



HAAGA-HELIA
ammattikorkeakoulu

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MIDDLE-LEVEL PRACTITIONER'S

role and empowerment in strategy
process and implementation



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Abstract



This working paper explores employee's perceived role and empowerment in the strategy process and implementation of strategy in ten different organizations focusing on middle-level practitioners between top-management and grass-root level in organizations. The empirical data consist mainly of semi-structured interviews with practitioners, such as middle managers, assistants, experts and officers. The purpose is partly descriptive, aiming to give quite a comprehensive picture of the practitioners' roles in strategy processes and mediating their emic perceptions of their role and practices. The approach is constructivist, aiming to conceptualize an active role of a middle-level practitioner in the strategy process. The study shows that middle-level practitioners have previously insufficiently recognized potential to improve strategy implementation. The practitioner's active and empowered role in strategy processes constitutes of multilevel, continuous interaction requiring trust, knowledge-sharing and cooperation in the socially constructed networks. By empowering middle-level practitioners, it is possible to develop strategy implementation, performance and results. Development from the practitioner angle is important to encourage an active implementation role in the strategy process.

Keywords Middle-level practitioner, Role, Empowerment, Strategy implementation, Strategy process, Strategy work



1

Introduction

Strategy implementation is a challenge. Several studies show that communicating strategy often fails, strategic goals cannot be achieved as planned and employees do not understand the meaning of strategy in their work (e.g. Balogun & Johnson 2005, Beer & Nohria 2000, Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984, Hrebiniak 2006, Ikävalko 2005, Kaplan & Norton 1996, 2008, Mintzberg 1978, 1990, 1994, Nutt 1999). Employees play an essential role in the implementation, but they do not always have enough information, support or encouragement to have an active role in the strategy process. It is obvious that a gap between strategic planning and implementation still exists, although the problem has been discussed both in research and practice for the past 30 years. Several respected researchers (Mintzberg 1978, 1990, 1995, Senge 1990/2006, Hrebiniak 2006) argue that thinking cannot be separated from doing and strategy formulation and execution cannot thus be separated from each other. Still, this separation is a reality in many organizations and also in strategic management research.

Strategic management researchers have been more interested in the content of the strategy, in the external and economic factors and how strategies are formulated than in the implementation (Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984, Hrebiniak 2006, Huff & Reger 1987, Johnson et al. 2003, Mintzberg 1978, Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel 1998, Pettigrew 1992). Even though early strategic management research in the middle of last decennium was interested in the intersection of strategy and organization (Floyd, Cornelissen, Wright & Delios 2011), the planning, designing and positioning of strategy has dominated research (Mintzberg 1990) and continues to do so. Literature on strategy implementation became more popular in the 1980s (Furrer, Thomas & Goussevskaia 2008, Huff & Reger 1987), however, concentrating mainly on implementation tools and systems (Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984, Galbraith 1977/1983, Nutt 1986, Pettigrew 1992). The second influential discussion was stimulated by Kaplan

& Norton in 1996, focusing on monitoring the realization of strategic targets. This viewpoint is important for the success of strategy implementation, but neglects the sentiments of the people involved. Most influential implementation literature has been practical rather than scientific (e.g. Bossidy & Charan 2002, Maister 2008, Pfeffer & Sutton 2000).

In strategic management research there are only a few views taking an interest in the employees' role, like the Learning and Cultural schools of thought (Mintzberg et al. 1998). The focus of resource-based view (RBV) (Wernerfelt 1984, Grant 1991, Barney 1991, 2001) is on people's strategic capabilities, whilst RBV expanded with a dynamic-based view is concerned with applying the capabilities in practice (Teece, Pisano & Shuen 1997, Helfat 2000, Regnér 2008). Still, the development of RBV has not been fully exploited and there is a need for research integrating strategy and organization (Floyd et al. 2011). There is also a call for an activity-based micro-perspective in strategic management research (Johnson, Melin & Whittington 2003), as well as understanding the macro through studying the micro-level (Vaara & Whittington 2012) and linking these together (Jarzabkowski & Spee 2009). In all, there is an absence of individuals, human actors with emotions, motivations and actions in most strategy theories (Jarzabkowski & Spee 2009, Mantere 2003).

Middle managers' sense-making roles in strategy processes are well-documented (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Rouleau 2005, Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd 2008), but other practitioners' roles on the middle level, let alone the employees' roles at the periphery of the organization, remain almost totally unexplored (Mantere 2003). Strategy-as-practice literature (S-as-P) is closer to the actual work and practices linking to strategy outcomes and activating the periphery of organizations (Carter, Clegg & Kornberger 2008, Johnson et al. 2003, Vaara & Whittington 2012). Still, S-as-P literature has also mostly viewed the employee from the managerial point of view or on an organizational level without attempting to understand the underlying purposes, intentions and feelings of people (Kriger 2005, Carter et al. 2008), and is only beginning to recognize a wider range of actors in strategy (Vaara & Whittington 2012). The critical view argues that there are still taboos and biases between managers and employees in strategy work, and that revealing the myths and advancing the discourses would empower the employees as active actors with creative potential (Knights & Morgan 1991, Mantere & Vaara 2008, Neuman 2002).

To summarize, the gap in research is to create a deeper understanding of how employees can play an active and empowered role in the strategy process and thus enhance strategy implementation. Of particular interest are the middle-level practitioners with a strategic position between top-management and grassroots level in organizations and a seminal role in mediating and getting the strategies implemented.

Hence, this working paper explores middle-level practitioners' roles in strategy processes in different kinds of organizations. The purpose is partly descriptive, aiming to give a realistic picture of the practitioners' actions, practices and perceptions, and partly a theoretical concept analysis identifying the dimensions of the middle-level practitioner's role in the strategy process. The main research question of this working paper is:

How are the role and empowerment of middle-level practitioners in strategy processes constructed in different kinds of organizations?

The empirical aim is to understand the employees' concrete tasks, practices, actions and perceptions of significance and empowerment in the strategy process. The preliminary idea is that 1) we need to understand more profoundly the middle-level practitioners' roles in the strategy process to be able to enhance strategy implementation, 2) understanding these practitioners' roles requires understanding their perceptions from their own angles, 3) an active role for practitioners in the strategy process increases the feeling of empowerment and significance, and thus possibilities to plan and develop their own work and thus work more efficiently.

The study looks at the roles of employees, focusing on middle-level practitioners such as middle managers, assistants, experts and officers, seen as playing an especially important role in the implementation processes. The focus is important from the point of view of developing strategy implementation. By better recognizing middle-level practitioners' potential in a strategy context, it is possible to develop and support practitioner identity growth in bachelor-level education. It is essential to understand the practitioners' role from their point of view on the practical level and also the factors making it possible for them to participate wholeheartedly in the strategy process.

The research is based on extensive preliminary work as a multiple-case cooperation project at HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences. The research project aimed to find ways to develop strategy implementation and the employees' roles in the processes. Interviews, surveys and action research were conducted in more than 20 organizations, and more

than a thousand practitioners with a bachelor-level education were reached through surveys. These data are used as background material in this essay and ten of the cases and narratives of empowered middle-level practitioners have been chosen on qualitative grounds and analyzed more profoundly.

This working paper is also part of my dissertation studying employee roles in strategy processes from different angles and with different methods.

The literature review focuses mostly on strategic management research concerned with the employees' roles in strategy processes and practices. This focus narrows down the otherwise substantial literature to the Strategy-as-Practice view and Learning and Cultural angles. The main concepts of this essay are *middle-level practitioner role and empowerment* in the context of *strategy work and processes* including *implementation*. The focus of this working paper is presented in the following figure.

