. Strategic fit involves strategies to address both the internal and external domains. The external domain refers to the business environment in which the organisation operates, while the internal domain deals with issues related to administrative structure, business processes, as well as human resources.

The model supports the alignment of the external and internal IT domains to derive benefits from IT investments. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need to integrate business and IS domains because business and IS decisions and choices affect each other. For an organisation to achieve maximum performance there needs to be fit between the external and internal domains. Henderson and Venkatraman (1993) argue for IT strategy to be articulated in terms of the organisations position in the IT marketplace (external domain) and how IT infrastructure should be configured and managed. SA is assessed by the degree to which all the components of the model are in agreement.

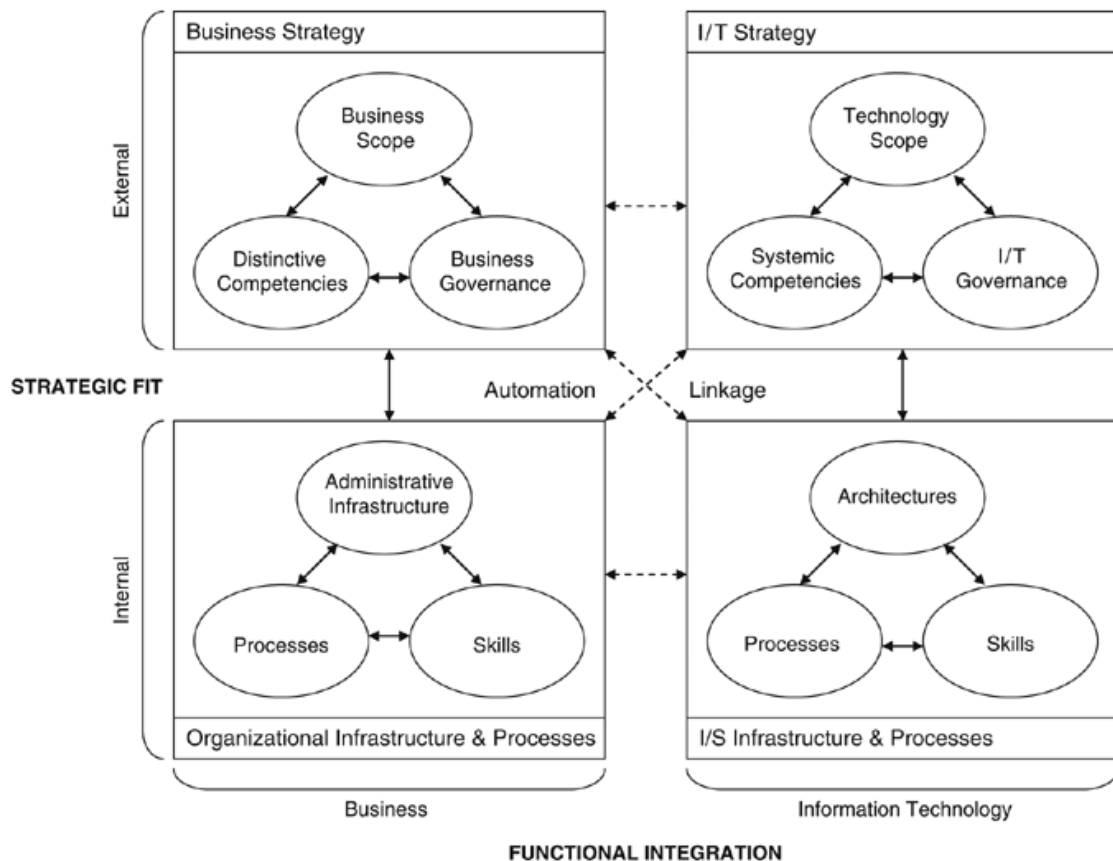


Figure 1. The Strategic Alignment Model (adopted from Henderson and Venkatraman, 1993)

3.0 The Concept Of Culture

Many authors agree that national culture is a difficult concept to define and research (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006; Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, and Srite, 2002; Tayeb, 1994). While there are divergent views about culture, many authors agree that culture has the following defining characteristics: it is learned by the members of a group; subjective and varies from one group to the next; it is shared by a group; it is dynamic; and ideational. It is also shaped by history, environment, geography and level of economic development (Myers and Tan, 2002). This paper adopts the definition provided by Hofstede (1980), which perceives culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.

