

CHALMERS



A Review of Strategy-as-Practice and the Role of Consultants and Middle Managers

*Master's Thesis in the Design and Construction Project Management Master's
Programme*

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Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering
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CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
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ABSTRACT

Evolution in strategic thinking has generated different perceptions of strategy and the way strategy works in organizations have developed over time. Shared among all different dominant theories is the perception that strategy is something organizations possess. Over less than a decade ago, a new movement in strategy research focused on the practice approaches in strategy. This practice view, for further studies, needed a framework which then called Strategy as Practice. As opposed to the dominant view on strategy as something organizations possess, the field of Strategy as Practice is concerned with strategy as something people in organizations do. Focus on '*people*' and '*Doers*' of strategy in organizations raised the question that '*Who are strategists?*' and '*What is their role in strategy works?*' The aim of this paper is to review the existing body of knowledge in this last concept in strategic thinking and illustrate it with a small empirical study in Swedish organization. The main focus is on the role of middle managers and external consultants as actors in strategy works.

Key words: *Strategy as Practice, Consultants, Middle Managers*

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Part I

1.1 Theoretical Frame: Strategy as Practice

1.1.1 Introduction

How does strategizing work in organizations? For years, researchers have been trying to answer this question through developing theories and doing empirical studies (Mintzberg, 1994). As a result of these efforts, different perceptions of strategy and its workings have developed over time. Examples of these perceptions include regarding strategy as “determination of the basic long-term goals” along with “adoption of courses of action” and the “allocation of resources” (Chandler, 1962) and also as “pattern in a stream of decisions” (Mintzberg & Waters, 1982). Shared among all these dominant theories is the perception that strategy is something organizations possess (Whittington, 2006). The main focus of these dominant process based views on strategy was that it should be designed by senior-level managers and implemented by the lower levels. Over less than a decade, a new movement in strategy research, taking a practice approach, has been attracting a growing number of researchers (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). As opposed to the currently dominant view on strategy as something organizations possess, the field of strategy as practice is concerned with strategy as something people in organizations do (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006).

Regarding strategy as the actions of people in organizations then brings the attention to the people who are the ‘doers’ of strategy. Researchers have adopted the word ‘strategizing’ to refer to this ‘doing of strategy’ (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). One distinctive characteristic of studies with a practice view on strategy is that a larger number of organizational members are considered as strategic actors in the new approach (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). The focus of strategy research is therefore distributed between these different actors among which are the middle managers and the strategy consultants (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Middle managers are a particular group of organizational actors whose role as strategists has been highlighted in the strategy as practice studies (Whittington, 2006). The strategic role of middle managers has been addressed in several studies (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Björnström & Räisänen, 2006) and a number of these have a direct practice approach (Regnér, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Mantere, 2005; 2008). Consultants as strategic actors, however, have not been the subject of much research within the field of strategy as practice (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Only a few studies have indirectly looked into the role of consultants (Regnér, 2003; Nordqvist & Melin, 2008). As the concept of strategy as practice is a relatively new field for study, there is still a need for more empirical research to underpin its assumptions and draw practical implications for organizations.

1.1.2 Purpose of Study

This master thesis reviews the existing literature within the strategy-as-practice school and reports results from in depth interviews with middle managers and consultants in some companies. The questions we sought answers to were ‘Who are actually strategists?’ ‘Can consultants and middle managers be called strategists?’ And if so, ‘What is their role in strategy work?’ Findings are presented with relation to the previous studies on strategy as practice. Part I of the study consists of the literature

review and Part II presents the results of the empirical study and its analysis and discussion.

1.1.3 Thinking Strategic: Towards a Practice View

The history of strategy and strategic thinking goes back to military and political decisions in ancient history where people planned strategies to triumph in battles (Ghobadian & O'Regan, 2008). However, it was not until the 1960s that strategic management emerged as a new concept (Ghobadian & O'Regan, 2008; Nerur *et al.*, 2008). From that period up to now, various researchers have developed different perspectives on strategic management. A look at the history of strategic management research highlights the names of the individuals who have made major contributions to the field such as Chandler (1962), Porter (1980; 1985), and Mintzberg (1994). Whittington (2004) identifies two main competing lines of research on strategy within the past five decades in the West. The first view, represented by researchers like Ansoff, Drucker, and Steiner, focused on the experiences of American corporations such as General Motors and General Electric in developing new practices. The second view was comprised of the works of American business historian Alfred Chandler (1962). Chandler's research focused on diversification and divisionalization in American Enterprises and resulted in gathering large databases and forming a framework based on Williamson's (1975), economic theory. His framework later became a model for strategy research (Whittington, 2004). Whittington (2004) argued that although researchers continued to use such quantitative methods, and many would still defend them, this approach to studying strategy has locked in. He started to introduce a new concept in strategy with focus on practice-based strategies in which people who do the strategy work also influence strategy work. Qualitative approach in strategy research was recognized to be more beneficial for this line of thinking.

Ghobadian and O'Regan (2008), in their study on the development of strategic management, have classified the key contributions to strategic thinking. Table 1 is derived from their study with some minor changes and additions.

Table 1 – Summary of Strategy Evolution (Derived from: Ghobadian & O'Regan, 2008, pp. 10-11)

Period	Key Contributor	Main focus
1960 - 1980	Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965), Learned <i>et al.</i> (1965/1969) Andrews (1971)	Using qualitative methods in research to find the 'best practices' useful for managers and develop practitioners who wish to be managers.
1980 - 1985	Porter (1980, 1985)	Introduced a framework for systematic, theoretical analysis at firm level by empirical research combined with econometrics techniques.

1985 - 1990	Williamson (1985), Eisenhardt (1991)	Focusing on the interface between firm and environment at firm level.
1987 - 1990	Mintzberg (1987)	Emergent Strategy
1990 - 2000	Wernerfelt (1994), Barney (1991)	Using large-scale data and sophisticated multivariate analysis techniques and inductive case methods.
2001- Present	Johnson <i>et al.</i> (2003) Whittington (2004) Jarzabkowski (2004)	Strategy as Practice

1.1.4 Historical Overview

In 2001, a workshop with about 50 researchers in attendance was organized by the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) with the purpose of discussing the developments in strategy micro-processes (Carter *et al.*, 2008). This movement towards a micro perspective was an answer to the dissatisfactions in academic research on strategy at the time. Eventually, participants of the workshop agreed on a need to focus more on a practice-based view on strategy making (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003).

Since Michael Porter's introduction of a framework for strategy research, studies have been mainly based on the micro-economics beliefs. This means that research on strategy was mostly focused on a few variables on the macro-level of the organizations and market where there was little consideration for the identity of the participants in strategy work (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). As Johnson *et al.* (2003) described, moving towards a micro approach in recent years is the reflection of two different phenomena: a change in the economic environment and in the nature of the strategy work actors.

According to Johnson *et al.* (2003), the economic drivers on the micro level were affected by two factors: the changes in how to look at resources in the markets, and also the 'hypercompetitive' environment. Rapid growth in open markets, information flow and labour mobilization have changed the way organizations look at their resources. Increased tradable resources and inapplicability of imitating strategies from other organizations call for higher transparency in strategies for firms to keep their competitiveness in the market (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). This means that to find a sustainable advantage, firms have to focus more on the micro assets that are hard to trade and emulate. Furthermore, the speed and innovation as factors of competitive advantages in a 'hypercompetitive' environment impacted both the level and frequency of the strategic works in firms. To match the speed of market change strategic decisions had to be made closer to the customers and bolder this changed strategy practices from something which was arranged in advance to a more continuous process. These changes also emphasized the role of people in strategy work much more than before (Johnson *et al.*, 2003).

Focus in strategy research has been moving from economics towards centring the sociological aspects of strategy. From a sociological point of view, strategy is an

effective issue with lots of intentional or even unintentional consequences on society (Whittington, 2004). According to Whittington (2006), Schatzki characterizes the two main views in social theory as ‘individualism’ and ‘societism’. Schatzki believed, while the first view concentrates on the individual actors and neglects the wider ‘macro-phenomena’, the second view is much concerned with the ‘social forces’ and leaves little room for studying the role of individuals. Whittington (2006) therefore emphasized on the need to bridge this gap and have a wider view.

Focusing on strategy as a practical theme, as Whittington (2004) noted, results in two different views on strategy. First, strategy can be seen as a practice in itself. This means that looking at strategy in a broad field which can influence society - *sociological agenda*. Second, strategy is the way people do their work in the firm which affects the firm and can be seen as a competitive advantage for it - *managerial agenda*. There are three traditions that can be seen as the focus of these two agendas; sociological understanding of strategy elites, sociology of strategy work, and sociological appreciation of strategy’s science and technology (Whittington, 2004).

According to Whittington (2004), strategy elites in society concern issues such as distribution of power in society, which can spread within and beyond a firm. Within the firm actors can be senior managers or strategy planners, and outside the firm actors can be consultants, or gurus that have effects on the practice.

On one hand, in a managerial perspective, strategy elites reflect the role of strategists in the firm and can be an assisting tool for managerial development of strategy. The main question here is ‘How does one become a strategist?’ Inclusion of middle managers in strategic decision-making processes and also finding a framework for better development of managers as strategist are of main concern for this line of thinking. On other hand, in a sociological agenda, sociology lets people ask about strategy work details, required skills, work organizations and their implications in strategy (Whittington, 2004). As Mintzberg (1994) argued, strategy work has transformed from a centralized work of professional planners to a work of middle managers and organizational peripheries. Furthermore, in a managerial view focus will be on the skills that strategists will need and the ways of obtaining them. Whittington (2004) quotes Mintzberg (1994) who notes that ‘strategy-making needs both strategy-thinking and strategic-planning’. However, Whittington argued that there is still a lack of knowledge of what exactly these skills should be and how they should be organized and used. Finally, the role of science and technology is to introduce and adapt proper tools for transferring knowledge into applicable strategy and also to find the best and most effective way of using those tools in managerial practices (Whittington, 2004).

The need for studying micro-level activities and their influence on strategy work plus an emphasis on the practical issues and the role of different actors called for a new concept in strategic thinking. This was the starting point for researchers such as Richard Whittington, Paula Jarzabkowski, and Gerry Johnson to introduce the new concept of ‘*Strategy as Practice*’. From a Strategy as Practice point of view, Strategy is viewed as “*a situated, socially accomplished activity*”, while strategizing means the “*doing of strategy*”, which comprises all the actions and negotiations between different actors as well as the practices they use in accomplishing the strategic activities (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). In the next section, we will take a closer look at this new concept which also sets the base for our study.