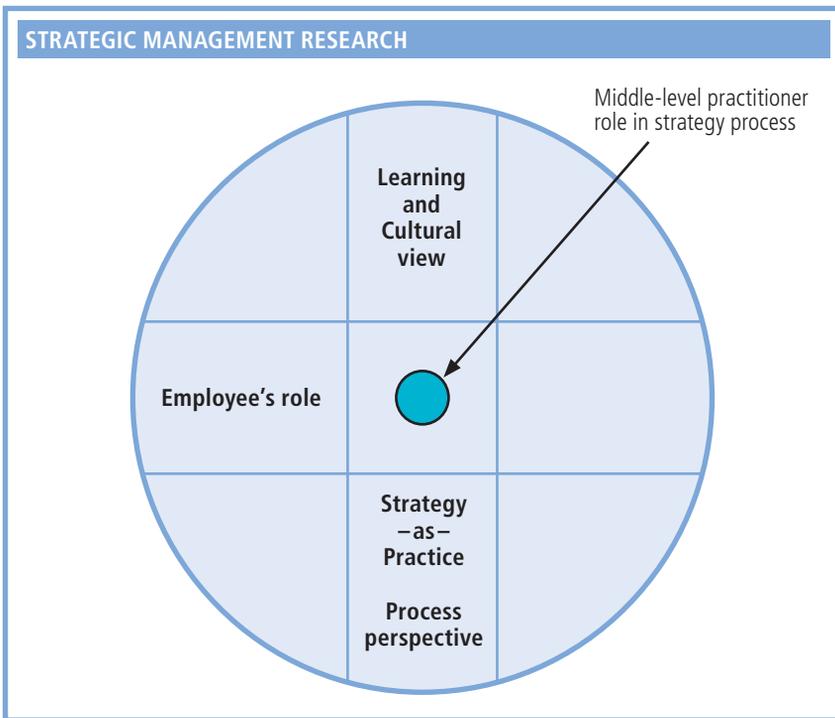


Figure 1. Focus of the research



2

Strategy process and strategy work

Strategy is most often seen in a functional way as a deliberate plan that determines decisions into the future. The Strategy-as-Practice view does not define strategy as a plan or a document but as "something people do", meaning the organization's everyday practices, routines and norms (Carter et al. 2008, Jarzabkowski 2004, Johnson et al. 2003, Regnér 2008). The interpretative definition of strategy shares the S-as-P view of strategy as socially constructed and action-oriented. Sense-giving and sense-making activities in the strategy process are central to developing a collective understanding of strategy on all levels of the organization and among the stakeholders (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Weick 1993/2001). According to Mintzberg (1990), strategy represents a fundamental congruence between external opportunity and internal capability and can thus be the link that is needed between planning and action. In this essay, strategy is seen in a practical and social way as *a shared tool to improve the performance and as practices people do to achieve the objectives of the organization*. This definition combines functional, interpretative and S-as-P views.

The *strategy process* is traditionally viewed based on the Harvard Design and Planning schools of thought as a linear, top-down process that starts by analyzing the environment, formulating strategy on the basis of the mission, vision and organizational values and implementing the strategy as operational processes (Mintzberg & al. 1998). The traditional view has been criticized by Mintzberg (1978) arguing that strategy process should be emergent (eg. Mintzberg & Waters 1985), by Huff and Regent (1987) for lacking attention to both strategy content and the overall process, and by Pettigrew (1992) for the need of more dynamic approaches to processes, action, movement and renewal. According to Kriger (2005), strategy process has much neglected essential psychological and social dimensions and deep embedded tacit knowledge in organizational routines. Senge states (1990/2006) that strategic thinking, learning and acting in

an organization depend on several important elements such as awareness and sensibilities, beliefs and assumptions, relationships, skills and capabilities and practices that are interlinked in a deep learning process. The cultural view similarly emphasizes social learning in organization culture. Schein (2010,18) and Weick and Roberts (1993) share many elements in how they see social learning occur in organizational culture, building upon shared assumptions, solutions and stories learned by organization members, considered to be valid or plausible to be taught to new members as the correct way of thinking and acting. This research embraces the contemporary view of a cyclical strategy process model that emphasizes social interaction and encourages people to incorporate new information into action (Aalto University 2000-2011, Sull 2007) and also sees strategy process as a collaborative emergent learning process (Mintzberg 1990, 1998).

The S-as-P perspective emphasizes studying day-to-day practices as the most important part of the strategy process, offering means to implement strategy more successfully (Carter et al. 2008, Johnson et al. 2003). Regnér (2008) suggests the integration of the S-as-P and the dynamic capabilities views. The radical view questions the hierarchical routines and rituals, underlining the social processes and interaction between managers and employees and appreciating both roles, because management has knowledge of shareholder guidelines and a mandate to put them into practice, but employees have the most current information about markets and customers (Carter et al. 2008, Whittington 2007).

In this research the strategy process refers to an *overall process of planning, communicating, implementing and reviewing strategy*. Yet, the focus is on *implementation* because it is the most important part of the process for the employees. The term *strategy work* is considered as capturing better than 'strategic management' the work of everyone in an organization, both managers' and employees'. The term *strategy-making* is considered to refer more to formulating instead of implementing strategy. *Strategizing* according to S-as-P is everybody's work in the organization. Still, the focus in literature has been more in formulating than implementing the strategy (Whittington 2006).



3

The middle-level practitioner role in the strategy process

This research is concerned about employees' roles in the strategy process in general, and middle-level practitioners' roles, in particular. The term *employees* means all members of an organization excluding top management. *Middle-level practitioners* refer to practitioners positioned in organizations between top-management and grass-root employees. *Bachelor-level practitioner* refers to the European standards of higher education according to the Bologna accord.

Practitioners are seen as *strategic actors* (Johnson et al. 2003, Whittington 2006) or, as Mantere (2003) puts it, as *agents* capable of carrying out strategic action. Previous research has recognized middle managers' major role in conveying the strategy to the employees and being responsible for the implementation (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd 2008). This working paper also aims to widen the understanding of other middle-level practitioners' roles in strategy processes.

The practitioner's *role* in the strategy process refers not only to their *practices in the strategy process* (Johnson et al. 2003, Jarzabkowski 2004, Carter et al. 2008, Regné 2008), *but also to the social position and the individual power they perceive they have in the process* (Knights & Morgan 1991, Mantere 2003). Practices are actions, concrete micro-level tasks and routines employees have in social cooperation in strategy work. *Action* and *participation* are starting points in an active role and closely linked to *communication* (Mintzberg 1994, Stensaker et al. 2008), *sense-making* processes (Weick 1993/2001) and the *commitment* of employees (Kohtamäki, Kraus, Mäkelä & Rönkkö 2012). The sense-giving and sense-making of strategy on all levels in an organization, both vertically and horizontally, formally and informally, are needed for the implementation (Gioia &

Chittipeddi 1991, Weick 2001, Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005, Ikävalko 2005). Organizational discourses either promote or impede employees' participation (Mantere & Vaara 2008) and often existing hegemonic and non-participatory discourses rarely lead to commitment to implementation (Laine & Vaara 2007).

In the spirit of Knights and Morgan (1991) I argue that people need to be *empowered* to implement the strategy, i.e. providing individuals with a feeling of significance and competence to constitute an active role in strategy work. Power is socially constructed and related to knowledge and interaction (Foucault 1977). Individuals' social positions shape their power differentials and access to and control over valued resources, and interaction networks correspondingly affect information processing and job-related perceptions (Ibarra & Andrews 1993).

Empowerment is an individual's perception of increased intrinsic task motivation with a sense of impact, competence, meaningfulness and choice related to an active orientation to the work role (Spreitzer 1996, Thomas & Velthouse 1990) enhancing feelings of self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo 1988), and trust (Zimmerman 2010). Sharing knowledge and power between managers and subordinates can mobilize capacity and resources to get things done (Bowen & Lawler III 1992, Kanter 1979).