Different levels of analysis of culture are recognizable in the IS literature. Most IS studies of culture use “nation”, “organisation” or “individual” as the unit of analysis. National culture represents culture shared by people of a given nation state, whereas organizational or sub-culture signifies patterns of shared behaviour of people in the same organization. Individual or subjective culture signifies the influences of different cultures on individual behaviours. There are many sub-cultures within national culture, as there are organizational sub-cultures.

Some authors (for example Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2000) compares culture to the layers of an onion: the outer layer comprises the observable aspects of culture, such as language, clothing, housing etc.; the middle layer constitute the norms and values which a community holds, including the concept of right or wrong (norms) and good or bad (values). At the core of the onion are basic assumptions, which are the series of rules and methods society has evolved to solve problems. Individuals may be viewed as a product of the influences of the various layers of culture to which they are exposed (Ali and Brooks, 2008).

3.1 Hofstede's National Culture Dimensions

Several models have been put forward to explain, distinguish and understand national culture. These models are useful because they provide an analogous reference point for the analysis of cross-cultural differences. The classic work of Hofstede (1980) originally presented four national culture dimensions for the study of cultural

differences, based on research amongst employees of the IBM Corporation in 72 countries. Hofstede argues that differences in work related values, beliefs, and norms can be understood and explained in terms of four main dimensions: power distance; uncertainty avoidance; Individualism (vs. collectivism); and masculinity (vs. femininity). The original model was expanded with the addition of a fifth dimension, short term vs. long-term orientation (Hofstede and Bond, 1988); and a sixth, indulgence (vs. restraint) (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010).

Hofstede's taxonomy of national culture has had a lot of influence on cross-cultural research (Taras, Roney, and Steel, 2009) and is the most cited national culture framework (Reis, Ferreira, and Santos, 2011). For decades, a range of disciplines (e.g. management), including IS, have employed Hofstede's model for researching cultural differences. According to Jones and Alony (2007), this may be as a result of rigour, relative accuracy and the relevance of Hofstede's dimensions. However, the model is not without controversy. As stated by some authors, Hofstede's work is outdated, especially in an era of globalisation. The model is also criticised for having too few dimensions to effectively capture the many cultural differences within nations and for using data from just one US company, which they argue is not representative (Jones and Alony, 2007; McSweeney, 2002). However, the subsequent addition of two dimensions to the original model may be responses to the criticism that the original dimensions were inadequate.

Power Distance (PD)	The degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)	The degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity.
Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV)	The degree to which people are integrated into groups. Individualistic cultures stress personal achievements and individual rights. Collectivist cultures prefer individuals act predominantly as members of a life-long and cohesive group.
Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS)	Masculinity signifies a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material reward for success. Femininity implies a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented.
Long term vs. short term orientation (LTO)	Long term oriented cultures attribute more importance to the future. They foster future oriented values like persistence, saving and capacity for adaptation. Short term oriented culture promote values related to the past and the present, including steadiness, respect for tradition, reciprocation and fulfilling social obligations.
Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR)	Indulgence refers to the degree that society allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses

	gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.
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Table 1. Hofstede's Dimensions Of National Culture

The use of cultural dimensions is popular in research for many decades. However, cultural dimensions in IS research are criticised for perceiving culture as static and falling neatly onto a particular set of predefined dimensions of validity. For example, Myers and Tan (2002) are of the view that cultural dimensions are too simplistic to capture the complexities and multilevel influences of culture on IS. The notion that national culture is aligned with the boundaries of nation states assumes cultural homogeneity within nations and glosses over the fact that many nations are multicultural and many cultures are multinational. To a large degree, many empirical studies on culture focus on “what is now” rather than “why is it like that now”. Yet culture is a constantly evolving construct, deeply influenced by where it has come from; the collective experiences of the people who repeatedly re-form it onto everything from new technologies to new social constructs and communities.