1.2 Strategy as Practice

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) noted that strategy as practice is an effort to ‘humanize’ research on management and organizations. Moreover, Whittington (2006) described the aim of practice theorists as to overcome the existing dualism between individualism and societism, adopting a new perspective that respects both views. He therefore introduced a framework for strategy practices (Whittington, 2006) in order to bridge the gap between micro and macro level views on strategy. He argued in line with Reckwitz’s (2002) interpretation of practice in social theory that there is a need to have a better understanding of the different meanings of practice. Practice as a guide for activities within organizations and also as the activity itself and its potential influence on the whole society. Further, he described three themes of his framework for strategy research as *Practice*, *Praxis*, and *Practitioners*.

1.2.1 Practice, Praxis, and Practitioners

Whittington (2006) defined ‘*Practices*’ as “*the shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using things*”. The ‘Practice’ term is more concerned with the macro-level phenomena that serve as guidance for actions. It refers to similar routines of behaviour such as traditions and norms and different procedures for deciding, acting and using tools in strategy work (Whittington, 2006). It includes the formal and informal interactions and activities at the organization centre and at the peripheries (Regnér, 2003). Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007, p. 9), quoted Reckwitz (2002) who defined Practice as a “*routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another*”. They also argued that practices are connected to “doing” because they use different types of resources and through them many actors interact to finalize an activity. By utilizing these resources and making proper patterns for strategy implementation, the ability for studying the construction of strategic activities will be improved (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007).

The term ‘*Praxis*’, a Greek word, refers to the actual activity people do in practice. Jarzabkowski notes that Praxis is comprised of the “social, symbolic, and material tools through which strategy work is done”(Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 70). Praxis can exist on both micro- and macro-levels and is the stream of what is happening inside society and what actors do (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Whittington defines Praxis as ‘all the various activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy’. In this view it is the intra-organizational works of making and implementing strategy (Whittington, 2006). Furthermore, Praxis involves the interconnection between different institutions that individuals act in and contribute to. This means that Praxis can operate on different levels from institutional to the micro and also is dynamic and can shift between levels (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Whittington (2006) argues that praxis covers a wide domain and can include board meetings, management retreats, presentations, and even simple talks. Furthermore, in his model for strategy as practice research, Whittington (2006) noted that ‘*strategizing*’ or the ‘*doing of strategy*’ happens in episodes of praxis, demonstrating the importance of studying praxis as a theme for strategy research.

The third core theme in the practice theory is concerned with the ‘*Practitioners*’ who are the actual human beings who carry out the strategic activities. Adopting a practice approach calls for a deeper understanding of the human agency and engagement with

what practitioners do in their strategic work (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). These practitioners are people who are engaged in formulating, shaping, and executing strategies. Whittington (2006) notes that practitioners become an important theme for research since their characteristics and skills are what makes a distinction between practices in general and what happens 'in practice'. He further quotes Bourdieu who used the metaphor of card players who, depending on their skills and the situation in the game, may play a certain hand differently each time. This implies that being experienced and skilful in strategy works for practitioners can become a competitive advantage for firms.

As this new concept in strategy work is getting more and more in focus for research, some critiques were also raised over it. In the next section some of these critiques will be discussed.

1.2.2 Critiques of Strategy as Practice: Is This Something New?

The field of strategy as practice like many other fields of study and research has got its own critics. In an article criticizing the practice view on strategy, Carter *et al.* (2008) argue that strategy's role is to lead the firms through changes or in unstable situations and keep it sustainable for future successes. They continue that strategy is a concept for CEOs and senior managers.

According to Carter *et al.* (2008), '*direction setting*', '*resource allocation*', and '*monitoring and control*' which were used by Jarzabkowski (2003) as formal procedures of strategy as practice are part of the current management principals introduced by Fayol (1918) instead of being new concepts. Strategy as practice scholars such as Jarzabkowski and Whittington have not directly defended the claim on why they used principles which were introduced before them, as formal procedures of strategy as practice. However, regarding the importance of the practice view in strategic works, strategy as practice is a new way to look at strategy. Hence, the procedures in strategy that were introduced or used by other lines of thought can also be adapted and used in this new concept. In fact, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) noted that strategy as practice is mostly concerned with explaining the existing problems as opposed to being concerned about the theory in use. Since the focus in this new field is on the identity of strategists, their activities, and the reasons and means behind them, 'the field does not require new knowledge per se', instead it tries to use the existing body of knowledge to investigate new identified problems.

Carter *et al.* (2008) further argue that strategy as practice researchers have not considered key strategists such as Mintzberg. For instance, Johnson *et al.* (2003) brought up the notion of 'bottom-up' strategy effects without mentioning Mintzberg's work on emerging strategy which is a key contributor to the same field of study (Carter *et al.*, 2008). Strategy as practice researchers such as Whittington on the other hand believe that strategy research needs to get over the older views on strategy such as Mintzberg's and the focus should turn to practices. Whittington uses the term post-Mintzbergian to describe what he calls a new era in research on strategy (Whittington, 2004; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008).

The ambiguity in defining the term 'practice' is another area where the strategy as practice field is being criticized in Carter *et al.*, (2008). They argued that the definition of practice covers many things from process to an actual activity with contradictory meanings and also it changes in a plural form to a word with a different

meaning. As they quoted Jarzabkowski (2004): *'Practice is the actual activity, events, or work of strategy, while Practices are those traditions, norms, rules and routines through which strategy work is constructed'* Carter *et al.* (2008) raise the question as to *'why Practice and Practices should have different meanings?'* Their suggestion for Practice is *'being closer to reality'* and *'being more practical'*. They concluded that focusing on practice regarding the definition of strategy as practice concept as, *'what people do'*, will narrow down the view of practice (Carter *et al.*, 2008). Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) however argued that their notion of 'practice' should not be simply interpreted as 'reality'. As Jarzabkowski (2005) mentioned the strategy as practice view is not concerned with objective reality, instead its focus is on the real experiences and the mutual role of actors and their world.

The other critical point in Carter *et al.* (2008) view is the meaning of the word 'strategy'. They noted that if someone thinks about 'strategy' in reverse, as Veyne (1997) suggested, it will be seen that strategy does not exist as a starting point and the practices associated with it made the acceptance that strategy is an object that can be observed and managed. Hence, *'strategy does not exist independently of a set of practices that form its base'*. They describe that, only a few actions which are done in organizations will be named 'Strategy' because those actions were around a series of practices that formed what is recognized as strategy. Hence, when the focus is on strategy as practice, concentration will be just on the practices that are known as a strategic activity in advance. Carter *et al.* (2008) further ask some key questions as: *'What makes an action a strategic one?'* and *'Is it true that authors of strategy are necessarily strategists or is it practices and rituals of strategy making that might constitute a person as a strategist?'* Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) agreed with the point that Carter *et al.* raised as the danger of focusing on strategist's acts and thought which may curb observing what is not done, practiced, and not said. They noted that *'we should attend to the significance of that which is not enacted into practice, as well as that which is'* (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p. 104). Overall, strategy as a practice still needs to be studied in different areas and subjects in strategy works. Praises and critics can both clear the strengths and weaknesses of this concept and help to manage people and organizations better.

In the next sections we first describe the framework for studying strategy as practice. Further on, we will take a closer look at strategy as practice practitioners and their interrelations with practices and praxis. Particular focus is on middle managers and consultants.

1.2.3 Framework for Studying Strategy as Practice

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) proposed a framework for strategy as practice studies based on the three themes of study defined by Whittington (2006). According to Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007), although these are discrete elements, their interrelations should be considered when studying strategy as practice. As earlier strategy work in organizations is comprised of *who* the doers of strategy are, *how* they do it, and *what* practices they draw upon in their activities. Strategizing as the *'doing of strategy'* takes place at the intersection of these three themes (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). The themes for strategy as practice research and their relations are demonstrated in Figure 1 as proposed by Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007).

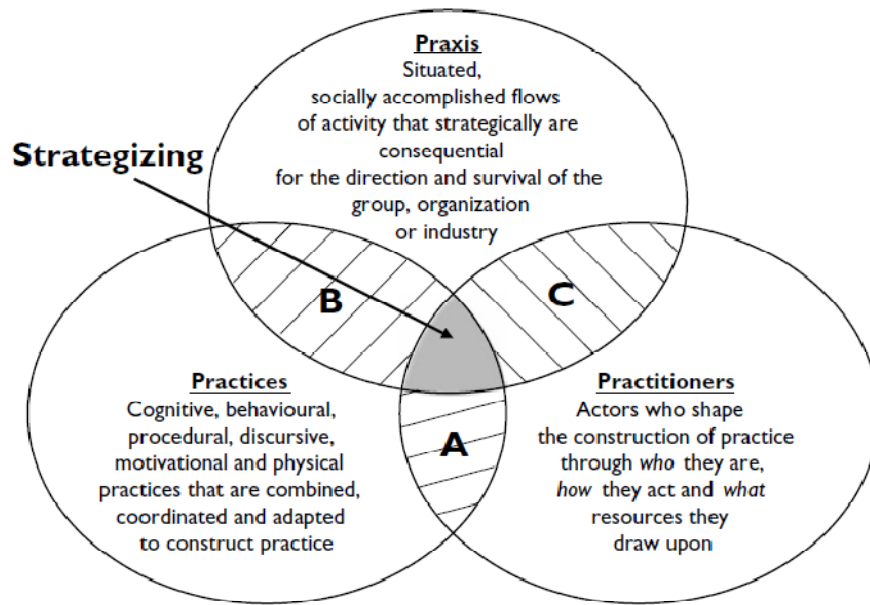


Figure 1- A Conceptual Framework for Strategy as Practice Analysis (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p 11)

A, B, and C in this figure show the possible research areas that researchers can focus on the field of strategy as practice. A is the interconnection between Practitioners and Practices, B represents the relation between Practices and Praxis, and C refers to the interconnection between Practitioners and Praxis. In their review study of strategy as practice, Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) categorized almost all the existing studies that were related to the strategy as practice concept up to the time and categorized them according to corresponding area of study based on their framework. They also pointed out the areas of research in which they perceived a need for further studies. Table 2 is derived from the table Jarzabkowski et al.'s (2007) categorized of studies with themes related to strategy as practice.

