The IT Strategic Alignment Process: A Dynamic Capabilities Conceptualization

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Given the focus on the "what" rather than the "how" of the strategic alignment of IT, a disparity has arisen between the results of empirical research and the results expected by practitioners. The need for a renewed look at alignment has thus been expressed. In this regard, we propose a conceptualization in the form of a process model. Based on the dynamic capabilities, and on the alignment perspectives found in Henderson and Venkatraman's seminal model, IT strategic alignment is modeled as a process of reconfiguration of the firm's IT and organizational resources, competencies and capabilities. As many questions are left unanswered with regard to this process and the factors that contribute to its effectuation, the proposed model is meant to serve as a conceptual framework for further study. In taking a new look at IT strategic alignment the aim is to provide an alternative for investigating and managing this process.

Keywords
alignment process, IT strategic alignment, dynamic capabilities, alignment perspective, alignment mechanism, IT resources, IT competencies, IT capabilities.

Introduction

For the last three decades, the strategic alignment of IT has been the subject of many conceptual and empirical studies that highlight a shared interest by researchers and managers (Leonard and Seddon 2012). Mainly studied as an outcome to be achieved (Benbya and McKelvey 2006), alignment has generally been defined in relation to the coherence (fit) between the organization's strategy, structure, environment and management of IT (Bergeron et al. 2001), and with little attention to the management of its implementation (Wilson et al. 2013). Thus, making recommendations and developing useful management tools tailored to the dynamism of business firms has been difficult (Avison et al. 2004). More specifically, a lack of knowledge on the process of alignment is such that many firms have invested in IT without questioning their business model (Amit and Zott 2001) or without assessing the coherence of their IT choices with their strategic objectives (Raymond and Croteau 2009). Moreover, many firms adopt IT simply as a "commodity", whose use is relatively common (Ray et al. 2005; Nevo and Wade 2010). Giving the role of IT in today's organizations (Booth and Philip 2005; Yayla and Hu 2009), this situation suggest a lack of both strategic and technical competencies with regard to IT, including those at tactical and operational levels of the organization (Gutierrez and Serrano 2008). Many questions thus remain unresolved regarding the realization of alignment and the true role of IT within the organization that is revealed by this process.

Given the focus on the "what" rather than the "how" of IT strategic alignment in the past researches (Levy et al. 2011; Street 2006), a disparity has arisen between the results of empirical research and the results expected - and likely to be applied - by practitioners in this regard, suggesting a failure to clearly identify and conceptualize the process by which this alignment is effectuated. While efforts have been made to provide a more comprehensive view of alignment and of its characteristics as well as its enablers (Avison et al. 2004; Luftman and Kempaiah 2007; Newkirk and Lederer 2006; Reich and Benbasat 1996; 2000), lack of knowledge on the "how" of IT strategic alignment is still a major concern (Chan and Reich 2007;
Luftman and Derksen 2012; Wilson et al. 2013). Thus, despite the growing body of research on the strategic alignment of IT, the need for a renewed look at this research object has been expressed by a number of researchers (Leonard and Seddon 2012; Wilson et al. 2013). In other words, a reconciliation between strategy formulation and strategy implementation with regard to IT alignment is still needed (Gutierrez 2011).

In order to expand upon prior findings, we propose here a new conceptualization of IT strategic alignment in the form of a process model, noting that there has been little use of such models in IS research as opposed to variance models (Levy et al. 2011; Schwarz et al. 2010). Based on the dynamic capabilities concept (Teece 2007; 2012), and on the alignment perspectives found in Henderson and Venkatraman’s (1999) seminal strategic alignment model (SAM), IT strategic alignment is modeled as a process of reconfiguration of the firm’s IT and organizational resources, competencies and capabilities. As the first step of a research-in-progress, the proposed model is meant to serve as a conceptual framework for the further study of this process. More specifically, aiming for a clearer description and a better understanding of the IT strategic alignment process as well as the technological, organizational and environmental factors that contribute to its effectuation, two research questions have been formulated: What are the mechanisms and the dynamic capabilities that constitute the IT strategic alignment process? How do these mechanisms and dynamic capabilities interact within this process?