4.0 Impact Of National Culture Dimensions On SA

Depending on the nature of the research, Taras et al. (2009) recommends that scholars choose the dimensions of national culture that are relevant for any given study. Accordingly, this paper examined four dimensions of national culture (PD, UA, IND, LTO) that in our view are most likely to directly influence organisational efforts to achieve SA through their effect on the components of the SAM.

4.1 Power Distance

PD represents a society's approval of social inequality. It expresses the degree of acceptance by less powerful members of a society that power is unequally distributed. There is a high degree of inequality, hierarchy and a preference for centralised decision-making in high PD contexts, while low PD cultures tend to be more egalitarian and less structured.

This dimension is an important factor in efforts to achieve SA in organisations because the level of PD determines how well senior managers relate with lower level staff. The PD dimension influences the level of partnership between people from the business and IT/IS functions, an important ingredient for SA. High PD may adversely affect efforts directed at SA, which require partnership and consultative decision making. In contrast, all things being equal, low PD will support a better level of

partnership among staff at various levels of the organisation in IS strategic planning and strategy execution, leading to positive effects on SA. This is consistent with findings by Martinsons, Davison, and Martinsons (2009) that organisations in high PD cultures used IS for vertical communications to reinforce hierarchical controls of business activities and are less likely to develop formal IS plans. Empirical evidence from Khatri (2009), shows that employees in high PD contexts are passive followers of instructions with little discretion, with largely autocratic managerial decision-making. In high power distance cultures, business and IS employees from different levels of the organisation may be uncomfortable participating or contributing to strategy development. This may affect the efficacy of the resultant strategy due to the lack of effective input, especially from the lower echelons of the organisation. Employees at lower levels of the organisation may not feel part of the strategy, which may affect its execution. In contrast, low power distance cultures may achieve a better level of participation in strategy formulation and execution. Therefore, the level of power distance could enable or inhibit alignment. Furthermore, overall communication is adversely affected because subordinates are not encouraged to make their views known. Conversely, in a study examining the effects of PD on empowerment and team participation, Zhang and Begley (2011) finds that high PD actually leads to higher team participation in Chinese companies. However, low distance can lead to subordinates challenging their superiors, resulting in conflict. Chan (2002) found that informal organisational structure enhanced IS performance and played an important role in SA. This suggests that organisations in low PD cultures, where decentralised and informal organisational structures are preferred, all things being equal, may have a better chance at achieving better SA. High PD cultures (e.g. China) place emphasis on hierarchy and tend to favour more formal and centralised organisational structure and clear organisational processes. Conversely, organisations in low PD cultures (e.g. Sweden) may prefer relatively decentralised and informal organisational structures, which enhances partnership between employees at different levels of the organisation (Hofstede et al., 2010). This implies that greater efforts should be made to involve staff at the lower echelons of an organisation in strategic planning as well as other efforts to facilitate SA in high PD contexts.

4.2 Uncertainty Avoidance

UA relates to how members of a society strive to respond to ambiguous and unstructured situations. High UA societies are usually uncomfortable and cautious in uncertain situations that challenge the status quo. Such societies try to reduce uncertainty by enacting rules, policies, and creating bureaucratic structures and processes. On the contrary, in low UA contexts there is a greater degree of tolerance for uncertainty.

Many rules, policies and standard operating procedures could jeopardise flexibility to respond to strategic issues and take advantage of opportunities, which could adversely affect SA. For example, Martinsons et al., (2009) confirm that in high UA contexts, organisations make detailed plans in order to cope with uncertainty. High UA contexts, with preference for detailed plans make it difficult for organisations to respond quickly to strategic issues and take advantage of new opportunities. Overall, low UA gives organisations a degree of flexibility and a better chance to achieve SA.

4.3 Individualism (Vs. Collectivism)

This dimension represents the degree to which personal independence is valued over group membership. In high IND cultures, individual interest and decision-making are preferred over group compromise.