Table 2 – A Summary of How Empirical Strategizing Research Operationalizes Key Concepts in the Strategy as Practice Agenda (Derived from: Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, pp. 15-17)

Exemplars	Dominant Practitioner focus	Level of Practice	Dominant analytic focus*
Ambrosini et al., 2007	Middle managers, supervisors and processing teams	Firm-level: Variation in customer satisfaction	C

Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005	Middle managers in multiple divisions	Firm-level: Implementation of strategic change	C
Hodgkinson <i>et al.</i> , 2006	Multiple organization levels according to the workshop participation	Activity-level: Impact on strategy development	B
Jarzabkowski, 2003, 2005	Top managers	Activity-level: Evolution of streams of strategic activity over time	B
Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2006	Top managers	Activity-level: Role of meetings in stabilizing or destabilizing strategic activity	B
Laine & Vaara	Top, middle and project managers	Activity-level: Discursive struggles according to diverse interests in shaping strategy development	A
Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003	Top managers, board members, other employees	Firm-level: Failure in strategy formation	A
Mantere, 2005	Top, middle and operational managers	Individual level: Construction of the self as a strategist	A
Paroutis & Pettigrew	Corporate and SBU strategy teams	Activity-level: How practices evolve in association with changing strategy process	A
Regner, 2003	Top & peripheral (SBU) managers	Firm-level: Strategy creation and renewal over time	B
Rouleau, 2003, 2005	Middle managers	Firm-level: Implementation of strategic change	C
Salvato, 2003	Top managers	Firm-level: Evolution of dynamic capabilities over time	B

Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2004	Top managers	Decision-level: Outcome of a specific strategic decision	A
Schwarz, 2004	Consultants and clients	Activity-level: Generation of collective knowledge	A
Sminia, 2005	Top managers	Activity-level: Emergent strategy formation	B
Stensaker & Falkenberg	Managers of business divisions	Activity-level: Variation in adoption of a practice and its association with strategy change	A
Vaara <i>et al.</i> , 2004	Top, middle and operational managers, Organization, Media Government bodies	Institutional-level: Construction of strategic alliances as a dominant institution	B

*For more information about A, B, and C letters refer to Figure 1.

Practices and Praxis are closely interrelated in organizations. In his proposed framework for strategy practice, Whittington (2006) demonstrates the potential weight of practices on praxis and how practices typically emerge from praxis. He also argued that generally, practitioners' reliance on the intra-organizational praxis and extra-organizational practices is dynamic. This means that practitioners have the possibility of reforming praxis elements (Whittington, 2006). Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) noted that much of the studies about practitioners, have focused on the strategists at the managerial levels and not much has been done to study the influence of actors outside the organizations such as consultant, regulators, and consumers on shaping strategy. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical studies in the field of relations between practitioners and praxis. There is a need to not just know who is a strategist but also to know how this will impact the praxis in an organization (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). The following section will focus on identifying the strategy practitioners and their ability to influence on strategy work. Particular focus will be on the group of middle managers and consultants.

1.3 Strategy Practitioners; Who Are Strategists?

Strategy practitioners are regarded as the link between the praxis in an organization and the practices that exist at the organizational and extra-organizational levels (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Strategy implementation relies heavily on the practitioners since the realization of strategic goals depends on the adoption of the practices by the organizational members (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Nordqvist and Melin (2008) also indicated that in order for practices to be effective, they need to be properly interpreted in the organizational context. This process of drawing upon practices at different levels is open and dynamic. In today's world, the

actors have the possibility to change the parts of their practices through reflection and experimentation. Since practices typically emerge from praxis, being reflective about practices and making use of the openness in social systems gives the strategy practitioners the possibility to introduce new practices through changing their praxis (Whittington, 2006).

Adopting a practice approach to research on strategy broadens the category of activities that are considered strategic for the organizations. Since this new perspective regards strategy as something all people in organizations do, all activities that are important in reaching the strategic goals of an organization are considered as strategic activities (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006). Johnson *et al.* (2007) define strategic activities as those that are undertaken in order to reach strategic goals and directions, business survival, or to maintain competitive advantage for the organization. In the currently dominant view, strategy is regarded as a top-down deliberate process where formulation and implementation are considered to be different processes. The term 'strategist' therefore refers to top level managers who are in charge of strategy formulation. Therefore, research is mainly focused on senior managers and the strategy formation processes at the top levels of the firms (Whittington, 2006). Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) criticize this approach claiming that it has two main weak points: first, adopting such a perspective fails to study the individual as a person with his/her special characteristics, and skills, which matter in the translation and implementation of the strategy; second, that a top-down, deliberate view of strategy results neglects a large group of actors such as middle managers and even operational level employees. As mentioned earlier Whittington (2006) defined the aim of practice view on strategy for filling the gap between these two dual views, individualism and societism, by respecting both of them.

Strategy practitioners form a large part in organizations and therefore have an important role in society. They drive the world's most powerful organizations forward (Mintzberg, 2004). Effective praxis therefore depends largely upon these strategy practitioners' ability in adopting different practices and deploying them in their organizational contexts (Whittington, 2006). However, this does not mean that senior management should be excluded from research on strategy. Indeed, Whittington (2006) notes that senior managers still play an important role in strategy formation and a deliberate perspective on strategy is still very much prevalent in organizations throughout the world. The practice turn in strategy research calls for broadening the scope of viewing actors as strategists (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007) so the other level actors and their role in strategy shaping and implementing can be seen and their effects are not neglected.

In a review study on the practice turn in strategy, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) define two main dimensions underpinning the study of practitioners within the strategy as practice literature: (1) whether the unit of analysis consists of a single individual or a group of practitioners, and (2) whether or not the actor is a member of the target organization. Research on individual actors consists of studying a single person, such as Tom the production manager of a certain firm, and describing the special situations and study outcomes related to that single individual. Rouleau's (2005) study of strategic sense-making and sense-giving and the studies on role expectations and organizational practices by Mantere (2005; 2008) are examples of such research on individual actors. Another approach is to study a group of actors, such as engineering consultants within an organization. The results of such studies focus on the relation of the whole group of actors with the organizational strategy.

Examples of such studies include Balogun and Johnson's (2004) study of middle managers and Jarzabkowski's (2005) study of top managers. The second consideration regarding research on practitioners considers the relationship between the actor and the organization. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) categorize strategy practitioners as either internal or external. Internal practitioners are those that have a defined position within the organizational hierarchy such as the CEOs or project managers. External actors might have an impact on the organizational strategy, but they are not allocated a position in the organizational hierarchy. Examples of external actors include consultants, gurus, the media, and the governmental institutions such as business regulators. While these actors are not part of the subject organizations, their actions, such as business regulations, have an influence on the organizational strategies since they form 'the legitimate praxis and practices' (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008).

Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) further introduced a typology of the strategy as practice research, indicating the number of theoretical and empirical studies conducted in each area of research. In this typology, praxis can occur on multiple levels. The authors therefore distinguish three levels of Praxis: *Micro*, *Meso*, and *Macro*. Micro Praxis occurs at levels of individuals or a specific group experience such as meetings or workshops. Meso is referred to as Praxis at the level of organizations or sub-organizations, such as patterns of strategy action or processes. Finally, Macro Praxis is associated with the institutional level (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Figure 2 demonstrates the typology that Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) defined.

Level of praxis	macro	C n Empirical = 1 n Theoretical = 0	F n Empirical = 1 n Theoretical = 2	I n Empirical = 1 n Theoretical = 8
	meso	B n Empirical = 3 n Theoretical = 0	E n Empirical = 16 n Theoretical = 0	H n Empirical = 1 n Theoretical = 0
	micro	A n Empirical = 6 n Theoretical = 1	D n Empirical = 6 n Theoretical = 0	G n Empirical = 0 n Theoretical = 0
		individual actor within organization	aggregate actor within organization	extra-organizational aggregate actor
		Type of practitioner		

Figure 2- Typology of Strategy as Practice by Type of Practitioner and Level of Praxis (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 74)

A look at Figure 2 shows the relatively low level of attention that has been paid to studying the external strategy practitioners, particularly at the *micro* and *meso* levels. Moreover, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) mention the need for more attention being paid to the role of middle managers as strategy practitioners. The largest group of

actors in an organization is the one whose role in strategy work with a practice base view has not been studied much.

The current study is an attempt to investigate the roles of these two groups of practitioners, namely middle managers as individual actors within the organizations and the consultants group as external actors in strategy work. In this regard the next section is an attempt to obtain an overview of the studies that have been done on these two groups.

1.3.1 Consultants and the Working of Strategy

The role of consultants in the strategy work in organizations is an area where research from a practice perspective is particularly scarce (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Consultants' influence on strategy-making has been studied indirectly by some researchers (Nordqvist & Melin, 2008; Regnér, 2003; Kaplan, 2008). However, none of the researchers above have directly studied the role of consultants as external actors in relation to organizational strategy from a practice perspective (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Regnér's (2003) observations on strategy-making in the peripheral parts of organizations demonstrate that strategies in these subsidiaries were biased more towards the managers' perceptions of their local market and the use of external consultants. According to his studies, inductive and exploratory processes for strategy making as well as high levels of uncertainty particularly endorse the use of consultants. His studies, however, do not investigate the ways in which consultants influence the process of strategy making.

Considering that the lower-level managers in organizations generally lack a background in strategic planning (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006), bottom-up communication of strategic ideas might be hindered by the lack of a common language at different levels. Using expertise from outside the organization can help in overcoming such problems. Kaplan (2008) demonstrates how the initially rejected business ideas of a group of middle managers later got accepted after being reframed with the help of an outside expert.

In another study on strategy-planning champions, Nordqvist and Melin (2008) investigate two firms that have used the knowledge of an actor outside the firm. Their study demonstrates positive outcomes for both organizations. Nonetheless, the outside consultants in both cases were later recruited by the organizations in order to keep the knowledge they brought into the firm, therefore changing their position to inside actors. The authors characterize a strategy-planning champion to be a 'Social Craftsperson', an 'Artful Interpreter', and a 'Known Stranger' as well as a 'Skilful strategic Thinker' and an 'Artful Planner'. The problem, however, still exists with this notion since although the first three characteristics might be present in some middle managers; these actors generally lack an academic training in strategic planning (Whittington, 2006). Therefore, there is still a need for studies to investigate the relationship between these external actors and the organizations and how they influence the strategy processes within a firm (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, in our review of the strategy as practice literature, we did not encounter studies that have investigated the long-term effects of consultancy services and the situation in organizations after the consultants leave the firm.

In a recent study with a practice approach to strategy, Lundgren and Blom (2009) focused on the role of strategy consultants. Their study investigated the role of

consultants as strategy practitioners and their activities in work of strategy. The study demonstrated results in conformation with Whittington's (2007) argument that although strategy work is mainly associated with grand ideas and analysis at the top-management level, the role of lower-level participants should not be ignored. The next group of strategy actors whose role is highlighted in the practice approach is the middle managers.