This paper begins with a review of the conceptualization of alignment, both as an outcome and as a process. A model of IT strategic alignment as a process of reconfiguration is subsequently presented, and the various phases and dynamic components of the process model are expanded upon. The proposed model’s contribution to alignment theory and practice is then discussed, followed by future research avenues and concluding remarks.

**Conceptualization of IT Strategic Alignment**

The complex multidimensional and multilevel nature of IT strategic alignment is generally recognized in the scientific literature. Nevertheless, this concept is still primarily defined as an outcome to be achieved. Thus defined, the alignment concept lends itself to a static operationalization and measure of its content and characteristics (rather than a dynamic operationalization of its process) (Levy et al. 2011). For others, as inspired by traditional IS success factors such as top-management support, prior conceptualizations of alignment surmised the presence of various endogenous and exogenous factors as antecedents or concomitants to alignment. Thus, implementation of alignment is often linked to the maturity of the organization in terms of IT and strategic management. (Luftman 2003; Luftman and Kempaiah 2007).

In summarizing the literature, one is led to conclude that prior research on the strategic alignment of IT: 1) has focused on the “what” of alignment, that is to say, its content in terms of antecedents, consequences and alignment dimensions (“what is aligned with what”), 2) has proposed and tested variance or causal models of alignment for the most part, and has therefore mostly employed quantitative methods, 3) has well-identified the different technical, organizational and relational factors that facilitate or inhibit the attainment of an alignment outcome, but in an essentially prescriptive and universalistic approach that takes little account of the uncertainty, heterogeneity and complexity of the organizational environment in which alignment occurs. In short, the traditional approach to alignment is based on a determinism that does not work well in the IS field (Benbya and McKelvey 2006; Oh and Pinsonneault 2011). In this regard, the large number of IS studies performed on the alignment concept within the last 30 years poses two challenges, namely evaluating the contribution of these studies to a better understanding of the IT alignment process, and ascertaining the usefulness of their findings for managers and practitioners (Leonard and Seddon 2012).

While supported by a solid theoretical and empirical body of research that enhances its value as a core process in the management of IS/IT (Booth and Philip 2005; Oh and Pinsonneault 2011), the strategic alignment of IT thus requires a more dynamic, process-based approach at this point. Especially in identifying the IT and other organizational resources, competencies and capabilities that contribute to the alignment process (Baker et al. 2011; Schwarz et al. 2010), but also in understanding the conditions, decisions and events that punctuate its course (Benbya and McKelvey 2006; Rai et al. 2012).
Dynamic Conceptualization of IT Strategic Alignment

Paradoxically, a number of researchers had initially conceived IT strategic alignment as a dynamic phenomenon and as a specific capability, that is, as much more than a cause-effect relationship between the firm’s strategic management and its IT function (Chan and Reich 2007; Venkatraman et al. 1993). It has thus been recognized in the literature that alignment possesses a number of features that define it as a process. In this respect, it is not considered to be an event (Henderson and Venkatraman 1999) or a desired outcome (Sabherwal et al. 2001), but rather represents a continuous synchronization (Smaczny 2001) or integration by the firm of various technological, organizational and relational dimensions (Fuchs et al. 2000). For others, although the alignment process retains its dynamic nature, it is effectuated on an ad hoc or punctuated rather than continuous basis, depending upon the evolutionary phases experienced by the firm as well as the evolution of its business environment (Sabherwal et al. 2001; Street 2006).

Approached as a process, alignment is also likely to vary from one organization to another and from one industry or sector to another (Bergeron et al. 2001; Tallon 2007). This implies that the specific organizational context of alignment should be taken into consideration (Sabherwal et al. 2001; Yaila and Hu 2009), as well as the environment’s uncertainty (Booth and Philip 2005; Newkirk and Lederer 2006), that is, in keeping with the objectives established and the strategies implemented by the firm (Kuruzovich et al. 2012; Philip and Booth 2001). Thus, alignment is not only a complex construct that captures the interaction between the needs and capabilities of the firm (Premkumar et al. 2005), but it is also a flow of events and decisions within which necessary conditions may be present but accidental or random elements may occur (Benbya and McKelvey 2006; Markus and Robey 1988).