From the learning point of view, strategists can be found throughout the organization in an emergent learning process, intertwining strategy formulation and implementation (Mintzberg & Lampel 1999). Strategy implementation is cooperation and knowledge-sharing of organization members; a superior's role is essential in encouraging people in their motivation, learning and feeling of empowerment (Ikävalko 2005). Strategic sense-making is seminal to the collective comprehension of strategy, and thus to employee engagement (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Weick 2001) and commitment in innovative learning processes (Johnson et al. 2003). The cultural view is also concerned with getting the whole organization committed to goals and strategies (Bourgeois & Brodwin 1984). As Schein (2010) points out, strategic change in a multidimensional and multifaceted organization culture requires changes in social processes at all organizational levels, individual and group behavior in different subcultures and micro-cultures. Also Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv and Sanders (1990) state that organizational culture is socially constructed and difficult to change. The S-as-P view considers strategic actions as a social and interactive process involving actors from all levels of an organization. The practi-

cal perspective makes it possible for employees to use their creativity and imagination in cooperation, thus developing an organization's competitive advantage together (Carter et. al 2008, Jarzabkowski & Whittington 2008, Regnér 2008) and excellence in strategy work should be recognized on the periphery of the organizations as well, because its role can be crucial in the success (Mantere 2003, 2005).

Literature regarding organizational behavior and psychology has studied employees' roles widely in organizations attempting to understand individual thinking and behavior at work, even though linking to strategy work does not always exist. Still, it is well documented that the work itself enhances work engagement, which is an important antecedent of strategy implementation (Bakker 2011, Saks 2006). Ulrich, Brockbank and Johnson (2009) emphasize employees' central roles in strategy work and thus the HR processes as part of the strategy process from planning to implementation and review.

4

Methodology



This qualitative analysis combines functional, interpretative and radical ideas within the organizational paradigm field to better understand the large and complex phenomenon of an employee's role in the strategy process (Burrell & Morgan 1979/2011, Gioia & Pitre 1990, Mason 2006, Mohrman & Lawler III 2012, Neuman 2002). The intent is constructivist and interpretative (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2011, Coffey & Atkinson 1996), believing like Mason (2006) that research integrating several angles can enhance the creativeness and the logic of qualitative research and increase possibilities to understand each case holistically and create meaningful and empirically well-founded theory. In strategic management research, not much interdisciplinary research has taken place and a more integrating approach is needed (Floyd et al. 2011). According to these choices, sensitive appreciation of complexity and variety in qualitative analysis is applied as Coffey and Atkinson suggest (1996).

The working paper presents and analyzes empirical data that have been collected in a procedural manner applying Yin's (2009) ideas of case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. The attempt has not been to control or isolate the phenomena from the context, but rather to study the real-life authentic actions and perceptions of practitioners. The research is not looking for variables and causalities in a positivistic way, but attempts to understand the phenomenon and constructs of people holistically and more profoundly (Piekkari & Welch 2011). The attempt is descriptive particularization (Stake 1995), even though the larger background material permits some more general reflections. The aim is to understand the employees' roles in their uniqueness in the existing contexts instead of working with excessively strict methods comparing and finding differences with other cases. The cases have been chosen on qualitative grounds to be of general interest and theoretically as useful as possible to get a holistic picture of practitioner roles with different kinds of practices in the strategy

process, and strategy processes in different kinds of organizations, including "polar types", global and local, large and medium-sized parent companies or subsidiaries (Eisenhardt 1989). However, this case study is instrumental in the sense that the research question is more important than the cases (Stake 1995).

The research benefits from the preliminary work in more than 20 organizations' strategy processes and strategy work. The gathered data were evaluated and analyzed multi-methodologically and collectively. Information was gathered with surveys among practitioners, interviews and action research to get richer descriptions of the phenomenon. Cooperation in research and the use of several investigators and evaluators in the process have given different perspectives and novel insights into the study and enhanced the creative potential and confidence in the findings. A multiple-case study provides more information on a complex phenomenon, but simultaneously demands a well-defined focus (Eisenhardt 1989, Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, Van de Ven 2011, Yin 2009). In this study, the research problem is relevant, coming from a real need to make the focus clear in practice (Edmondson 2011). Yet, the research question has been rather broad, making it possible to gather the data in an open-minded way (Eisenhardt 1989). While an inductive approach warns of a priori constructs, Yin (2009) claims that the research gains from prior development of theoretical propositions guiding data collection and analysis. The abductive process navigates between these opinions (Charmaz 2006).

The interviewees were carefully selected so that there were both managers and employees from different levels of the organization, mainly the middle-level, and people with a good picture of the strategy work in practice. The aim was to gain an understanding of the positive ways of working, as there already exists comprehensive literature on problems and obstacles to implementation (e.g. Hrebiniak 2006). The interviews were conducted with constructivist and ethnographic intent, appreciating the practitioners as part of the world they described, in order to understand their own constructs of their roles in the social processes, by asking them "what" and "how", trying to understand their organization culture, ways of working, and interacting, but still leading the off-railing discussion back to strategy work and strategy implementation (Charmaz 2006, Silverman 2001/2010). Interviewees were asked to describe the organization's strategy processes, their own role and tasks and also perceptions and feelings. Every interview started and ended with open discussion about the

working culture and other more general issues. Interviews were recorded and documented. As the strategy processes are not self-evident to employees, they were encouraged with comments like "Can you tell more about how you discuss these important matters?" or with questions helping them to recognize that the actions they did were in fact important parts of strategy implementation, e.g. "Do you organize or participate in strategic information meetings?"

The aim is to understand the practitioners' emic perceptions in a hermeneutic way and, as part of my dissertation, to find elements to build employee-oriented theory grounded in the empirical reality of organizations' strategy work in a comparative analysis, coding, categorizing and conceptualization in a critical, cognitive process (Birks & Mills 2011, Charmaz 2006, Locke 2001, Myers 2009). The whole process aimed at useful research and can be described with Van de Vens's (2011) diamond model of *engaged scholarship*, a collaborative form of research engaging key stakeholders, researchers and practitioners, starting from problem formulation in extensive dialogue with people from the field who know the problem as well as reviewing the literature, to understand the phenomenon, continuing with open-minded theory building and research design with several alternative models in an iterative and abductive process, including both inductive and deductive analysis in practical and theoretical cooperation.



5

Results

The presentation of the results follows inductive logic grounded in empirical observations in the spirit of Charmaz (2006). The ten chosen organizations, the informants and middle-level practitioners are presented in table 1, Data Description. In the first round of empirical categorizing, the informants' descriptions of the organizations' strategy processes and the positive elements of strategy work are presented. Middle managers', management assistants', communications and HR officers' perceptions of their tasks, practices, roles and empowerment are presented and discussed. The descriptions are translated and shortened, but the aim has been to maintain the emic perceptions and emphasis.

Based on cross-case studying of the expressed perceptions, the second round of the analysis focuses on categorizing the practitioners' roles by perceptions of the level of knowledge and interaction of strategy as the interviewees most often mentioned that these elements had major importance for their active empowered role. The term "interaction" has been chosen to describe a large amount of expressions the practitioners used to indicate the interaction such as dialog, discussions, sense-making, palavers, cooperation, collaboration, etc. The studied S-as-P -literature supports these choices underlining sense-making and interaction of strategy (e.g. Carter et al. 2008, Whittington 2007). Also, from the learning and cultural point of view, human interaction is emphasized, even though the mainstream managerial-oriented literature does not recognize the essentiality of interaction to the extent that the employees' seem to perceive it. An integrative model to understand the employee's perceived role and empowerment in the strategy process is formulated drawing from the empirical data and the literature.

Finally, insights emerging from the data are discussed and reflected with reference to the research question, the whole research material and other research conducted for similar purposes.