1.3.2 Middle Managers as Strategists

Middle managers are a particular group of strategy practitioners whose role as strategists has been undermined by the dominant top-down view on strategy (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). However, studies using a practice approach have revealed the importance of middle managers and even lower-level employees as strategic actors (Floyd & Wooldrdige, 1997; Regnér, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Middle management's engagement in the strategy process goes beyond simple implementation of the strategies formulated by the seniors. The works of middle managers have been described as agenda seeking through middle top-down processes, selection of proposals and filtering the information (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Björnström & Räisänen, 2006). They are also known to connect the strategic and operational levels in organizations through interpretation, mediation, and negotiation (Floyd & Wooldrdige, 1997). In a study of organizational change, Balogun and Johnson (2004) concluded that middle managers are as much the recipients of change as they are its implementers.

The increased environmental dynamism and competition which call for greater organizational flexibility and less hierarchical structures result in higher levels of autonomy for middle managers. Balogun and Johnson (2004) also refer to the trend of decentralization and geographical distribution of organizations as factors contributing to the role of middle managers. These factors can also result in increased separation between the senior and middle management and reduced interaction between the two (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). However, although studies have demonstrated the various strategic activities of middle managers, these groups of practitioners still struggle to be included in the strategy by the seniors (Whittington, 2006). Therefore, studying the reactions of the middle managers to strategies formulated at the top levels is of great importance (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Mantere (2008) describes Floyd and Wooldridge's categorization of middle management activities in the strategy process as a widely accepted categorization. The model uses the direction of the activities, as well as whether these are integrative or diversifying to categorize the strategic activities of middle managers. The four activity types include: (1) Implementing deliberate strategy (downward, integrative), (2) facilitating adaptability (downward, divergent), (3) synthesizing information (upward, integrative) and (4) championing alternatives (upward, divergent). However, in order for middle management to be effective in strategy work, there needs to be an alignment of goals at different organizational levels. Mantere (2008) suggested that a reciprocal view on strategic role expectations is required in order for the middle management to fulfil their expected roles. Balogun and Johnson (2004) also note that the reduced interaction between middle and top-level management caused by the increased separation between the two levels hinders such alignment. Therefore the authors conclude that in studying the role of middle managers, it is important to understand the way they make sense of the formulated strategies.

1.3.3 Organizational Strategy and Middle Manager's Sense-making

Sense-making is an ongoing retrospective process aimed at finding '*plausible images that rationalize what people are doing*' (Weick *et al.*, 2005). How middle managers make sense of organizational strategies affects the way they interpret them for the operational levels of the firms. However, this process of sense-making by the middle managers does not happen under the control of the seniors.

In a study on middle managers' sense-making through structural re-organization, Balogun and Johnson (2004) note that especially in decentralized organizations, the actions and behaviours of the peers as well as the common experiences have greater effect on middle managers' sense-making. In the absence of senior management, the collective 'plausible' interpretation of strategies by the middle managers would therefore have a greater influence on the directions taken by the organization. According to the same authors, senior managers can become "*ghosts*" in relation to middle managers' sense-making. They further refer to studies demonstrating that senior managers in geographically dispersed organizations had more of an indirect influence through stories and gossips about their actions. Therefore the sense-making process of middle managers is mostly influenced by their peers' behaviours, characteristics, and actions (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Furthermore, in his study of strategy making in the peripheral part of an organization, Regnér (2003) noted that middle managers' sense-making is also directed towards external actors such as consultants, business rivals and their customers. His study demonstrated how strategy making in the peripheral parts of organizations follows an inductive pattern, biased towards the use of exploration and seeking consultancy from local sources outside the organization. One particularly important factor in such situations is the shared personal experiences among the people in a work environment. Such shared experiences greatly influence the process through which organizational members make sense of strategies (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

In explaining the sense-making processes of middle managers in organizations, Balogun and Johnson (2004) also referred to the concept of schemata change. They noted that the way general concepts and experiences are stored in the organizational memory depends on the cognitive structures comprised of schemata. In that sense, schemata act as instruments for filtering information and dealing with complex problems. Researchers have demonstrated that a change in the schemata occurs through different processes of social interaction such as formal and informal conversations among organizational members in the form of story-telling, rumours and gossip, and common personal experiences can also be influential on the development of shared meanings in organizations (Labianca *et al.*, 2000; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Whittington's (2006) model for strategy as practice research demonstrates the influence of practitioners on praxis as well as indicating that it is the praxis that makes strategy practitioners. In Whittington's (2006) model, strategy practitioners perform the activities in pursuit of strategic objectives (strategy praxis) in episodes such as meetings, team briefings, etc.

Acting as a connection between an organization's senior and operational level, strategizing is highly influenced by middle managers. It is therefore essential for the senior management of a firm to play an active role in the schemata development at lower levels of the firm, especially among middle managers. Since barriers usually exist for vertical interaction between the managers in organizations, a lot of the social

interaction will be among peers at the same levels (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The authors therefore conclude that the development of relationships in organizational structure and the ways of working are determined by these interactions among middle managers. Furthermore, Balogun and Johnson (2004) demonstrate that even if the senior managers are not in direct contact with the subordinates, their symbolic influence could still play an important role in the sense-making of organizational members. Hence, it is important for senior management to be aware of such influences on the way middle managers make sense of the organizational strategies. In another study on middle managers, Wesley (1990) argues about the dilemma of inclusion or exclusion of middle managers, and suggests the term 'strategic conversation' as a solution to the problem and he defined it as '*verbal interactions within superior-subordinate dyads focusing on strategic generalities*' (*ibid.* p. 337). The strategy as practice field may be able to use the existing knowledge on the concept of communities of practice. Entering communities which brings about a form of apprenticeship provides an opportunity for better communication and a forum for developing shared meanings (Whittington, 2006). In the next section, we will take a brief look at the processes through which middle managers try to be influential in the strategy work.

1.3.4 Middle Managers as Strategic Champions

Many studies have demonstrated that middle managers are the drivers of organizational strategy (Mantere, 2008). In fact, acting as the mediators between the senior management and the operational levels of organizations, middle managers are key members in the realization of strategic objectives in organizations (Floyd & Lane, 2000). In a study of middle managers, Mantere (2008) argues that this mediation role is structured by role expectations. These expectations are particularly high in decentralized organizations. Middle managers in the peripheral parts of organizations have to deal with more complex issues and are required to have a more inductive approach to organizational strategies (Regnér, 2003). Therefore, as the organizations get more decentralized, the strategic roles of middle managers become even more important (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Mantere (2005) defines the concept of strategy champions as individuals who try to have an influence on issues which they regard as strategic, but stand away from their predefined operational responsibilities. Taking Mantere's perspective, strategic issues are both those that are defined to be crucial for organizational survival or success and those that individuals perceive to be strategic. Therefore, strategy champions are those who try to have an influence on the organization in terms of strategic issues. According to Mantere (2005), individuals seeking to influence organizational strategy engage in different activities such as trying to affect the opinions of other organizational members at different levels, trying to change organizational systems and procedures, trying to gain control over resources. Kaplan (2008) also demonstrates how middle managers try to change organizational strategies using politics and framing.

Researchers have studied strategy champions from different perspectives. A common way is to consider strategy champion as a functional role for the individuals in organizations. Mantere (2005) criticizes this view, mentioning the problem with considering strategy championing as a functional role as neglecting the individuals who are willing, but are not able to champion issues they perceive as being strategic.

Such a view, therefore, does not allow us to study the organizational practices inhibiting champions from performing their desired role. He therefore suggested regarding championing as a social position instead of a role.

1.3.5 Organizational Practices and Middle Manager's Strategic Action

Organizational practices can be categorized into those related to strategy formation, organizing, and control (Mantere, 2005). The important issue regarding formation practices is the way in which individuals make sense of strategy and its relationship to their work in the organizations. Organizing practices means to define the legitimacy of actions according to the organizational strategy. These include issues such as defining the proper ways of acting according to the strategy and the definition of the roles and obligations of individuals. Mantere (2005) quotes Karl Weick who notes that *“organizing requires people to do different things in an interlocked manner, which requires the legitimation of action”*. Therefore, organizational strategy also serves as a deciding measure regarding the legitimacy of actions. Control practices deal with the distribution of resources in organizations. Mantere (2005) argues that control practices are required because making sense of organizational strategies and knowledge about the expected and proper actions are not enough for strategy championing. An individual needs to be able to lever the resources required for fulfilling the tasks he/she believes to be of strategic importance for the organization. Examples of such practices would be middle managers' ability to lever their required financial or human resources.

Organizational practices can also be categorized as being either recursive or adaptive (Jarzabkowski, 2004). A recursive view on strategic goals can be seen in calls for stability and control while an emphasis on sense-making and sense-giving suggests the usage of adaptive practices (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). According to Mantere (2005), formation practices are mainly comprised of sense-giving and sense-making. Communication activities and discussions among different levels of organizations in search of mutual perceptions of the strategy are common examples of such practices. Sense-making/sense-giving can be considered as adaptive practices since individuals are given the opportunity to have their own interpretations. However, the creation of common understandings can also take the form of recursive practices such as organizational bulletins aimed at clarifying the organizational goals. Mantere further argues that there exists a potential for tension between these two types of strategy formation practices: while operationalization practices call for recursive approaches such as defining explicit strategic goals, sense-making and sense-giving practices call for continuous communication. Middle managers in general seem to be enabled mostly by adaptive formation practices. Mantere (2005) attributes middle managers' yearning for adaptive practices to higher levels of problem solving and decision making required by the middle managers in comparison to operational level employees, and therefore recommends such practices at the middle management level in organizations.

Mantere (2005) describes that recursive organizing practices include clear plans for organizational structure and individual roles in support of organizational strategy. Employee development programs and structured career paths are other examples of recursive practices that have been found to be enabling for middle managers (Mantere, 2005). Taking an adaptive approach to organizing, however, calls for an

ongoing negotiation of the roles and responsibilities. In cases of conflict between the new strategies and the old, established work designs, Mantere (2005) found a lack of adaptive organizing practices to be hindering organizational performance. Middle managers in particular favour adaptive organizing practices due to the higher flexibility they bring about for this group of practitioners, enabling them to have an influence on organizational strategies.

In terms of control practice, a recursive approach has clearly been reported to be favourable by middle managers. Middle managers acting as strategy champions prefer to have their voice heard in terms of strategic issues. Recursive control practices therefore act as enablers for middle managers since they provide them with the opportunity of leveraging the required resources to drive forward their strategic plans (Mantere, 2005; Kaplan, 2008). However, at lower levels of the firm, adaptive control practices might act as enablers for managers with less authority in the organizational hierarchy. These adaptive practices mostly take the form of social contacts where the individuals can express themselves through their connections with higher level managers in the firm, making them able to have their say on issues they perceive to be of strategic importance (Kaplan, 2008; Mantere, 2005; Regnér, 2003).