IT Strategic Alignment Process as a Dynamic Capability

Given a process-based approach that best fits organizational reality (Levy et al. 2011) as well as organizational heterogeneity (Avison et al. 2004), IT strategic alignment can also be conceptualized as a dynamic capability (Leonard and Seddon 2012). In this regard, Table 1 summarizes the salient aspects of this dynamic approach to alignment.

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<td>- Impact on performance is through the reconfiguration of IT resources, competencies and capabilities</td>
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Table 1. Dynamic Conceptualization of Alignment
As a process of adjustment of the firm’s resources, competencies and capabilities with its strategic objectives, in the face of a continuously-changing environment (Hortelano and Gonzalez Moreno 2010), alignment is not only a strategic competence (Baker et al. 2011), but it is also a process-oriented capability (Kim et al. 2011; Tallon 2007; 2008). As such, the IT strategic alignment process focuses on the resources and competencies that allow the organization to reconfigure itself according to its needs and to the exigencies of its environment (Teece, 2007). Under these conditions, performance and value creation in regard to alignment are thus indirect outcomes that are enacted through intermediary operational and managerial processes (Kim et al. 2011).

The dynamic approach to alignment described above further highlights the importance of pondering the role and formulating the objectives assigned to IT, if the organization is to achieve full value from its investment in such technologies (Avison et al. 2004). This approach thus recognizes that in matters of IT and alignment, the expectations and needs of organizations vary (Raymond and Croteau 2009; Tallon 2007). This also means that the role accorded to information technologies and the importance placed on their strategic alignment may vary considerably, depending upon the organizational context and the managers involved (Kuruzovich et al. 2012; Philip and Booth 2001).

**Contribution of Dynamic Capabilities to the Conceptualization of Alignment Process**

Rooted in the resource-based view (Barney et al. 2011), dynamic capabilities represent a theoretical approach that refers to the transformational nature of resources and capabilities from a process-based perspective (Winter 2003). This concept refers in particular to the acquisition and preservation of existing resources (resource-accumulation) (Maritan and Peteraf 2011) and to the development of new resources (resource-building) (Makadok 2001). As for the strategic alignment of IT, dynamic capabilities are based on a hierarchy and embedding of these elements, i.e. IT resources, within IT competencies, within IT capabilities (Peppard and Ward 2004; Wilson et al. 2013). In line with the study’s aim of a clearer description and better understanding of the IT strategic alignment process, dynamic capabilities also refer more or less explicitly to the notion of organizational routines and repeated action patterns (Wade and Hulland 2004; Zollo and Winter 2002), and thus have commonalities that can be shared by several firms (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000). While respecting the firm’s tacit and idiosyncratic resources and capabilities, the recurrence of certain mechanisms constitutes a pattern type that can be appropriately applied to the alignment process. Based upon reconfiguration, the preceding notion promotes a better understanding of the technological and organizational factors that allow the firm to renew and develop its tangible and intangible IT assets, including its IT infrastructure (Helfat et al. 2007).

Beyond the foregoing theoretical considerations, the strategic alignment of IT process is effectuated when the organization’s information processing capabilities match its information requirements (Premkumar et al. 2005). One can surmise that as information requirements increase, the firm will further develop its resources, competencies and capabilities, as well as specific mechanisms designed to meet these requirements. Thus the need arises for an approach to alignment that allows one to describe and explain how these elements are developed and renewed by the organization. Now, when compared to organizational capabilities, the main characteristic of “dynamic” capabilities lies in their transformational power (Teece 2007). Dynamic capabilities refer to that which renders firms more flexible or agile in the face of rapid and profound changes in its competitive environment (Duhan 2007; Teece 2012). Considered to be conceptually promising in the IS research domain (Ravinchandran and Lertwongsatien 2005; Schwarz et al. 2010), this concept can be used to take a renewed look at the strategic alignment of IT, from a process-based perspective that better represents the dynamic nature of alignment (Kim et al. 2011; Levy et al. 2011).