This dimension is important because achieving SA depends on collaboration between the business and IS functions and teamwork. Many organisations are increasingly depending on teams to accomplish goals. Consequently, the ability of employees to work in teams is very important to SA success. In high IND cultures such as the US, the effective use of teams may be adversely affected since individual interests are elevated above group interests. On the other hand, in low IND (collectivist) cultures like China, where the group interest is elevated above individual interests, efforts at collaboration and teamwork have a greater chance of success. This is consistent with Martinsons et al. (2009) finding that teams are typically more effective in low IND contexts. However, cohesive and effective teams are more difficult to create in high IND settings. According to Lu and Heng (2009), Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism in terms of interdependence, where individuals are expected to follow group activities and support group initiatives. This is good for collaboration in team projects, however, *quanxi* (connections or interpersonal relationships), which is a form of Chinese individualistic collectivism, makes it difficult for outsiders to access the group, potentially hindering teamwork and SA. There is the need to provide

incentives in high IND settings in order to encourage teamwork and to direct the efforts individuals towards SA and common organisational goals. In low IND contexts, it is necessary to coordinate efforts of teams or groups towards a common goal.

4.4 Long-term (Vs. Short-term) Orientation

The LTO dimension deals with the level of importance attached to the long-term over the present. High LTO cultures are characterised by values that accentuate future oriented behaviour and perseverance. Organisations in cultures with high LTO (China and Japan) tend to engage in future oriented behaviour and prefer gradual and steady progress. On the other hand, low LTO (short-term) oriented cultures (US) tend to emphasize the present over the future. In terms of SA, organisations in high LTO cultures may prefer future oriented approaches to SA, while those in cultures with low LTO are inclined towards radical change driven by charismatic leaders (Martinsons et al., 2009) and accordingly, short-term approaches to SA. These observations mean that high LTO contexts such as China are likely to adopt more gradual approaches to SA. On the other hand, organisations in low LTO contexts may prefer radical and immediate or quick fix approaches to SA.

These suggest that values linked to this dimension have significant implications for the kind of strategies that will be most effective for achieving SA. In high LTO settings, this will imply long term vision and goals backed by an enduring strategy to achieve SA. This might have adverse implications for flexibility to respond to immediate strategic issues that crop up. There is thus the need to ensure that organisations adopt sufficiently to guarantee its survival in the short-term, while pursuing long-term strategies. In low LTO cultures, SA efforts need to focus on the strategic IS planning since concentration on short-term benefits may result in the neglect of long-term goals.

5.0 Discussion

As depicted in Figure 2, the national culture dimensions influence some of the elements of the four quadrants of the SAM with implications for SA. Business strategy develops the overall vision and sets the agenda and guidelines for the organisation in general, while IT strategy sets the goals and principles regarding IT

use. Business and IT strategies are vital to achieving SA and are part of the strategy domain of the SAM. National culture is likely to impact the development of new strategies to respond to market forces as well as the strategy formulation process. Ideally, business strategy should be formulated by business and IT/IS executives at all levels of the organisation. Evidence from Schneider & Meyer (1991) suggests that the interpretation and response to strategic issues is influenced by national culture, therefore different cultures are likely to react to the same strategic issue in different ways. The dimensions of national culture in different contexts could potentially affect SA through the strategic planning, strategy development and execution.

Hofstede et al. (2010) assert that in countries with high power distance, subordinates are likely to be afraid of superiors and bosses tend to be authoritarian and reluctant to share responsibilities. On the other hand, the management style in low power distance countries is more consultative; however, subordinates are more likely to challenge superiors. This suggests that power distance is likely to affect communication and how an organisation develops strategy and address strategic issues. In spite of indications that national culture influences strategy, Singh (2007) argues that that national culture is valuable in explaining micro and macro phenomena, but has not enhanced understanding of organisational strategy or performance. As a result, he concludes that national culture is of limited relevance to strategy.

Organisational infrastructure and processes deal with internal arrangements that support the organisation to gain competitive advantage. They include administrative infrastructure such as organisational structure, roles, responsibilities and reporting relationships. It also deals with management processes, activities and skills to execute strategy (Venkatraman, 1994). The management structure influences how employees at various levels of an organisation relate to each other. National culture influences the kind of administrative structure and interactions amongst people at various levels of an organisation, with implications for SA.