Enabling recursive practices generally takes the form of structured designs and operationalized targets (Mantere, 2005). These can be regarded as enablers for middle managers to be active players in the strategy work since such practices provide a good performance measurement system allowing for individuals to gain rewards from having a positive strategic influence (Mantere, 2005; 2008). Moreover, structured career paths and allocation of responsibilities helps in legitimizing the organizational strategy. He further concludes that recursive practices that have been reported as enabling are those that give the organizational members a sense of ‘security through predictability’. The feeling of security through predictability can be related to Giddens’ (1991) notion of ontological security noting that ‘individuals build their identities on a sense of being able to predict how the environment will correspond to their activities’ (Mantere, 2005, p. 175).

Adaptive practices on the other hand, could be enabling for strategic champions through creating “*a sense of ownership*” for practitioners (Mantere, 2005). Negotiation of responsibilities and influencing organizational strategy through framing, personal contacts, and social networks are typical of such practices (Kaplan, 2008; Mantere, 2005). Middle managers in particular will enjoy adaptive practices when it comes to control issues since it provides them with the flexibility they desire to have in their work. Mantere (2005) noted that feelings of psychological ownership in organizations have been reported to be positively influenced by an intimate knowledge of the issue as well as a sense of control. He further concluded that perhaps the most important enabling factor about adaptive practices is the fact that they provide strategy practitioners with the opportunity to make sense of organizational strategy in their own context.

Summing up the enabling and disabling organizational practices, Mantere (2005) concluded that issues related to control are of the highest importance for middle managers both as enablers and disablers. Formation practices are ranked second in importance for middle managers. Studies on middle managers have demonstrated that absence of proper control practices will hinder strategic championing by middle managers (Nordqvist & Melin, 2008; Regnér, 2003; Mantere, 2008; Mantere, 2005). Overall, studies by Mantere (2005) demonstrated that an increase in adaptive practices in organizations could favour creative innovation, but at the same time threaten the

feelings of security. He found his results to be in accordance with Johnson *et al.*'s (2003) conclusions that championing enablers increase the performance of organizational strategy while disabling practices reduce it.

There still exists a need for research on strategy as practice to demonstrate that organizational strategy is not only the domain of senior managers. Studies focusing on the role of middle managers could reveal the ways of working with strategy at lower levels of an organization. Given that communication is often hindered between these actors and the senior levels of the firms, along with the fact that most middle managers do not have a specific background in strategy, shows that there is a need for further studies to demonstrate the role of consultants in the strategy work with respect to middle and senior managers.

1.4 Empirical Study Approach

1.4.1 Research Method

As Bryman and Bell (2007) defined, qualitative research is a type of research method that focuses on interpretations rather than on quantifications and frequencies. It is an inductive research method. Moreover, in qualitative research on subjects related to the social sciences, meanings are carried by people and their social worlds. Therefore, researchers believe that they should put themselves in the eyes of the people who are the subjects of their studies in order to achieve the reliable results and interpretations (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

In this paper, a qualitative approach was chosen for the study since the subjects of the research were people and their roles in strategy work. According to Remenyi (1998), a qualitative model should be introduced as a guideline for the research. This model starts with a literature review on the subject to find answers for the raised research questions. Methods for gathering empirical data need to be in accordance with the type of study and the type of questions which are going to be investigated. There are different methods, e.g. interviews, reviewing documents, or observations (Bryman & Bell, 2007). When the data collection is completed, a *narrative* can be developed from the interviews. It is a detailed textual description of the cases studied based on the different ways of data collection. This narrative will be analysed according to a theoretical assumption. Analysis section can reach a hypothesis or an empirical result in the end and after discussion part (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998).

1.4.2 Empirical Data

According to Bryman and Bell (2007), interviewing is the most widespread method for data collection in qualitative research. Although this method is time-effective for collecting data, it has also its limitations. Interviews give the researchers an indirect sense of their real experiences and not an actual sense. In this study we used *semi-structured interviews*. Bryman and Bell (2007) defined semi-structured interviews as questions that allow the interviewee to speak freely about the topics. Questions are the tool to kept the interview on track of the study's subject. However, the question guideline does not restrict the interviewer and the interviewee, and the conversation is allowed to float in different directions towards topics that might come up during the interview. Qualitative research allows the researcher to observe the body language of the interviewee as well as listen to answers he/she gives to the questions.

The research questions focused on two different sets of actors in strategy work: middle managers, as individual actors within organizations, and consultants, as external aggregate actors in organizations. Two different interview guides were designed to evaluate comparison between both group's ideas about the role of middle managers and consultants in an organization's strategy works.

The focus of this study was mostly on Swedish firms, so the result may be different in other countries because of, for instance, cultural differences. There was also a time limit for this study and the small number of interviewees. The other barrier was the language used in the interviews which was not the first language of either interviewees or interviewers. This may have caused minor misunderstanding during the interviews.

Overall, there were five interviews with middle managers and four interviews with consultants in different types of organizations. Middle managers who interviewed were representatives of four different organizations and the consultant interviewees were representatives of three different consultancy firms. The interviews took place in the interviewees' own offices so that they could feel comfortable. Furthermore, in order to collect reliable data, a voice recorder was used. By recording, the opportunity of listening to the interviews more than once was possible and this helped prevent further misunderstandings. All the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using colour coding to identify different themes.

Interviews with the consultants included representatives from three different firms. The focus of interviews was on the type of consultancy services provided by the firms, their role in the strategy work in organizations, and how they perceived the role of middle managers as strategy practitioners. Two of the firms work internationally with clients in Europe and other continents and one is a Sweden-based company working with clients mainly in the Nordic countries and central Europe. The companies adopted different missions and approaches towards their consultancy services. Table 3 below gives an overview of the consultancy firms. The names represented here are fictional and the real names of the companies are disguised in order to keep the privacy of the firms.

Table 3 – Overview of the Consultancy Firms

Company	Examples of Consultancy Services	Market
Company A	Management Development and Graduate programmes mainly to do with Project Management, Strategic Management and Commercial Management	UK, Sweden, Germany and Egypt

Company B	Strategy Implementation Support Simplifying Strategy Work Leadership Development Team Development	Nordic Countries and Central Europe
Company C	Organizational Effectiveness Leadership development Employee Engagement	82 Countries

The second series of interviews were comprised of meetings with managers in organizations from different industries. However, common among managers selected from diverse organizations was the fact that they were all placed below the senior level where the organizational strategies were being formulated. The interviews were then focused on indentifying the role of these middle managers in the workings of strategy in organizations. Attention was also paid to the relationships between managers and external consultants. Interviews were conducted at four Swedish firms all with an international market. Table 4 below gives an overview of the interviewed firms. The names represented here are fictional and the real names of the companies are disguised in order to keep the privacy of the firms.

Table 4 – Overview of the Industrial Firms

Company	Industry	Market
Company Alpha	Construction	Worldwide
Company Beta	Electronic Defence Systems	Worldwide
Company Gamma	Pharmaceuticals	Worldwide
Company Delta	Consumer Goods	Worldwide

2 Part II

2.1 Findings

2.1.1 Consultancies

Results from the interviews demonstrated that although all consultants found strategy to be of extreme importance, they believed that it is not always used in organizations. To the consultants, strategy described the goals to reach as well as the way forward. It was associated with long-term views and the tools for delivering the organizational objectives. The notion of strategy as a plan to win the war was also perceptible in their statements.

... In simple terms, strategy is a word that tells me about the way forward, and what I need to do in order to deliver what I want to deliver. It's my objective and how I'm going to get there... (A)

My view on strategy is how to play the war and how to play the market world. It is something between the mission and long term strategies. (B)

...Strategy is everything! Without it people are lost! (B)

The consultants, however, seemed to believe that, quite often organizations do not make use of their strategies. The interviewees mentioned different problems such as poor communication of strategies as well as the absence of a proactive strategy as reasons for which organizations face problems with their strategies.

... I see strategy as something that is too seldom used in organizations... As regards strategy, knowledge management and HR function in organizations, my experience is that they don't have good strategies. They just act in the present and they are reactive rather than proactive... (C)

... I think there are several reasons why organizations are not using strategy. I don't think we have a long term philosophy anymore in general in the companies. It is more about financial results in the short run... One will say that I'm responsible for result this year and if something is to happen in five years I might not even be here, therefore I'm not interested in that. So this short-term thinking can penalize in some sense development of good strategies. (C)

The nature of the consultancy works differed among the firms. While firm A had a focus on development and presentation of tools for strategy formulation and implementation to the organizations, firms B and C had a coaching and teams development and career paths approach. The representative from firm A was particularly involved in training programs for one of the world's leading construction companies in the United Kingdom as well as zone and branch managers of some of the world's largest banks in the Middle East and North Africa. The focus of the latter cases has been to enable managers to implement projects related to the strategic objectives of the banks. The first noticeable fact regarding development of tools and presenting programs for the organizations was the consultant's remark regarding the necessity of tailored tools. A common problem with the organizations seeking help from consultancy firms as well as the consultants themselves was mentioned to be the repetitive presentation of prefabricated tools such as *'the lost Dutchman's gold mine'* and *'the Seven habits of highly effective people'* which, according to the consultant, brought no particular value to the firms in the long run. The key to obtaining successful results from the consultancies was noted as gaining a deeper knowledge of

the organizational objectives and implementing them in the training programs for lower-level managers.

...I see myself as a consultant whose work is a mixture of looking at the firms' problems and what they want to develop and then coming up with an educational program to enable the staff to develop into a situation where they can deliver strategic objectives through projects.(A)

...Getting inside the head of the client and understanding what they are seeking to achieve instead of simply delivering a normal course gave me more leverage and influence over the way they drove their programs forward...(A)

Firm B explained their way of working with strategies as developing the strategy alongside their customer organizations instead of formulating it for them. The key issue here was the sense of ownership the organizations would have if they came up with the strategies themselves. One main problem with organizational strategies according to firm B was that organizations did not think about their strategies in terms of their customers. As one representative of firm B mentioned:

We lead them through the process of formulating strategies. We are the ones asking questions and the firms are formulating and implementing strategy themselves... This is necessary for the firms to have a feeling of ownership for the strategy... (B)

... I have seen many sessions with the customers where we have only asked the question what the new strategy means regarding their clients... The rest of the session has been an ongoing debate among company managers themselves since that is something they had never thought about... (B)

Focus on consultancy services in firm C was mainly on behaviour-related issues. Leadership and employee-development programs as well as consultancies for individuals and teams are provided by firm C in order to enable organizations to achieve their business goals. A strong emphasis was found by this company on talent and career management and aligning people's behaviours with organizational objectives. The correlation between highly developed people and the ability to run the business more efficiently was also an issue the firm focused on. Firm C therefore works with developing the steering groups in organizations and help departments in deciding what types of leadership and employee developments they require, and designing development programs for people to meet organizational objectives.