**IT Strategic Alignment as a Reconfigurational Process**

The above considerations on the strategic alignment of IT highlight the fact that it has become more important to understand “how” organizations manage, use and evaluate IT, rather than “how much” they have invested in IT (Kohli and Grover 2008). At the same time, the importance of elements that are complementary to IT throughout the alignment process has also been raised (Wilson et al. 2013). Indeed, dynamic capabilities “create value by conferring upon the organization the ability to perform a particular function, by which we mean a purposeful set of actions” (Helfat et al. 2007, p. 13). The desired result is thus organizational change, through managerial and adaptive processes, rather than performance. As
illustrated in Figure 1, and rooted in an incremental and cumulative reconfigurational approach (Pavlou and El Sawy 2011; Barney et al. 2011), that the strategic alignment of IT is defined here as:

*a dynamic process meant to review the role and importance of IT in the organization, and thus enable the attainment of its strategic objectives through the use of these technologies. Dependent upon the IT resources and IT competencies in place, this process takes place through three cumulative mechanisms, that is, assimilation of IT, transformation by IT, and renewal by IT, that each require various dynamic capabilities, namely relational, sensing, learning, integration, and innovation capabilities.*

Moreover, the effectuation of the IT strategic alignment process is based on an important premise regarding the role attributed to IT (Philip and Booth 2001) and the strategic importance of these technologies in the organization (Kuruzovich et al. 2012). Illustrating the coherence between its resources, competencies and capabilities that must be developed by the organization (Cumps et al. 2009), the "dominant alignment perspectives" proposed by Henderson and Venkatraman (1999, p. 477) are useful, as the choice of a specific perspective in a given context is seen to moderate the effectuation of the alignment process. In other words and representing the mindset within which the organization is implementing its technologies (Avison et al. 2004; Gutierrez 2011), these perspectives are the means by which the organization can articulate external and internal orientations (Venkatraman et al. 1993). Thus, depending upon the specific role that is attributed to IT, one could then observe a more or less successful alignment process, and the presence or absence of specific resources and competencies.

![Figure 1. Dynamic Framework of the IT Strategic Alignment Process](image-url)

*Figure 1. Dynamic Framework of the IT Strategic Alignment Process*

Beginning with the evolution of the alignment perspective (Venkatraman et al. 1993; Henderson et Venkatraman 1999) as the foundation of our framework, the main elements of the proposed process model of IT strategic alignment can now be presented.
Evolution of the Alignment Perspective

Further understanding of the alignment process requires an additional component in its conceptualization, namely the alignment perspective that underlies this process. As proposed by Henderson and Venkatraman (1999) in their seminal strategic alignment model (SAM), the choice of one of four such perspectives reveals the importance accorded to IT in a given context. More specifically, from these perspectives, the role attributed to IT by the firm may be that of 1) "strategy execution", 2) "technology transformation", 3) "competitive potential" or 4) "service level". As the link between the organization's internal and external strategic orientations (Venkatraman et al. 1993), these perspectives thus implicitly refer to the strategic importance of IT in a given context (Kuruzovich et al. 2012; Philip and Booth 2001). As it characterizes IT more or less as a strategic "necessity", each perspective becomes an indicator of the direction and magnitude of the alignment effectuated by the organization (Avison et al. 2004). Moreover, be it formalized or not by managers (Newkirk and Lederer 2006), this strategic orientation can be observed through the acquisition, accumulation and development of required IT resources, competencies and capabilities (Makadok 2001; Maritan and Peteraf 2011).

Assimilation of IT Mechanism

The first strategic alignment of IT mechanism is that of IT assimilation. It refers to the extent to which the firm's IT applications are infused and routinized within its business processes (Fichman and Kemerer 1997). In allowing for the updating and improvement of IT assets and capabilities (Pavlou and El Sawy 2011), IT assimilation goes beyond the simple adoption of technology, as this alignment mechanism is in close connection with the specific business context of the firm (Wilson et al. 2013). It thus indicates the degree to which the firm has integrated the use of IT into its business activities (Chatterjee et al. 2002). Moreover, this mechanism allows for a continuous rather than ad hoc adaptation of the organization's IT resources, competencies and other capabilities (Baker et al. 2011).