ORGANIZATION	DATA SOURCES AND THE MIDDLE-LEVEL PRACTITIONER CHOSEN FOR ANALYSIS IN BOLD
1. Large private Finnish concern and a part of a global provider of facility services, with more than 10,000 employees in Finland	Project manager, management assistant and HR Coordinator
2. Middle-sized multicultural northern European sales concern's headquarters with nearly 200 employees with parent company in Europe, part of a global group manufacturing and selling durable consumer products	Strategic manager and CEO Executive Assistant, HR Coordinator , a survey of middle managers and practitioners, 57 respondents out of 160
3. Large global concern with HQ in Europe and subsidiary and plants in Finland	Directors of Development and Communications, Communications Specialist, six management assistants
4. A large private Finnish concern, with levels from owners to cooperative units, along with their trade unions, working committees and the cooperative parent company, with more than 10,000 employees	Strategy manager, Service manager, 12 middle managers , 1 assistant
5. Large concern in construction and renovation with 50,000 employees globally, headquarters in Finland	HR manager responsible to HR director. CFO's presentation of strategy processes in practice
6. Large industrial concern with 10,000 employees, HQ and local subsidiary in Finland. Subsidiary employs 900 and the plant 160 persons.	Concern's HR Director, Management assistant to CEO of subsidiary, Executive Assistant of regional plant
7. Large subsidiary in the financial sector with 2,000 employees in Finland, Northern European headquarters with ca. 20,000 employees globally	Management assistant in a team responsible for strategy implementation actions with 300 hundred practitioners in Finland
8. Large Finnish traditional producer of consumer goods, about 3,000 employees and sales organization with about 300 employees in Russia	Export Director in parent company, CEO and managers of marketing, logistics and administration in subsidiary, previous interviews among employees in parent company
9. Subsidiary in Finland with ca. 150 employees, HQ in Europe, part of a global concern	Management assistant, communications coordinator
10. Large Finnish subsidiary to a Northern European company in communications with ca. 30,000 employees globally	Area manager and Head of Support Office , i.e. supervisor of management assistant pool

Table 1. Data description: The ten studied organizations and the practitioners

5.1 Strategy processes and strategy work

The informants described the organizations' strategy processes in a very similar way throughout the project material, i.e. top-down as stated in functional management books, although the organizations were different, i.e. large and medium-sized, global and local, parent companies or subsidiaries. The employees' part of the process was clearly the implementation of the strategy designed elsewhere, whereas the sense-making was about understanding the strategy, its meaning for the unit and the employees. In

subsidiaries, the guidelines to strategy came as a rule from the headquarters, even though in global companies the local strategy could be planned rather independently enabling sense-making and thus social learning locally. This kind of local sense-making is also underlined by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) and Weick (2001), as well as social learning by Schein (2010) and Weick (2001).

The practitioners, with the exception of the middle managers, perceived strategy work as the managers' job and mostly as strategic planning, instead of practitioners' concrete practices. This means that thinking is still very much separated from doing and strategy work as 'everybody's work in organizations' is not yet reality. Yet, many of the studied organizations were in the process of starting to apply more interactive methods in the strategy process, employees were encouraged to take part in strategy discussion and many of the middle-level practitioners had active and empowered roles in planning and executing actions according to the strategy.

The effective one-way information of strategy was perceived as important. However, there was a clear difference in how managers and employees experienced the adequacy of the interaction. Sense-making takes time, many meetings and daily dialog. Similarly Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) stated that shared understanding and common commitment to strategy implementation relies on ongoing dialogs. Balogun and Johnson (2005) argued that not only formal communication counts, but that a wide range of informal interaction, both vertical and lateral, is needed, and Ikävalko (2005) noticed that informal discussions and meetings were considered as most enabling in strategic action. Aalto University studies on strategy work (2000-2011) also emphasized the importance of multilevel dialog.

Communication on all organization levels and between organizations was seen as essential in the strategy process. At the middle level of the organization, the need to communicate is in all directions, horizontal and vertical in the organization, and also towards customers and other stakeholders. In concerns with headquarters and subsidiaries, the importance of communication between the parent company and subsidiaries and also between subsidiaries was underlined. In middle-sized organizations, the importance of cross-functional and cultural cooperation and cooperation between the different organizational levels in the biggest organizations was emphasized. In global organizations, informants said that 'global cooperation is the basis of all work and is taken into account in job interviews and recruitment'.

An open and encouraging organizational culture was said to make it easier to take part in the strategic discussion. ‘Open culture’ was described with various aspects of good interaction between people in different kinds of organizations, whether large or small, global or local. Still, some cultural differences could be noticed in the case material. For example in organization 8 the Finnish parent company had a relatively open discussion culture between employees and managers, but in the Russian subsidiary the managers’ roles were more authoritarian.

The most essential elements of the strategy processes as the interviewees perceived them in the case organizations and the positively experienced features in strategy work are compiled in Table 2. Because the interview format was open-ended, the presentations reflect the issues that were mentioned as the most important and cannot thus be compared in every detail.

ORGANIZATION	CHARACTERISTIC FOR STRATEGY PROCESS	POSITIVELY EXPERIENCED FEATURES IN STRATEGY WORK
1. Large service company	Large differences in white- and blue-collar workers' possibilities to take part in strategy discussion. Top management tells the strategy to blue-collar workers via video conferencing system. Strategy and own role are explained in own team. Superior support essential. Monitoring challenging when employees work in partner companies.	Strategy workshops and sense-making between top- and middle-management and white-collar workers. For blue-collar orientation to work. Managers' personal commitment to the implementation.
2. Middle-sized multi-cultural HQ	Strong parent company relation. Diversity is respected. All personnel have possibility to take part in strategy discussion from the beginning. Strategy info to all units in tandem in English and local language. Dialog between countries is a challenge.	Active communication, regular meetings and knowledge-sharing with all country organizations. Young personnel and culture. Middle-managers' role essential.
3. Large subsidiary to HQ in Europe and part of a global concern	Genuinely global processes with multicultural organizations and teams. Clear guidelines from HQ but freedom to plan strategy for local market. Strategy is transformed to practical goals and project. Yearly strategy clock guides communication and work.	Encouraging, learning organization, innovative way of working, benefit from diversity. Cross-functional communication and knowledge sharing in many forums, e.g. CoPs, social media
4. Large private, multilevel Finnish concern	Equality, respect and representation of employees on all organization levels, also locally, in decision making. Still, the employees' role is clearly the implementation of the strategy. Challenges in communication between levels.	Open dialog, supporting of middle-managers' sense-making and sense-giving. Common values are shared. Everybody's involvement, individual and team development are encouraged,
5. Large global concern with HQ in Finland	Strategy process is seen as the backbone of all work, shared goals and values in strategy implementation, action plans and systematic monitoring and rewarding of results.	Directors participate actively in communicating the strategy to employees and the implementation actions and monitoring. Ideas from personnel are taken account of.
6. Middle- sized plant of large industrial group	Strategy is behind all actions. Sustainable, constant development and know-how respected in concern and subsidiary, challenging to stay up-to-date with the development	Open culture based on trust, everybody's opinion is important, good leadership, frequent interaction, systematic scheduling of meetings, process development in cooperation
7. Large subsidiary in Finland with HQ in Northern Europe part of global concern	Strategy comes from HQ, is presented in subsidiary, actively discussed how to be applied locally and with HQ to develop the strategy. Middle managers have major role in implementation. Strategic goals are discussed from the point of view of every unit and individual.	Open discussion culture, failures accepted. Team work, cooperation, equality between employees, respecting everybody's ideas and suggestions to develop the local strategy. Local workshops with whole personnel.
8. Russian subsidiary to a large traditional producer in Finland	Strong management and owner influence, strategy comes from HQ. Traditional, top-down strategy process in rather bureaucratic multilevel matrix organization. Focus more on daily cooperation and middle-manager activity than knowledge distribution because of rather stable environment.	Daily communication between HQ and subsidiary. Cooperation and well-established processes. Systematic way of implementing strategy is appreciated, e.g. strategy clock and must-win-battles. Commitment of management team.
9. Medium-sized subsidiary in Finland, HQ in Europe	Systematic strategy work globally with strategy clock as main tool. European ways of working, parent company mission, values, communication and culture. Local strategy process rather independent and more precise. Strong sales orientation	Open, daily communication and cooperation in all directions. Trust and knowledge sharing. Team meetings and intra with team working sites. Clear strategy process and schedule. Common understanding of strategy and values.
10. Large Finnish subsidiary to Northern European HQ in a global concern	Laborious strategy process in multilevel, matrix organization, focus much on economic factors, annual operating planning. Video information of strategy in whole organization.	New processes, better commitment, yearly strategy clock helps planning the work,

Table 2: Strategy processes and positive features in strategy work as the middle-level practitioners perceived them.