Contacting the consultancy firms was usually done by the HR department in the case of firms A and C. The interviews demonstrated that in most cases consultancy firms are contacted when organizations perceive a problem. In turn, fewer numbers of cases existed in which consultancy firms were contacted for future development programs. Consultants agreed upon the issue that organizations in general believed that when no problem is perceived, there is not a need to contact consultants. Nonetheless, there was agreement that the conditions are changing and organizations are showing more attention to issues regarding development. According to the interviewees from firms A and C, consultancy services are often sought for managers below senior levels. However, none of the consultancy firms reported cases in which lower level managers themselves have sought consultancy from outside their organizations. This was related to the fact that the lower level managers did not see that as part of their job.

... Managers below the functional head do not contact me, it is always at more senior levels. It is only when you meet them and you get to talk to them that you hear that

there are problems. Normally they would say that dealing with problems is someone else's job... (A)

... I would say that companies are becoming slowly more aware about what is possible to achieve but of course there are differences in maturity. Some companies just want you to be the miracle man and solve all their problems in half an hour. So we try to psycho-educate them in some sense. Even if you buy a machine you have to grease it every once in a while, the same thing you have to do with your staff, you have to oversee the system and try to make it stronger continuously... (C)

Firm B however, adopts a different approach towards providing consultancy services. According to the representatives of the firm, their mission is to get top management involved in the process. Interviewees from all three firms strongly believed that unless the senior management of the organizations does not approve the processes, not much will happen by the efforts of lower level managers and employees. Interviewees from firm B therefore emphasized the involvement of senior management as a mandatory requirement for them to accept clients. Even in cases of working with lower levels of organizations, the firm's objective was described as starting the process from top management.

... We believe that if we work on strategy at the middle management level we probably won't succeed because it is the top management that has the ownership and they have to believe in strategy. But, we try to help the middle management to implement and carry on the strategy in lower levels... (B)

Questions regarding the workings of strategy and the role of middle managers revealed the top-down nature of strategy in today's organizations based on the consultants' views. Implementation of strategies formulated at the senior levels of the firms is what is expected from middle managers in general. *...It [middle managers' influence on organizational strategies] would depend on the country and the industry. I would say at the top of the scale: very little, and at the bottom of the scale: don't even think about it! It has nothing to do with you!* The interviewees' general perception indicated that middle managers are not usually involved in the formulation of organizational strategy. Hierarchical barriers in the organizational structure usually hinder communication between middle and senior managers. Moreover, some of the interviewees believed that in many cases even when middle managers are given a chance to express their opinions, it does not affect the organizational strategies.

... I can see companies that have a very top-down oriented strategy work but they try to camouflage it, they are inviting people to discuss but the decision is already made. This is only a political game in order to make people calmer. I would say it is very common in Sweden. (C)

In that sense, middle managers who will try to perform beyond their immediate role expectations will be facing lots of problems. Not only organizational barriers hinder communication of the ideas, outperforming other organizational members will also bring about the risk of being marginalized. Consultants reported cases of misuse of systems for managing organizational behaviour in which middle manager were caught in the organizations' political games.

... For example, these days I have the case of a middle manager who has been identified as a problem. But the truth is that he is actually a high-performer and a much better performer than his managers. So he has started taking initiatives and that

is disturbing the strategic managers above him. Therefore, all of a sudden he has become the problem in the political game of the organization...(C)

Middle managers, however, were regarded as key performers in the workings of strategy in organizations by the consultants. Different interviewees expressed that middle managers' role is essential in materializing the organizational strategies. Representatives from firm B especially emphasized that no matter how brilliant the strategies formulated by the senior management are, materialization of the strategies remains highly dependent of middle managers' sense of ownership towards the strategies. Ideas differed, however, regarding the ways of creating this sense of ownership for the strategy in middle managers. The interviewee from firm A regarded the problem with middle managers and organizational strategy in two ways: first, managers in charge of organizational divisions need to be included in the formulation of strategies, and second, strategy should be clearly communicated with managers at lower levels instead of being left for them to figure out.

... This then creates confusion and lack of clarity. And you could say why can't the third level find it out for themselves? That's because they just work like that. They are supposed to have the strategy passed down to them and then being asked what they need in terms of resources to deliver it instead of figuring it out for themselves...(A)

Emphasis from representatives of firms B and C was mostly on the importance of continuous communication of strategic goals with the lower levels. Having conversations regarding strategic matters among seniors and middle manager was regarded as a key towards sustainable improvements by both firms. An Interviewee from firm B specially indicated that every aspect of organizational structure may act as an enabling or disabling factor in this regard. Having a flat organizational structure and the availability of seniors among lower level managers and employees was identified to have positive influence on the adoption of organizational goals and values by the middle managers.

... I think a typical pitfall from top management is that they don't have time or forget to involve the middle management. It won't be very difficult or time consuming. They can ask a few questions from them and give them a chance to speak out what they think before starting the implementation. (B)

... Even when we are working with managers at second or third levels of the firms, we also bring a manager from higher levels in the group. We believe that lower levels have the right to ask questions from the seniors regarding the reasons behind decisions and strategies. So, in a way we put the senior manager in a 'hot chair' and then we try to make them interact as good as possible. It is notable though that if we mix too many different levels, lower level managers will be afraid to speak in front of the seniors. (B)

Interviewees also emphasized the importance of honesty in the communications. Absence of honesty was associated with hiding problems instead of facing them. Interviewees from firms B and C reported that middle managers as well as seniors feel threatened at times by the consultants. The feelings were related to the exposure of vulnerabilities to consultants as actors outside the organization. Consultants on the other hand also reported cases in which senior management in organizations have tried to use them as tools and the feeling that there is always a considerable probability that such cases may happen. Lack of practices such as communication of strategy, responsiveness, trust building, and inclusion was reported to result in middle management's confusion and frustration with the organizational strategy.

... I see middle managers squeezed in organizations! Sometimes they don't have much power and they just have to execute what the senior management tells them. And they hear all the complaints from the organization members as well. There are a lot of burn-out cases at the middle manager level. (C)

... I also see that there was some shift in focus about 10-15 years ago when we are talking about process based organizations with few hierarchical levels; this led to the situation where the spans of management have become much wider. Before, managers used to have 10-15 people to work with directly. Today, middle managers can have about 50-70 to communicate with. In Sweden, middle management is obliged to have something called development and co-worker communication. Imagine if you have 70 people and you have to meet every one of them! Even if you put one hour for each person that's two weeks just in interviewing! And then you have to do something with all that material. So when do you have the time to be proactive and to think about the future? Because I think that is part of the role of middle management. You should be looking forward and you won't have the time to do that. It is like having to deal with a lot of small fires and so I can see a lot of people being squeezed out there. (C)

The firms did not know much about the long-term effects of their consultancy work. In case of firm A, client organizations usually re-contact them for future development programs which they perceived as a sign of successful delivery of their services. They, however, believed that organizations could use a more specific program for staff development instead of contacting consultants whenever they perceive a need. This was the case with the UK based construction company they worked with.

Another problem with the information regarding the long-term effects of consultancy services was the lack of proper follow-up systems. Both firms B and C mentioned that they plan to bring about sustainable improvements in organizations. As an interviewee from firm B mentioned: *"What we do is not much about bringing something new to the organizations. Instead, we show them how to use their knowledge... The knowledge is usually there, they just need to use it effectively."* Client organizations however, often do not co-operate properly on follow-up studies. Moreover, in cases which follow-up exist, the evidence is not of a scientific nature.

... For example if after a leadership training program the co-workers report that the leaders are communicating much better in an organization inquiry, we could only hope that it is an effect of our program. Something else might have happened, but we don't know. But then we have a lot of clinical observations...(C)

A further question from the interviewees regarded middle managers' knowledge of strategy. Consultants generally believed that such knowledge is absent among the middle managers. However, none of the interviewees perceived a need for academic background on strategic management issues among middle managers. Although, some level of understanding of strategic matters was reported to be useful for middle managers in finding a common language for communication with the higher levels of the organizations. The strongest emphasis on such issues was found in firm A, which had a long history of coaching middle managers to present their strategic ideas to the board. However, according to the interviewees the most important issue regarding the conversation with middle managers is the organizational culture and the mindset of the senior managers. As an interviewee from firm B noted: *If they [seniors] believe in the importance of the role of middle managers in strategy work and their inclusion in the strategy formulation, that is much more important than having courses in strategy.*

2.1.2 Middle Managers

Differences between the interview results with middle managers were much larger than those among the consultants. Common among the middle managers was the perception that their job is of strategic importance for the organizations. Also when asked about their perception of the term strategy, most middle managers were quick to point out that strategy differs from one level of an organization to the other. Definitions of strategy, however, differed much more among middle managers than those among the consultants. An interesting observation among middle managers' perceptions of strategy was that although the need to address 'what to achieve' and 'when to achieve it' were included in some the interviewees' definitions of strategy, only one middle manager suggested that strategy should include 'how' the organization is going to achieve its objectives. Associating strategy with long-term perspectives was also common among managers.

... What we do first is that we define a wanted position. And this mainly relates to the kind of business objectives we have and also what sort of solutions and products will help building up this business. And then you will have to look at the organization and what kind of organization do we need to get there... (Beta)

... Strategy is taking a helicopter view of every project you're working on, looking at the surroundings, other projects in the company, projects at competitor firms, considering medical needs, and then try to find a position and a way forward for the specific project that I'm working in... so strategy is all about trying to find the right track and the right progress for the project you're working in... (Gamma)

Strategic activities of the middle managers also differed among the companies. Managers at companies Alpha, Beta, and Delta described their role in strategy as that of implementing the overall organizational strategies as set by the senior management. However, different attitudes towards this defined strategy were observed in the mentioned firms. A representative from company Alpha described his role as that of steering within the organization's strategic frame: "... we take care of Alpha's strategy and use it in our district and then we put district specifics in that strategy". However, no concrete examples of such actions were provided by the interviewee. Strategies in companies Beta and Delta were quoted to be more about the objectives and goals. Representatives from these firms noted that the organizational strategies set out the long-term goals for the divisions they were working in and then the managers have the autonomy in deciding about the ways to achieve the objectives. As a sales manager from Beta noted:

... In general I don't think we have much defined roles. It is more about what you do with the task that you are supposed to handle... I would say that our organization is not a very formal one in a way that you can find on an organizational chart or any other formal description to say who is doing what. That of course could be seen both as an advantage and a disadvantage... (Beta)

Also a global sourcing director from firm Delta described his role as:

... We are a service provider; we don't run the business... So we need to support the company strategy. So there is the Delta strategy; and there are the business group strategies. And then what we do is that we take the

business group strategies and see how we can support them with our strategies... Now we need our own vision to understand how we should be in the long-term: where should we be in five years to support where the business in five years. So our strategy is really an outcome of the business strategy. This forces us to really understand the business strategy and break down to something tangible... (Delta)

Strategy workings in firm Gamma however, formulate different roles for middle managers in the organization. Business strategies in the firm are also formulated by the senior management and implemented by the lower level managers and employees. However, the route to formulating organizational strategies starts at the lower levels of the firm. The firm's scientists' new ideas are born at the lower levels of the firm and then at certain levels are combined with business plans. Managers are responsible for gathering ideas, discovering the ones with the potential for future income for the business and then presenting them to higher levels which will finally decide about the business directions.