Transformation by IT Mechanism

The second strategic alignment of IT mechanism is that of transformation by IT, noting that the literature does not always distinguish between transformation and assimilation (Ambrosini et al. 2009). It is seen to differ however in the level of intensity with which previously assimilated IT resources and competencies are then used. This mechanism is one of stabilization, alteration and enrichment of the firm’s IT resources and competencies in order to maintain their usefulness and effectiveness (Sirmon et al. 2007), in given context (Wilson et al. 2013). Transformation by IT is also time-dependent, through the firm's past experience and investment (Zollo and Winter 2002), notably in relation to its IT infrastructure (Chen et al. 2008). This alignment mechanism primarily addresses the firm’s knowledge in matters of IT. It operates by adding or deleting knowledge, or by reinterpreting it (Zahra and George 2002). In this sense, transformation by IT, coupled with the assimilation of IT mechanism, plays an important role as it indicates the firm's ability to learn from its business partners and to absorb external knowledge (Wang and Ahmed 2007).

Renewal by IT Mechanism

While the two precedent mechanisms act upon the acquisition, alteration or recombination of IT resources and competencies, renewal by IT means that there is a reconfiguration, expansion and maximization of these, in a sense of innovation and regeneration (Winter 2003). Facing a changing or particularly turbulent environment that requires constant remodeling of the organization as a whole (Ambrosini et al. 2009; Zahra et al. 2006), a feature of this mechanism is that it fits in part with the notion of "emergence" and thus cannot always be predicted through plans and procedures (Benbya and McKelvey 2006). This third strategic alignment of IT mechanism thus requires going beyond the application of knowledge that has been assimilated and transformed. Nevertheless, knowledge exploitation routines put in place by the organization are more likely to ensure the sustainability of this mechanism over time (Zahra and George 2002). One thus knows that there has been renewal when organizational knowledge becomes stabilized through new behaviors (Wang and Ahmed 2007), in doing so IT moves closer to business strategy (Wilson et al. 2013).
Dynamic Alignment Capabilities

Unlike the preceding alignment mechanisms that are generic, that is to say, can be shared by all firms (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000), dynamic capabilities represent a collective combination of various specific elements (Pavlou and El Sawy 2011). They are thus likely to vary according to the firm’s organizational context and business environment (Teece 2007; 2012). However, these capabilities have often been discussed without regard to their specific function (Helfat et al. 2007) or to the hierarchy that characterizes these (Winter 2003; Zahra et al. 2006). In this regard and inspired by Teece’s "sensing-seizing-transforming" clusters of activities, dynamic alignment capabilities are the relational, sensing, learning, integration and innovation capabilities that support the assimilation of IT, transformation by IT and renewal by IT mechanisms. As such, dynamic alignment capabilities can also be described as process-oriented capabilities (Kim et al. 2011). Thus distinguishing the alignment capabilities that are idiosyncratic to one firm (Pavlou and El Sawy 2011; Teece 2012) from the alignment mechanisms that are common to many firm (Ambrosini et al. 2009).

Moreover, alignment mechanisms and dynamic capabilities are not only likely to be involved in several organizational processes (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000), but they also act an interdependent and reflexive manner that reflects their embeddedness in a specific organizational context (Wilson et al. 2013). This being said, given that the alignment process is still very much of a “black-box”, and that its main purpose is one of reconfiguring the organization in the face of a changing environment (Chen et al. 2008), it is through the dynamic capabilities associated with each of the three alignment mechanisms that we hope to more fully describe and better understand this process in a given organizational context. Our future research will thus attempt to more clearly identify these mechanisms as well as their interactions.

Contributions

The strategic potential of IT remains untapped in many organizations (Booth and Philip 2005; Gutierrez 2011), as these organizations still consider IT solely as a “commodity” rather than technologies that enable their attainment of a sustainable competitive advantage (Nevo and Wade 2010). Moreover, irrespective of the degree of formalization of practices and the stage of business development, the dynamic nature of IT strategic alignment ensures that it is never complete and always evolving (Benbya and McKelvey 2006; Fuchs et al. 2000; Wilson et al. 2013). Thus, when looking at the process of strategic IT alignment in a dynamic perspective, the achievement of alignment as an outcome, i.e. the "extent of fit", is less important than how the organization achieves the "right type of fit", i.e. a fit that that corresponds to its strategy (Tallon, 2008).