Business governance, defined by internal considerations such as management structure, decision-making rights and responsibilities, reporting structures, and policy making is important in contemporary organisations. Business and IT governance is a strategic area that is affected by significant cultural differences at the national level.

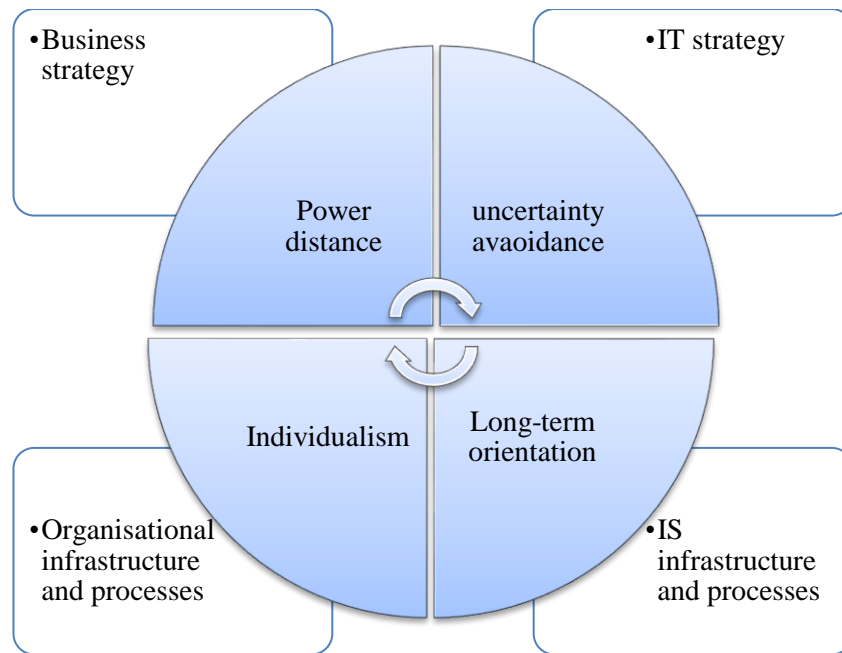


Figure 2. Impact of national culture dimensions on SA

6.0 Implications And Conclusions

This paper conceptually explored the influence of national culture dimensions on SA, using evidence from the national culture and SA literatures. It is part of an on-going cross-cultural research project that intends to empirically explore the impact of national culture on SA. We found instances where PD, UA, IND, and LTO affect SA through their interactions with organisational level factors. For example, national culture dimensions influence IS strategic planning processes and the level of partnership between business and IS executives. Different cultures have different preferences for strategic planning, organisational structure, and management style, which potentially affect efforts at SA. Accordingly, the interaction between national culture and organisational level factors is likely to have unique influences on SA in different cultural contexts. In high PD and UA countries (e.g. Countries in the Arab world, Mexico, China), IS strategic planning and strategy development and execution might be adversely affected, reducing flexibility to respond to strategic issues with an adverse impact on SA. However, it is expected that strategic planning and strategy development will be enhanced in countries with low PD and low UA (e.g. Scandinavian countries, Israel, Ireland) with a positive effect on SA.

The findings have important implications for organisations seeking to attain SA. Managers have to evaluate and take the potential influences of national culture

dimensions into account when designing strategies aimed at SA. For example, Newman and Nollen (1996) stress that better organisational performance is recorded when management practices are consistent with national culture. Strategies developed in one cultural context may not be applicable to other settings. Therefore, achieving effective SA would require international organisations to exploit national culture dimensions to their advantage by instituting measures that will take culture into consideration in areas such as IS strategic planning, strategy development and execution, and management structure. Ultimately, strategies aimed at SA have to be modified to suit an organisation's cultural context.

Having conceptually explored how national culture impacts SA, our future research trajectory is to empirically examine this relationship through cross-cultural research in two distinct cultures. The lessons from such an endeavour will be useful in informing the development of culture-sensitive strategies to boost SA in different contexts.

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