... Within my team I have experts from both the science and the commerce sides. So we get very detailed information about what is possible and what is not. And level of detail is not always known at the senior management level: they can't know everything about everybody in the whole world! So when they are trying to form the strategy I feel that it's my responsibility and important for me to make sure that whatever I feel is the right direction is included in their strategy... (Gamma)

Managers were also asked about whether or not there have been occasions in which they have tried to have an influence on issues they regarded to be strategic which were not within their immediate field of responsibilities. An interviewee from the construction firm, Alpha, was once again quick to remark that the organizational strategies fit the line of business perfectly and he does not see the need to influence such issues. Other managers, however, reported such incidents in the form of both successful and unsuccessful attempts. Similarities once again existed between the experiences of the managers from firms Beta and Delta. The periodic meetings regarding strategy in both companies were reported as a chance for the managers to have their opinions heard concerning such issues. However, at times when the managers felt the necessity of having an impact on strategic issues outside the framework of such periodic procedures, managers reported the informal networks to be the tools mostly used for having an influence on strategy instead of formal organizational procedures. As manager from firm Beta noted about his experience regarding their influence on strategy:

... They [seniors] set a preliminary or draft strategy. And then they collect feedback on this strategy. You see people everywhere in the organization... with the task to bring the strategy and interview a number of people that are selected, not randomly, but they present various levels in the organization... (Beta)

... Half a year ago we merged with another part of Beta of equal size so we are more or less doubled and we needed new business sites. So we needed to describe how we should work in the operating sites and I said I can do that... (Beta)

Interviewees from company Gamma reported a different approach for having an influence on organizational strategies. In Gamma, continuous communication of

strategies is considered as part of the strategy. A manager in the company described the issue as: *there is a lot of information regarding company's strategies... and we try to communicate that all the time at formal and informal meetings with the lower level managers and employees as part of our strategy.* A global product director at the firm further noted:

... I don't think it helps if I work in isolation. So I have to try and influence. Then there are two ways: either I wait until I am being asked which happens at some companies; but here there is a lot of freedom to actually go to people and say: "well, I know you are thinking about this... Let's sit together and let me tell you how I see the world..." (Gamma)

2.1.3 Middle Manager and Consultant Relations

The relationship between middle managers and external consultants was also a focus of the study. Companies adopted different approaches regarding the use of consultation from outside the firms. According to an interviewee from firm Alpha, the company only uses consultation services at the senior level. Other managers and employees tend to use inter-organizational channels for seeking consultation. Experiences regarding the use of external consultants by the senior management were reported to be negative by the district manager from the construction company.

... They [consultants] are overpaid and they do not understand our business. I think I have seen a lot of consultants' reports about Alpha and their works for the strategy and I think they have failed 100% of their missions. (Alpha)

Alpha uses consultants for strategy works, but I know that it is not good. Maybe you can use it in some way but you have to be very specific. And you have to be very aware of the fact that they don't know your business. Because they don't know our business, they cannot come up with suggestions that are suitable for our business. (Alpha)

Other firms reported more frequent use of external consultants. Managers at firms Beta and Delta benefited from consultancy services on issues such as marketing and business planning. The use of strategy consultants was only reported by the senior level management without any specific comment on the positive or negative experiences regarding the consultancy firms. Interviews in firm Gamma demonstrated that the company has a rather open culture regarding the use of consultants. Senior management in Gamma also worked with external consultants regarding the formulation of organizational strategies and also the management of change. Part of the company was also undergoing a structural change at the time of the interviews and once again a major international consultancy company was involved in the process. The interviewees expressed positive experiences regarding the consultancy services provided by the consultants in the past.

... Over the past years we have been involved in projects with some consultant firms in order to try to be more efficacious. My general experience is that it is very helpful. Sometimes when you want to make changes it doesn't help if I as a team leader come in and say well next week we will have a meeting and we are going to make some changes because you come with a lot of baggage. So there I think consultancies can be very helpful in a way of making a team sit and have a different view... (Gamma)

An interesting case during the interviews was company Gamma's plan regarding the development of a new medication. The proposal by the team working on the project was first refused by the organization. However, with the help of a consultancy firm the project group working on the medication managed to come up with a business plan for the idea along with support from another pharmaceutical company and the senior bought into the plan the second time. A manager who was in charge of developing the business plan regarded the way the strategic idea was proposed to the senior management as an important factor in its acceptance. He also pointed out the importance of ethical behaviour from the consultancy firm as a major contribution to the development of their idea.

... I think the important thing here was that we didn't go there with the same message and said: "well, actually you got it wrong. Just have a look at it again and please agree because this is important". What we did was we clearly got the message that the issue for the senior management to adapt the strategy with the new idea was the finance. So once we found a solution for that we got a very positive response. Because it is different from going back and saying you got it wrong. It is going back and saying: "Yes, we heard what you said, we addressed it and we have probably a solution for that. Are we allowed to proceed? (Gamma)

... In this case I think they [consultants] very ethically right. Nowadays, we do a lot with external partners and we have had some very bad experiences regarding secrecy agreements... In this case when the external consultants received the first contact from the other company, their first response was that they came to us and told us that the other company might be interested in the idea. So I think they played a key role by being honest. (Gamma)

Middle managers generally lacked any background training in strategy management. However, all of the interviewees reported to have participated in different forms of workshops and group sessions regarding organizational strategies. Absence of formal strategy training was not reported to have had an influence on the managers' performance. Managers generally believed that the knowledge gained through experience on strategic issues sufficed for them. Nonetheless, interviewees agreed on the idea that strategic thinking is an important feature for middle managers, enabling them in successfully achieving their objectives.

... There's a huge difference between project leaders within this company who do have a strategic thinking and others who don't have it. If you don't know where you are going, it is very difficult to run the projects. (Gamma)

2.2 Analysis of the Findings

2.2.1 Practitioners' View on Strategy

The main focus in this study, in regard to strategy work, was on the accepted definition of 'Strategy' in each group of practitioners. It is important to know about each group's perception of strategy in order to have an interview regarding strategic issues. The results demonstrated that there were different definitions of strategy among middle managers and consultants. Consultants' definition of strategy was about the long-term goals and how to reach them as was the focus of their strategic works. They saw strategy as a plan to reach aimed goals for organizations, without

considering any detail such as financial goals. However, considering details of strategy works was clear in definitions that middle managers gave. Their focus seems to be on the more tangible issues, or areas of work that can raise profit within their operations. The middle managers' perception of strategy was more about the "what" and "when" of the strategic goals, while the consultants focused on "how" as well.

2.2.2 Consultants and Middle Managers as Strategic Actors

2.2.2.1 Consultants

Interviews with consultants showed that when firms try to use strategy consultants are when they face problems, they want a change or they want to develop for the future. Future developments can consist of training programs such as project management, strategic management, leadership courses etc, for staff at different levels. However, as consultants argued, this developing side of their consultancies is not very common among all firms and not all of the firms have long-term views on their strategy. Consultants believed that having a strategy is not the common case in all firms and still some companies run their businesses with their short-term financial strategies to earn revenues. In regards of changing environment markets it is not wise to do so. As they furthermore mentioned, when a change happens in the market and a firm does not have a strategy to face new challenges, then it will be too late to start having or defining strategy for firm. Hence, having a strategy makes firms ready for facing future challenges and upcoming threat and enables them to survive, although all the strategies are not supposed to be successful and they need to be examined and proved during the time.

The way firms make contact with strategic consultants, as argued by consultants, is done mostly by their senior level managers and HR departments. They cleared that the need of consultancy is mostly seen by HR departments and moreover these contacts are always with acceptance of the senior-levels. Interviewed consultants believed that nothing will happen if the senior level managers don't believe in changes or developments in their firms. This shows that the role of senior level management in strategy shaping is still the most accepted issue among consultants and middle managers. All of them argued that because of changing environment of growing markets and their complexity, senior-level managers can not know all the issues in their firm anymore, but because they can have the overall view of the firm goals and visions they are eligible to shape the overall strategy of the firm. Moreover, the interviewed middle managers mentioned that using any strategic consultant in their level is not in their focus. The type of consultancies which they used was mostly for getting help in making business plans, marketing issues and for technical issues in their work. Middle managers also believed that strategy consultants should be used by senior level managers who are in charge of strategy making and are able to see the overall strategy of the firm.

This shaping of strategy and getting sufficient information about market and firm's abilities and available resources, as mentioned in the findings part, should be supported by getting more contacts with different levels of lower managers and consultants to help get the acceptable picture of the firm's capacity in strategy work. Consultants defined their role both as facilitators and mediators for firms. They mentioned that the most common problem that they see in firms is that different levels have problem regarding communication with each other.

Two of the consultancy firms defined their role as facilitators in firms. They tried to make different levels in firm have more interaction and communication by asking different questions regarding strategy and strategic thinking and make them think about everything they have, but they might be unable to see. The other consultancy firm worked as a mediator in firms. They informed about the existing problems in the firm and then offered solutions that could help the firm reach their desired goals by using tools such as training programs and courses for middle or lower-level managers. They tried to help lower-level managers learn the same language that the senior level uses for strategy making and implementing and make them be able to present their ideas to senior levels. As Kaplan (2008) argued, the importance of finding a common language, as a support for making communication, is crucial for not hindering bottom-up communications. The view of being a facilitator for a consultant is more in line with the strategy as practice view. Facilitator consultants do not aim to solve any problem but just want the actual players in strategy to find their abilities and get their sense of strategic thinking in their organizations and find their way of doing it. This facilitation is done through the participation of both senior and middle-level managers and this is in contradiction with the mediator role of consultants that their focus is just on the lower-level manager training.