In this regard, with regard to the IT strategic alignment process, the contributions of this research-in-progress include both analytical and practical dimensions (Booth and Philip 2005; Venkatraman et al. 1993). Analytical, as it involves an effort to understand the nature, extent and dynamics of the organization’s IT strategic relationships. Practical, as it highlights the implementation, adaptation, prioritization, monitoring and control components of the IT strategic alignment process.

Contributions to Research

From a theoretical point of view, applying the notion of dynamic capabilities to conceptualize the strategic alignment of IT contributes in a number of ways. The first contribution resides in elaborating a definition of alignment that is founded upon its process rather than its content, which is a novel approach in IS research. Second, we have developed a dynamic conceptual framework that allows researchers to open the alignment "black box" in order to better describe, explain and understand the true role and impact of IT in the business firm. Third, we have provided a better understanding of the interactions between the various contributing elements within to the alignment process, depending upon the role and the importance accorded to IT by the firm. In other words, the dynamic framework developed in this study poses the strategic alignment of IT to be a dynamic capability in itself. In so doing, this framework renews the research look taken on the alignment process and the manner by which its effectuation contributes to the attainment of the firm’s strategic objectives. Moreover, by highlighting the presence of different IT resources, competencies and idiosyncratic dynamic capabilities that contribute to each phase of the alignment process in a given organizational and business context, a more critical look can be taken at prior approaches, prescriptions or recommendations with regard to the strategic alignment of IT.
**Contributions to Practice**

From a practical point of view, clarifying and explaining the role of IT capabilities, competencies and resources in the IT strategic alignment process, and doing so within a given organizational and business context, should lead to recommendations in this regard that are better suited to the realities of the firm and to its strategic objectives in particular. The firm should then be in a better position to assess its alignment as changes occur in its environment and corresponding changes are made to its strategy. It should also be able to effectuate its strategic alignment of IT through actions that are better targeted and take place in stages at multiple levels of the organization. With this in mind the proposed dynamic framework could constitute the conceptual foundation and methodological core of a self-assessment tool for the continuous improvement of alignment. Such a tool would allow for the revision and adjustment of the role and importance accorded to IT by the organization in order to ensure the strategic coherence of the technologies it adopts and uses. Moreover, while respecting the idiosyncrasy of the firm, this tool could also allow for benchmarking of the IT resources, competencies and capabilities put in place by comparable firms, the ultimate goal being to offer alignment solutions that are valid and useful across firms.

**Future Research**

It is recognized that the challenge for any re-conceptualization is to develop empirical measures (Ambrosini et al. 2009), based on a precise operationalization (Zahra and George 2002). A first avenue for future research thus lies in the preliminary need to operationalize the components of the proposed dynamic conceptualization of IT strategic alignment. A second avenue lies in generating research propositions from this framework, doing so in a structured and rigorous manner that is appropriate to the process-based nature of this dynamic capabilities conceptualization of alignment (Langley 1999; Pentland 1999). These propositions could thereafter be tested empirically in stages. For instance, the first stage could be to identify an alignment process-type for each of the four alignment perspective proposed by Henderson and Venkatraman (1999). The second stage could be the application of these process-types in various business contexts, say manufacturing versus services, or small and medium-sized firms versus large firms. In so doing, the various declinations of the IT strategic alignment process will enlarge prior findings in gaining richness and validity, as well as its renewed conceptualization will gain in extension (Berthon et al. 2002).

**Conclusion**

We have used the dynamic capabilities concept to found a dynamic conceptualization of the strategic alignment of IT, considering alignment as a process to be managed rather than an outcome to be achieved. Nearly thirty years after the notion of alignment was first introduced in the IS literature, a need has arisen to reposition this notion in theory and in practice so as to better understand its true nature, that is, to open the "black box" of IT alignment. We hope that the proposed conceptualization encourages new research avenues on the dynamic aspect of alignment, that is to say, on its process, on the mechanisms that compose it, and on the resources, competencies and capabilities that contribute to it.

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