5.2 Middle-level practitioners' roles in the strategy process and implementation

As preliminary work, two larger surveys were conducted to gain an understanding of middle-level practitioners' practices and perceptions in strategy processes.

The first survey was sent to 9,000 practitioners with a bachelor-level degree in trade and business and more than a thousand answers were received. About 40 of the respondents were interviewed to get an in-depth understanding of their roles and the contexts. The results implied that practitioners have both interest and unnoticed capabilities that could be used in all strategy process phases. Instead of one-way information, the practitioners wanted more interaction and knowledge-sharing, especially with their own superior. An open, encouraging communication culture was perceived as the most essential factor for good strategy work. Development appraisals and feedback were appreciated. One's own activity and additional training were perceived as important. The results in the ten case organizations were in line with the survey results and the results of an extensive research project with several researchers at Aalto University (2000-2011).

A smaller survey was sent to about one thousand management assistants with about 70 answers, and the results supported the results of the previous, larger survey. Of the survey respondents, 46 percent thought their role was not so important in the strategy process, but more than half of all respondents were willing to develop a more active role in strategy work. About twenty management assistants were additionally interviewed and it was found that the assistants did not always perceive they were doing important strategic work, even when they were taking part in organizing and coordinating strategy work and helping management in strategic planning e.g. by searching, handling and conveying strategic information. Still, the roles were rather different: A management assistant in a small company participated in the entire strategy process, from planning to review, while in a larger company the tasks could be limited to, e.g. facilitating, organizing and scheduling strategic meetings and workshops.

The roles and empowerment of the practitioners' who were interviewed for this essay are studied in the following sections.

5.3 Middle managers' roles in strategy processes

Middle managers in the empirical material had rather different roles depending on their position in the organizational and social relationships' network. In subsidiaries where the middle managers did not participate in strategic planning, they felt that they had enough information, but not enough knowledge-sharing, thus the strategy remained remote from the actual work (org 4).

"We have enough one-way information, what we need is dialog and briefing on a personal level, what does the strategy mean to you and your unit" (Middle-manager, org 4)

"Treating the people with respect is most important" (Middle manager, org 2)

Participation in strategic planning enhanced the experienced empowerment in strategy work. In international cooperation (org 2, 8), the dialog between parent company and subsidiary was emphasized more, and consequently the interaction was more frequent. In these circumstances, the middle managers perceived their role as empowered.

"Regular meetings, dialog and cooperation are essential, we are more relationship manager type, we want to communicate orally and informally, you get immediate response and minimize misunderstandings. (Middle manager, foreign subsidiary, org 8)

The interviewed supervisor of management assistants (org 10) had a multi-level interaction position as a member of the executive team of the business unit and leading the communication of strategy on informal business level through the assistant team in the organization.

"I participate actively in the strategy implementation, in the organization. The communication of strategy work, assistants stand for it, delivering memos, information, and also knowledge-sharing between managers and personnel." (Head of Support Office, Org 10)

The middle managers felt that mediating the strategy, supporting and enabling the implementation was their task. However, they felt a clear need for more support, communication and knowledge-sharing of the strategy to be able to succeed in this task.

”The biggest challenge is the intern communication. The more you involve people, the better the implementation succeeds. Feedback is important to see that the strategy is understood in a similar way.”(Middle-manager, org 4).

It seems thus that there would be more potential among the middle managers to be used to enhance strategy implementation. The middle managers wanted to participate more, as e.g. Westley (1990) and Hrebiniak (2006) also noted in their studies. Their role can be seen as especially challenging, because the strategy processes were top down (Westley 1990, Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, Balogun & Johnson 2005) and the middle managers had boundary-spanning roles in the organizations (Pappas & Wooldridge 2002, 2007). Rouleau (2005) suggests that middle managers have tacit knowledge they use every day when interpreting the strategy. Correspondingly, in this study employees felt that their superior’s encouragement and support had major value for their activeness.

The middle manager’s (hr and communication officers’/management assistants’) roles are presented in the following figure.

	12 MIDDLE MANAGERS ORG 4 (HQ)	THREE MIDDLE MANAGERS IN SUBSIDIARY, ORG 8	HEAD OF SUPPORT OFFICE (ORG 10)
Interaction in strategy process	<p>Only some middle-managers had participated in strategic planning.</p> <p>More interaction and knowledge-sharing was wanted instead of one-way information distribution</p> <p>Yearly arranged middle-manager event</p> <p>Own superior, other superiors and colleagues major support</p> <p>Interaction is active in the planning phases, but when the strategy is ready, the support and interaction decreases</p> <p>Resourcing, enabling and encouraging employees to achieve strategic goals</p> <p>Joint dialog on how to reach the goals</p>	<p>Top-management road show starts strategic discussion.</p> <p>The strategy comes from parent company and the subsidiary strategy must follow the parent strategy.</p> <p>Interaction with parent company practitioners on different organization levels is frequent.</p> <p>Continuous changes in strategy mediated from parent company.</p> <p>Team meetings with employees.</p> <p>Superiors task is to make sense of the strategy to employees</p>	<p>Member of executive team of the business unit.</p> <p>Active interaction up and down in the organization and with HQ. Team meetings with assistant pool.</p> <p>Strategic communications in the organization is assistants' task.</p> <p>Assistants are important communication links between top-management and personnel. Especially informal communication.</p> <p>Strategic workshops for all personnel together with the assistants.</p> <p>Supporting and helping assistants.</p>
Knowledge of strategy	<p>Strategy is perceived as remote, only a PowerPoint, not linked to actual work.</p> <p>There is enough strategic information, but too little knowledge-sharing</p>	<p>The managers felt they had good knowledge of strategy</p>	<p>Good knowledge of strategy, insider in executive team, having "the big picture"</p>
Perceived role, empowerment	<p>The middle managers who had participated in strategic planning felt that their role was more empowered. The others felt they needed more support and knowledge-sharing</p>	<p>The role is seen as empowered and managers felt they succeeded in applying the strategy into practice</p>	<p>Supervisor of assistants' considered the role important and empowered. She has also gained more respect for assistant work in the organization.</p>

Table 3. The perceived roles of middle-managers in organizations 4 and 8 and supervisor of management assistant pool in organization 10

5.4 HR and communications officers' roles in strategy process and implementation

The interviewed HR Coordinator (org 1) and HR Manager (org 5) worked both for a big company where HR played the role of business partnership. The HR Manager had a comprehensive picture of the strategy process in the organization and was communicating the strategy daily through several channels and actively supporting the middle managers in strategy implementation, whilst the coordinator had more narrow tasks in the process.

*"Strategy is the backbone of all work. It is most important to implement the values in daily interaction. Ideas and suggestions from personnel are taken seriously, that is a big part of personnel commitment and well-being."
(HR manager, org 5)*

*The message of strategy is informed in all channels, the same message is repeated again and again... it is really good, then you perhaps finally remember it. I now know the strategy, but still I wonder what my role exactly is, in practice. I am pleased with the communication in my team, but it would be good to have even more dialog, interaction and transparency."
(HR coordinator, org 1)*

In organization 2 the HR function also played a business partnership role, but the potential could not be used because the coordinator said they did not have time to support the organization in strategy implementation. In the case organizations, it could be seen, as Ulrich and Brockbank (2009) also state, that the HR profession as a whole is moving to add greater value through a more strategic focus, but the business partnership requires HR professionals to have knowledge and skills that connect their work directly to the business.