As mentioned earlier, the contacts with consultancy firm is mostly done by HR and senior level managers and not by middle managers. Furthermore, middle managers perception of the work of consultants is not always positive and even consultants mentioned problems with senior level regarding what they want them to do and sometimes they tried to misuse their role. Consultants believed that some firms want them to solve their problems and mentioned the fact that this is not the focus of their consultancy work. They argued that there are occasions that the senior level has formulated the firm's strategy without concerning the other levels and asking them, as an external actor, to present it to their middle managers and make them accept it.

The other case that can happen for both middle managers and consultants is the feel of being threatened. Consultants, as mentioned by interviewed consultants, may ask to change the behaviour of middle managers with active role and great ideas that senior level managers felt threatened by. Furthermore, different levels of managers in a firm are also sometimes feeling threatened by outside consultants. Managers in such situations may try to hide their vulnerabilities from consultants which may cause problem to get actual information about how they work. Thus, the feel of being threatened can act as a barrier in relations between consultants and firms.

The other barrier that influences the relation between consultants and firms is the cultural issues. As mentioned by one of the interviewed consultants, the difference between the cultures of the consultancy firm and where they worked made some problems regarding effectiveness of trainings. The consultancy firm was a European firm which was working in a country in the Middle East. As the interviewee argued, their managers perception of work, the way they looked at their senior levels and strategy activities were much different from the Europeans. Middle managers of these firms were not motivated and they believed that their strategy is made by senior levels and they cannot have influence on it. These cultural issues are very broad and not all of cultural differences are signs of problems. The crucial factor in this regard is to understand the differences first.

As Nordqvist and Melin (2008) and Whittington (2008) mentioned, the role of consultants is to use their knowledge to fill the gap of academic trainings in strategic planning for managers in firms. Results showed that, in middle manager's ideas,

education in strategy field did not seem to be more important than having experience. However, consultants believed in both experience beside strategic education for better understanding of strategy works. It seems that formal trainings in strategy help to understand the ideas about strategy and also raise the critical thinking of people while the experiences are the actual practices which are implementing in firms. Existence of these two issues, knowledge and experience, could help better understand existing problems and lack in strategy works.

2.2.2.2 Middle Managers

Findings from the interviews with both middle managers and consultants emphasized the strategic role of middle managers as key players in materializing organizations' strategic objectives. Middle managers reported strategic activities such as agenda seeking, selection of proposals and filtering the information (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Björnström & Räisänen, 2006) as part of their daily work in organizations. Performing these roles was also perceived by the middle managers to be part of their formulated roles by the organizational strategy. Therefore, little was observed as a gap between the formulated role and the role actually played by the middle managers in the organizations. This view, however, was not supported by the consultants, especially those working with team building and people development. According to this group of interviewees, middle managers tend to hide such problems, especially to people from outside the organization. Consultants believed that it is only through deeper involvement with the organization that middle managers and lower level employees start to share their experiences regarding problems they have in their roles in the organizational strategy. Such feeling of mistrust was also reported as a disabling factor, hindering effective providing of consultancy services.

There was an inconsistency among the interviewees' perception regarding the role of middle managers as championing strategies. Consultants generally believed that the current culture in most organizations does not expect middle managers, nor does it make room for them, to challenge their superiors with strategic ideas as described by Mantere (2008). Middle managers' perspective on organizational strategy indicated that their role in the workings of strategy is mostly regarded as implementation and providing feedback. Some level of influence on strategies was reported by the middle manager at their own level. However, overall organizational strategies except for the firm Gamma did not count on lower level managers' ideas for formulation of strategy.

Except for firm Gamma's system for continuous reciprocal dialogue regarding organizational strategies, the inclusion of middle managers in the formation of organizational strategies was confined to the periodic – mostly annual – meetings and the occasional feedback systems like those in the firm Beta. The current study does not provide the senior managements view on the reasons behind this phenomenon. However, interview results demonstrated that middle managers are in need of some form of continuous communication of strategies. In cases where formal forums and procedures did not exist for providing this communication, middle managers relied on their informal networks to express their ideas. The results therefore are in line with Wesley's (1990) idea of conversation as a way to overcome the barriers regarding inclusion or exclusion of middle managers.

2.2.3 Making sense of Organizational Strategy

Sensegiving practices adopted by the senior management in most of the interviewed organizations appear to be confined to periodic meetings, the issuing of organizational bulletins and use of organizational intranets. The effectiveness of such practices is open to question since the studies did not provide evidence of middle managers gaining clear ideas regarding organizational strategies. Among the mentioned practices, periodic meetings in which people from higher levels of organizations actually 'sat down' with lower level managers in order to discuss strategic issues were reported as the main route for middle management's sensemaking of strategic issues. It is only through such meetings that senior management comes out of the shadows and has a direct impact on the employees. Other means used for sensegiving created more of distant image of senior management as that noted by Balogun and Johnson (2004). This idea was also supported by all consultants interviewed that being 'bombarded with information' has little effect on middle management making sense of organizational strategies. Consultancy firms may be able to play an important role in this regard in terms of facilitating the conversation among different organizational levels. Such approach was also reported as an objective by the consultancy firms. What was observed in most of the interviewed organizations was that greater attention is being paid towards one-way communication and periodic feedbacks. Use of consultancy firms for overcoming communicational barriers is also regarded from a short-term perspective. However, achieving sustainable improvements in sensegiving and sensemaking regarding strategic issues appears to require an attempt for facilitation of dialogue among the seniors and lower level managers.

2.2.4 Enabling and Disabling Organizational Practices

The relation between middle managers and organizational practices suggests that organizations need to pay better attention to the design and adoption of practices at different levels. An active relationship was observed between the managers and the inter-organizational practices. Middle managers' reliance on extra organizational practices and their level of adoption by organizations differed among the firms. Within the construction firm, Alpha, extra organizational practices were reported to be relied upon the least among the subject organizations. Seeking and evaluation of alternative practices at middle management level occurred most at firm Gamma. However, it should be noted that this trend is itself a legitimate praxis within Gamma whereas it is highly prohibited in firms like Alpha.

In terms of inter-organizational practices, middle managers reported to be enabled by the adaptive formation practices. The highest level of such practices was observed in firm Gamma. However, any attempt for better sensegiving by the senior management was reported as an enabler for strategic championing. In the absence of such practices, all the middle managers reported recursive practices such as organizational intranets, bulletins, and feedback systems to act as enablers. Operationalization practices, which are those that deal with establishment of clear strategic objectives (Mantere, 2005) received mixed support from middle managers. While in some cases middle managers yearned for clear targets in order to be able to adapt their plans to the organizational business objectives, others preferred some level of flexibility in their interpretation of organizational objectives.

Findings regarding organizing practices were not completely in line with Mantere's (2005) conclusions regarding the middle managers favouring adaptive organizing practices. Middle managers demonstrated different views regarding adaptive organizing practices such as negotiation of organizational roles and legitimacy of actions. While middle managers in two of the firms expressed positive views regarding such practices, others preferred a more defined line of responsibility. This view was also supported by the consultants who believed that middle managers generally do prefer to work with their own defined responsibilities. Consultants associated such behaviour with different reasons from general reluctance towards strategic outcomes to the fear of being abandoned by seniors. However, it should be noted that managers who did not report a desire for more adaptive organizing practices also did not report any attempt to challenge the strategic ideas of the seniors or to present their own strategic plans to higher levels. Adaptive practices were specially reported to be enabling in resolutions of conflicts which was in conformation with Mantere's (2005) findings. Therefore, one may conclude that in order for middle managers to champion alternatives as noted by Mantere (2008), adaptive organizing practices are required. In terms of recursive organizing practices, interview results only demonstrated middle managers positive views on employee development programs. Such programs were specially reported beneficial in terms of enabling middle managers to better understand strategic ideas since they do not have a formal training on strategy.

Recursive control practices were clearly reported as enabling factors for middle managers. Interviewees especially emphasized the importance of participation in strategy discussions. Meanwhile, having leverage on resource allocation was regarded as highly enabling for the middle managers who acted more as strategic champions. Finally, the use of informal networks for influencing strategic issues can be regarded as a major enabling practice for all managers except for those in firm Gamma that have better formal procedures for expressing their ideas. The findings regarding control practices were specially coherent with those of Mantere (2005) who describes that middle managers feel much more enabled in championing strategy where departmental plans are formulated before being summed-up in an overall organizational strategy.

2.3 Discussion and Conclusion

It is important to consider that strategizing happens at the interface between praxis, practitioners, and practice. The conceptual framework for strategy as practice in Figure 1 emphasizes the weight of culture on practices. Furthermore, our study also indicated that extra-organizational factors might have a great influence on practices. Attention should therefore be paid to factors influencing practices in the organizations such as culture – within country, industry, and organization – a firm's market, and organizational structure. Whatever the overall strategy of the firm is, these three main factors has influence communication inside organizations, the way senior level managers and middle managers interact with each other, and how they feel about consultants. Hence, it is important to consider these factors when the roles of practitioners are being studied. Otherwise the result of every study can be just applicable for the subject firm in the study.

The role of consultants in strategy work could be regarded from two different points of view depending on the nature of the consultancy firms. On the one hand, there are

the strategy consultants who provide different services regarding formulation or development of strategy and issues regarding personnel development. This group of consultants has a clear influence on organizational strategies when they are contacted by the management and can therefore be regarded as strategists. On the other hand there are the business consultants which usually work with the lower levels of organizations. Whether or not these consultants can be regarded as strategists may depend on the organizational culture, intra-organizational practices at the firm seeking consultancy, and the inter-organizational practices shared between the two firms. In other words, for this group of consultants to be influential on organizational strategies, a combination of certain practices needs to exist in the organizations.

Formation of strategies in organizations needs to be in accordance with the capabilities of their human resources and the market situation at the customer level. Such knowledge does not appear to be fully present at the senior management level. Middle managers therefore play the role of monitoring their environment and informing the seniors about the capacities at their level and their interpretations of the organizational strategies. At the same time, a common practice at middle management level is that of interpreting and making sense of organizational strategies. Therefore, we believe middle managers' activities are of strategic importance by the firm and can be regarded as strategizing. However, it should be noted that the managers interviewed in this study, although below the senior level, had organizational positions where other managers and employees worked under their supervision. Thus, a question to be answered is how far the limits of strategic activities go in an organization. We therefore suggest there is a need to take the same approach in studying the activities of lower level employees and managers in order to determine whether or not activities at lower level can be considered as strategizing.

3 References

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