The Communications Specialist (org 3) said that her main task was to communicate concern strategy in multiple channels of the organization and she felt that knowing and understanding the strategy and the organization made her work significant and fun. The communication was mainly one-way, but also f-to-f, cross-functional and informal in social media forums and CoPs (Communities of Practice). Her daily task was to find

and create the stories of strategy implementation in the large organization and tell them in the form of news, articles, videos, etc.

“Understanding the strategy and knowing the organization makes the work fun, self-management, using the technical equipment and learning new things is fun. Working with language means flexibility - you just have one link to the strategy, and then it is a strategic message.”
(Communications Specialist, org 3)

The Communications Coordinator in org 9 had a practical, proactive role in the strategy process and multi-level communication network, participating in the daily business dialog, planning and execution. She felt that her role was courageous and independent.

“Cooperation, knowledge-sharing and trust make you strong”
(Communications coordinator, org 9)

	HR COORDINATOR, ORG 1	COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST, ORG 3	HR MANAGER, ORG 5	COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR, ORG 9
Tasks, practices, interaction in strategy processes	<p>Well-being and safety at work, employee survey linked to the strategy.</p> <p>Planning, organizing and informing of all employee well-being events, training linked to strategy and safety at work.</p> <p>Cooperation and video meetings with HR teams in other Northern countries.</p> <p>Cooperation with communications and IT team.</p> <p>Documentation, reporting.</p>	<p>Main task to communicate concern strategy in the org.</p> <p>The strategy is made sense of in the communication team and with the business units in frequent discussions and meetings.</p> <p>Participates in planning the communication on basis of concern strategy clock.</p> <p>Participates and influences so that people in communication situations think of the strategy.</p> <p>Multi-channel-communication, also two-way communication, f-to-f, Social Media forums, CoPs (Communities of Practice) and cross-functional groups.</p> <p>News, articles, stories of successful strategy implementation cases, videos, own TV</p>	<p>HR practices are closely linked to strategy implementation.</p> <p>Organizing performance appraisals and development discussions with personnel and collecting the results.</p> <p>Organizing training and follow-up.</p> <p>Following employees' engagement and satisfaction with strategic performance.</p> <p>Gathering and processing employees' ideas, aspirations and suggestions.</p> <p>Rewarding performance and achieving of key initiatives.</p> <p>Supporting managers and middle-managers in strategy implementation.</p>	<p>Practical communicating of strategy in all directions inside and outside of the organization.</p> <p>Participating in the planning of the local strategy and strategy work in own team.</p> <p>Close cooperation with executive team.</p> <p>Knowledge search and planning of the strategic information in different channels.</p> <p>Participating in strategic workshops.</p> <p>Follow-up of campaign results and sales</p>
Knowledge of strategy	Own HR team and intra	Official knowledge comes from concern CEO and is made sense of in own communications team and with business units.	<p>Strategy is actively and constantly communicated and discussed through several channels.</p> <p>CEO presents strategy to all personnel and the presentation is videoed globally.</p> <p>Superiors discuss strategy individually with every subordinate.</p>	Through daily dialogue and cooperation with own superior, local executive team and own team.
Perceived role/empowerment	HR identity, serving people, happy people part of the strategy	Knowing and understanding strategy and the organization makes the work easy and fun.	Strategy work is part of daily tasks and the backbone of all work. Good results increase commitment, engagement and satisfaction.	Proactive, courageous, independent, strong through cooperation and knowledge sharing

Table 4. The perceived roles of HR and communications officers

5.5 Management assistants' roles in strategy processes and implementation

The interviewed management assistants were aware that their role and position in the organization between the management and employees was most strategic, even though only one of the assistants perceived the working role as strategic. The assistants could use their comprehensive communication skills to facilitate the managers' work, the implementation of strategy and knowledge-sharing up and down in the organization. The assistants had a highly positive attitude to the strategy. They described it as 'the most important thing in the business', 'behind of all actions' and 'the be all and end all'. They also felt that the strategy was a useful tool for prioritizing and planning both one's own and the organization's work.

"Understanding the organization's business, having the big picture makes the work easy and fun" (Management Assistant, org 7)

"You need to take responsibility for the big picture" (Management Assistant, org 6)

Mantere (2003) also found this group of supporting practitioners in his dissertation of employees' social positions in the strategy process. He categorizes these facilitators and strategic support persons as *empowered champions* and strongly argues that these facilitators are ignored as the strategic resources they are. Three CEO assistants' roles in strategy processes are summarized as they themselves described them in table 5. It is relevant to note that they had tasks in all phases of the strategy process from strategic planning to implementation, monitoring and updating. They had critical skills and knowledge that could be used to develop strategy processes and strategy implementation, such as project and time management, coordinating, organizing, communicating and facilitating.

"You need to know the goals to be able to prioritize and plan the schedule, meetings, events, practical arrangements, translate the messages to all units and countries" (Executive Assistant, org 2)

"A well-planned schedule is the basis for an effective strategy process" (Executive assistant, org 6)

"I help everywhere I can, it is important you have the big picture, you know the entire organization and respect everyone." (Management assistant, org 7)

"Assistants are responsible for the informal strategic communication" (Head of Support Office, Org 10)

The 20 previously conducted interviews of management assistants in the collaborative project also recognized the assistants' potential, even though the tasks varied in different kinds of organizations. By better recognizing the potential of management assistants, organizations and practitioners could gain through better organized and thus more effective strategy work. Management assistants emphasize the importance of open dialog and organization culture as the major source of their empowerment in strategy work.

"We have an open, encouraging culture and communication"
(Management Assistant, org 7)

"Daily contact with management team is important - we have our rooms near each other and discuss all issues on line." (Management assistant, org 9).

	CEO EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT, ORGANIZATION 1	CEO EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT, ORGANIZATION 2	EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT / COMMUNICATION OFFICER, ORGANIZATION 6, LOCAL PLANT
Tasks, practices inter-action in strategy process	<p>Supporting strategic planning by searching information, designing PowerPoints and preparing presentations for decision making</p> <p>Organizing Executive and Extended Executive Meetings, keeping the minutes</p> <p>Together with management scheduling the strategy process and planning the strategy information, communication and material</p> <p>Planning, organizing, facilitating and participating in Road Shows and other strategic events</p> <p>Administration of projects together with Project Manager</p> <p>Summarizing the CEO info in Intranet</p> <p>Interacting up and down in organization</p>	<p>Facilitating, organizing, coordinating both managerial and organizational strategy work</p> <p>Summarizing, translating, explaining strategic information in the organization</p> <p>Prioritizing according to the strategy</p> <p>Scheduling, organizing strategic meetings, events</p> <p>Practical arrangements</p> <p>Communicating in global environment</p>	<p>Annual planning of strategy process according to the strategy content and themes for Executive team, facilitating decision making, managing the schedules and actions to be taken</p> <p>Information of strategy in different channels weekly, calling and organizing monthly info meetings, strategic communication up and down in the organization, communicating and explaining the strategy to employees, actively collecting and giving feedback also upwards</p> <p>Together planning the key priorities, objectives and actions, monthly action plans, the entity of organization meeting schedule</p> <p>Together planning, implementing and informing about projects and developing processes</p> <p>Communication with interest groups, extranet, meetings, events, presentations, follow up</p>
Know-ledge of strategy	CEO, Executive team	CEO, Executive team	Subsidiary HQ/Executive team of local plant
Perceived Role/ Empower-ment	<p>"Active, committed, participating"</p> <p>"Strategy natural part of daily cooperation and dialog"</p> <p>"Scheduling makes it possible to plan the work"</p>	<p>"In front row seat, but not participating in decision-making"</p> <p>"Insider, knowing all the strategic information, seeing the big picture"</p> <p>"Understanding the strategy makes the work more meaningful"</p>	<p>"Everything is about the strategy"</p> <p>"I am an important link between management and employees"</p> <p>"Trust and respect are the cornerstones"</p> <p>"Good leadership is needed, but I work independently and actively according to the strategy and our goals"</p>

Table 5: Management Assistants' roles in Organization 1, 2 and 6

6

The modeling of the middle-level practitioner role in strategy work



Cross-case comparison clearly implies that different forms of interaction are considered most essential in successful strategy implementation. The mutual interaction in all directions inside and outside the organization seems to be the major element in the practitioners' empowered role in the strategy process. Action is needed when implementing strategy, and action and sense-making are closely connected to each other (Weick 2001). Knowing and learning constitute the dynamic aspect of knowledge (Small & Sage 2005/2006) making it possible to act. People are involved in multiple, dynamic and complex social networks of relationships and interaction that shape their access to knowledge and power (Ibarra & Andrews 1993).

The most essential empowering elements in the data were described with expressions of ways of interaction between people, encountering and treating people, but also independent taking of responsibility. These expressions of empowerment can be compared with Mantere's (2008) suggestion of a reciprocal view of strategic role expectations and conditions enabling middle-manager agency in the strategy process, e.g. narration, respect, trust and inclusion. As the empowerment is interwoven in social relationships and clearly related to knowledge and interaction (Foucault 1977, Ibarra & Andrews 1993), the empirical evidence in this study also suggests that the level of interaction and thus, access to knowledge, were the most critical elements for the employees' ability to have a clear position in the strategy process. According to these observations, the practitioners' roles in the empirical data are studied in relation to the level of knowledge they felt they had of the strategy and different forms of interaction they said that they participated in in strategy processes. The roles are placed in a matrix combining these elements in figure 2. The ranking

is based on the researcher's evaluation of the interviewees' expressed perceptions.

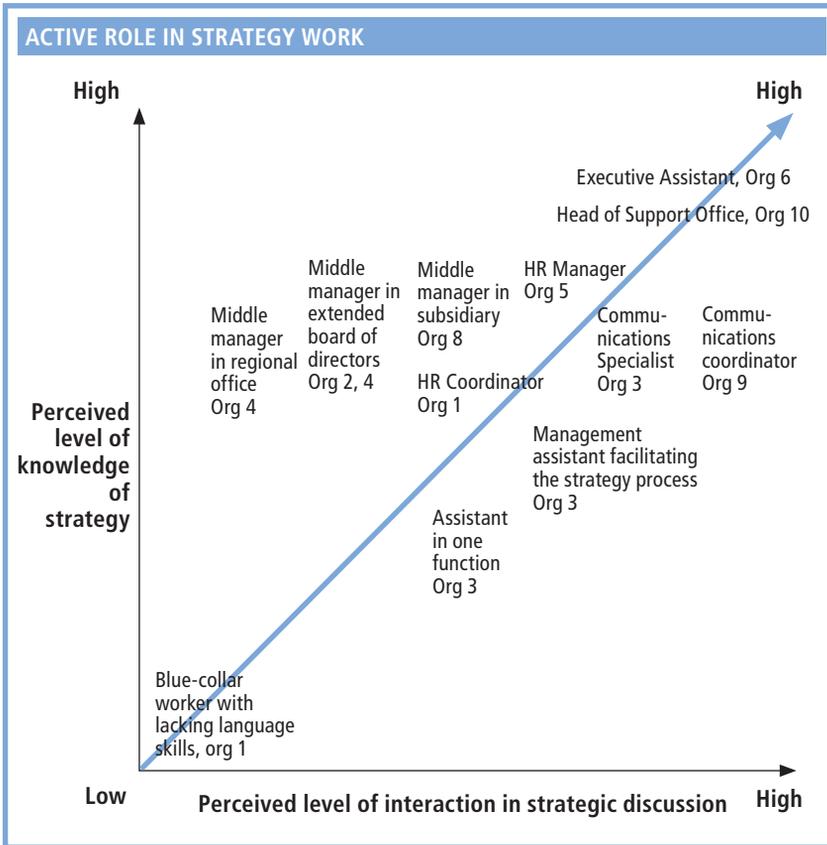


Figure 2. Practitioners' roles from the empirical data placed in a matrix, combining the perceived level of knowledge of strategy and interaction in strategic discussion.

Middle managers' and management assistants' positions in the matrix varied much depending on the perceived level of strategy knowledge and interaction. Middle managers in regional offices (org 2 and 4) could have central strategic knowledge and still perceive their role in strategy work as inadequate because of missing sense-making and support, whilst middle managers in subsidiaries (org 2, 8) considered the interaction with their parent company as higher and their role as more active. Middle managers participating in an extended board of directors obtained more knowledge, but did not feel it was enough (org 4). Middle managers also risked a silo perspective to knowledge (org 2). These notes are in line with research stating that it is not enough for managers to have strategic knowledge to

be able to engage in implementing activities, but it is also essential to have a central and boundary-spanning position in organizational networks (Pappas & Wooldridge 2002, 2007).

Assistants only facilitating the implementation processes without working in direct contact with the executive team, score lower because they did not have much knowledge of strategy content, even if they were active in the interaction when implementing the strategy (org 3). Of all studied practitioners, the most active roles, perhaps surprisingly, were possessed by management assistants working intensively with top management, planning and mastering the strategy process and the communication up and down in the organization and thus having both the big picture of strategy content and organizational processes with the power of acting in these matters, (Executive Assistants in organization 6 and 7). The practitioners scoring highest in strategic knowledge and interaction perceived their role as empowered and significant.

The matrix explains rather well a large part of the roles in the data, but is not comprehensive. In the data, there were also middle managers and practitioners with strategic knowledge and good interaction experiences, but a passive or even negative role in strategy process (org 2). Pappas and Wooldridge (2002) also noted that managers may be extremely knowledgeable about the strategy, but if they are not well positioned in the prevailing social network, it is unlikely that the firm will be able to capitalize on their knowledge. It is clear that the social reality in organizations is too complex to be explained with only two, even though elementary factors. The results imply that no single element is pre-eminent. This finding is supported by several studies. For example, Westley (1990) noted that inclusion in strategic discussion did not necessarily guarantee satisfaction. Stensaker et al (2008) stated that successful implementation required, in addition to participation in planning and sense-making activities, consistent action based on a shared understanding of changes. Kohtamäki et al. (2012) argue that participating in strategic planning has no direct impact on company performance, but participative strategic planning is linked to personnel commitment, which further impacts on company performance. Regnér (2008) suggests that linking together several distinct elements of success such as capabilities and individual practices through processes of interaction and activities nourishes creativity and dynamic capabilities, generating organizational assets and promoting competitive advantage. Weick and Robert (1993) noted that organizational performance was most



reliable in a whole body of social action, interaction and sense-making linking together in an organic system. The findings are in line with the literature emphasizing respect towards and belief in people, interaction and cooperation (Weick 2001, Johnson et al. 2003, Hrebiniak 2006, Regnér 2008). However, these results and the literature underlining interaction in the strategy process is rare in management literature, as the main focus is on strategic planning, managerial decision-making and the contents of strategy. Mainstream implementation literature is concerned with performance rather than communication (Furrer et al, 2008) and the most often mentioned recommendations for managers to develop implementation have been about controlling, managing or organizing resources (Aaltonen 2007).

Understanding and developing practitioners' roles in the strategy process and implementation require continuous both formal and informal interaction and understanding of practitioners' perceptions from their own angles. Drawing from the data and literature, the role of the middle-level practitioner in the strategy process can be understood and constructed through the network of interaction in which they are positioned and which they can use to have access to knowledge, and thus construct a feeling of significance, competence and empowerment. Just as strategy is not just a plan and document but "something people do", the employee's role is not just a job description, position or status, but rather action and interaction between people of the strategy and what it means for their work and in all directions inside and outside the organization. Jarzabkowski (2010) proposes that activity theory in the spirit of Engeström (1999/2003) could be applied in studying strategic practices as continuously flowing goal-oriented collective and individual mediation that explains how individual actors, the community and their shared endeavors are integrated in the pursuit of activity. To develop an "ideal" active role requires continuous action, interaction, participation, cooperation, knowledge-sharing and sense-making of strategic goals and the corresponding practices. These elements in turn require some forms of mutual trust and respect constituting the core of the construct. The analysis of the practitioners' roles in the empirical material indicates clearly that an active role in strategy work increases the feeling of empowerment and significance, and thus possibilities to plan and develop people's own work. In particular, the research underlines the crucial potential of middle-level practition-

ers in strategy implementation and work. The elements and the linking actions are illustrated through a construction in Figure 3.

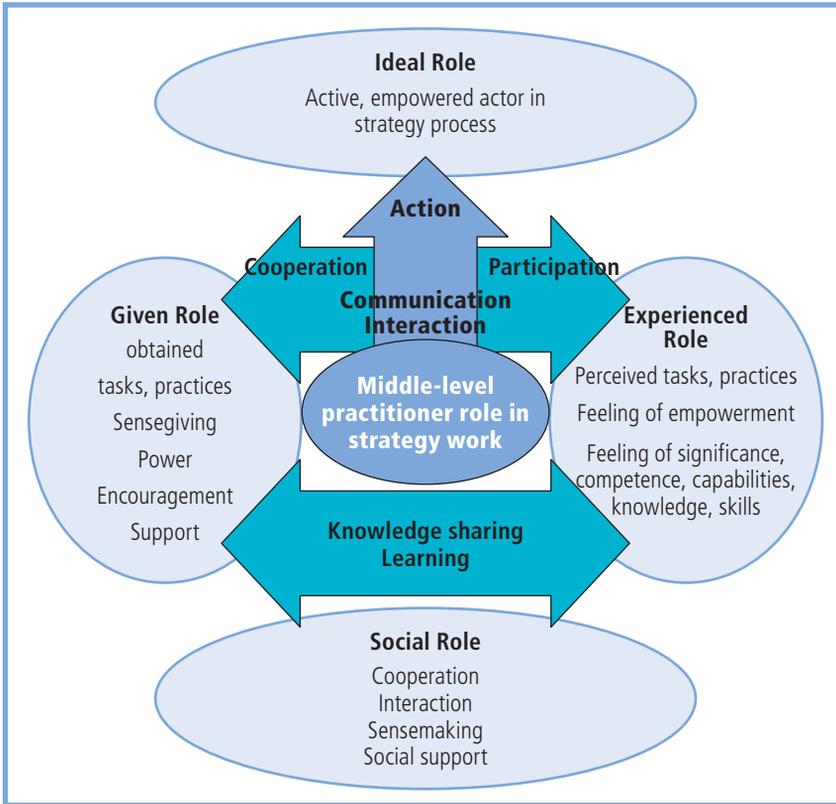


Figure 3. Constituting the role of the middle-level practitioner.



7

Conclusion and evaluation

This study has shown that middle-level practitioners have previously insufficiently recognized potential to facilitate and improve strategy implementation greatly in their organizations. The practitioner's active and empowered role in strategy processes constitutes multilevel, continuous interaction in the organization to obtain knowledge and understanding of the strategy and its meaning for daily practices. These processes in turn require action, trust and cooperation in the socially constructed networks.

The results contribute to strategic management literature by increasing our understanding of the middle-level practitioner's role and empowerment in the strategy process, providing missing pieces to help understand the micro-level perceptions of practitioners. The research gives clear support to the previous results on the importance of the middle managers in the strategy process but against mainstream strategic management literature, underlines the magnitude of cooperation, interaction, knowledge-sharing and sense-making as essential elements of strategy implementation. The main underlying factor for an empowered role seems to be mutual respect among managers and practitioners enabling good cooperation.

The practical implications of the research are prominent. By better understanding the middle-level practitioners' potential in strategy processes, it is possible to develop strategy implementation greatly. For managers, it is essential to understand the major role of interaction needed. The middle-level practitioners have a strategic role between top-management and the grassroots level in organizations and could have an essentially more important role in communicating strategy, and organizing, coordinating and facilitating strategy implementation. There are previously insufficiently recognized groups of practitioners, for example management assistants, that it was discovered had skills and potential that could be used more purposively in all the phases of the strategy process.

Even though working cultures are developing, the work is divided into managerial planning and "thinking", and implementation without

sufficient interaction and sense-making. Managers do not see practitioners as potential strategic actors and correspondingly, the practitioners do not perceive they play an important role in strategy work. Knowing and understanding the meaning of strategy in one's own work increases the practitioners' possibilities to see the big picture, be empowered to plan their own work, get engaged and feel significance. Practitioners could gain by using strategy as a practical tool to focus on the most important tasks and reduce the less important ones not related to strategy. However, most practitioners do not yet perceive strategy as a positive and useful tool. There are still myths and taboos in strategy work, along with a polarization between management and personnel as Knight and Morgan (1991) and Mantere and Vaara (2008) also argue. Open dialogue between managers and employees is the only way to genuine development.

Strategic Management research needs to understand more profoundly how to activate and empower employees' in strategy work in the messy reality of organizations with global and local, vertical and horizontal relationships and cultural differences in ways of thinking and acting. More cross-disciplinary research such as 'Strategic Leadership' could be needed to unravel the problem of employees' active role in strategy work and a successful strategy implementation.

The research increases understanding of the employee's role in the strategy process through a set of different kinds of organizations in a rather large context and provides practical tools for managers and practitioners to develop working practices. The credibility, reliability and validity were enhanced by using appropriate criteria for qualitative study (Silverman 2001, 222-241), e.g. rooting the research in a practice- and action-based view of strategic management literature, which gives insights to help understand the employee perspective. The research portrays a comprehensive picture of the practitioners' everyday realities in strategy work and contributes to knowledge through a theoretical reasoning emerging from the empirical findings and aims useful for the development of practitioners' working practices from their own angle (Charmaz 2006, Van de Ven 2011). The methodological choices were justified according to the philosophical stances taken and the researcher's values were presented and rooted in literature. The research process was described explicitly and the findings were reflected in existing research and discussion. The distinction between data and interpretation has attempted to be clear. The results are in line with previous literature and thus not providing totally new in-

sights, rather indicating the potential and possibilities to develop strategy work and implementation.

Yin's tactics (2009, 41) were also used to enhance the validity and reliability of the research. The *construct validity* was raised with multiple sources of evidence. Informants on different organization levels were interviewed to get a broader perspective of the phenomenon (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). *Internal validity* was improved through studying the ideas of different schools of thought and *external validity* through studying the constructs in several cases. *Reliability* was intensified through systematic evaluation, cooperation, frequent knowledge sharing in the project team and documentation during the whole project.

However, there are limitations and more qualitative empirical studies are needed to better understand the issues of employee role and empowerment in strategy work, constituting action and developing strategy implementation. The research recognizes more similarities than differences in different kinds of organizations' strategy processes, but the sampling represents only a small number of organizations operating in Northern Europe, even though several of them are part of global concerns. The interviewees were carefully chosen, meaning that that passive, reluctant and negative persons were not chosen to be interviewed. Some of them might have answered the surveys, but more likely they did not, meaning that not all problems and tensions were captured. However, the aim was not to find the problems, but to understand the positive and successful ways of working. This research did not criticize the taken-for-granted practices (Vaara & Whittington 2012), even though it also would be useful. The main method to gather data was semi-structured interview, which makes it possible to capture the emic perspectives, but the limitation is that people tend to answer more positively than they behave in reality. The research focuses only on a part of strategy process, i.e. the implementation, even though it is a huge phenomenon *per se*. The need to understand the employees' part in the whole process is eminent, but the focus is on the implementation because it is of major importance for the employees, and the reality in today's organizations still is that employees do not plan the strategy together with the managers. I am continuing my research by studying more profoundly practitioners' practices as action research and collecting their narratives in strategy process to better understand their angle and the antecedents of successful strategy implementation to find concrete, dynamic ways to develop the employee's role and identity in strategy work.

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