

Strategy Implementation Activities and Obstacles: A South African perspective

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Abstract. This quantitative study identify whether the extent of selected strategy implementation activities by South African (SA) organizations could explain organizational performance variations and the perceived obstacles preventing these organizations from implementing chosen strategies. A face-to-face survey was conducted amongst 258 respondents using a structured questionnaire. An exploratory factor analysis confirmed construct validity for the performance indicators and strategy implementation activities. Most respondents review their strategy implementation process quarterly, half-yearly or annually. Perceived obstacles to strategy implementation are that staff do not understand what is expected from them and lack of staff commitment. A total of thirteen hypotheses were tested and eleven significant differences were found. Managers should frequently measure strategy implementation progress as this will enable timeous identification of obstacles to strategy implementation. Organizations must pay attention to strategy implementation activities such as timelines, information and control systems, performance evaluation and incentives. Performance indicators should include both quantitative and qualitative measures.

1. Introduction

Within the strategic management field, there has been a significant research focus on strategic planning, formulation and process [1]. Strategy implementation has been a neglected research area and emphasize that numerous studies acknowledge that strategies frequently fail not because of inadequate strategy formulation but because of insufficient implementation [2]. Strategy implementation is even more difficult than strategy formulation [3]. Organizations normally believe that once a plan is finalised and agreed upon and employees are clear what to do, then it will be implemented [4]. However, this is not necessarily the case.

Good strategies depend on good implementation but 70% of change initiatives fail [5]. Furthermore it was pointed out that execution cannot succeed unless the strategy itself is designed to be executable. A global survey found that 80% of executives are satisfied with their strategies formulated yet only 14% are satisfied with the execution of the strategies [4]. Strategy implementation plays a positive role in financial performance [6]. Strategy failure or the strategy-to-performance gap can be attributed to the fact that 95% of employees are unaware of or do not understand their organization's strategy [7]. Often strategy implementation is considered a strategic afterthought [8].

The purpose of this article is to explore strategy implementation activities and obstacles in the South African context. Firstly, the problem statement and objectives of the research project are

provided. A theoretical exposition of strategy implementation and obstacles to strategy implementation will be outlined. Thereafter, the research methodology of the study will be highlighted. The research results will be given, followed by the main conclusions and recommendations and guidelines to successful strategy implementation.

2. Problem statement

A literature search revealed relatively few studies focusing on strategy implementation activities and the impact thereof on their performance, especially in a developing country context. Strategy execution is at the core of business success and forms a foundation for performance competence [9]. In order to achieve outstanding performance, strategy implementation plans must be clearly developed with clear time frames, indicating specific responsibilities for employees and making them accountable for task completion [10]. Based on this information, the aim of this study is to identify whether the extent of strategy implementation activities of the South African organizations could explain organizational performance variations, and to identify perceived obstacles to strategy implementation.

3. Literature overview on strategy implementation success and obstacles

3.1 Strategy implementation success

One must ask the question what are important for effective strategy implementation. Key to successful implementation is commitment, credibility and communication [11]. Aspects relating to corporate business unit relationships that are likely to affect strategy implementation success are business unit autonomy, sharing programs and synergies across Strategic Business Units [2]. The business experience of middle management levels determines their level of support in implementing strategies [12].

If organizations want to improve their performance, implementation activities need to be in place amongst other such as organizational structural changes, communication regarding when and how the strategies will be implemented, incentives to encourage strategy implementation, monitoring to ensure activities are coordinated, setting deadlines for implementation, setting of annual objectives and development of policies to guide implementation process [13]. However, there are limited evidence of the link between implementation styles and performance and suggest that managers should ensure that the implementation style match their strategic orientation [14].

Computerized cognitive aids can be designed to support the strategy execution process and may have a significant positive impact on decision-making efficiency and effectiveness [2]. Effective strategy implementation also requires strategic alignment of employees, processes, resources and departments with a focus on the customer [15]. Organizations should install information and operating systems that enable employees to carry out their operational roles better [16]. For SBUs trying to build market share or to pursue differentiation as a competitive strategy, an open relationship and subjectivity will impact effectiveness [2].

The importance of communication for strategy implementation cannot be enough emphasized; both up and downwards as it can foster shared attitudes and values [17]. Employees must have their new responsibilities, tasks and duties effectively communicated to implement strategies [2]. Information Technology in internal communications is essential for strategy implementation and to build a reputation for the organization [18]. Employees must also be informed about the reasons for the strategic decision.

Strategy implementation success also depends on control systems [2]. Effective strategy implementation requires a measurement process with specific performance indicators linked to strategy implementation activities and actions. Organizations must include both traditional financial and qualitative strategic performance criteria associated with core business processes, customers, employees, organizational learning and innovation [19].

Progress is measured against the metrics to determine successes and critical success factors [20]. In the 1960s and 1970s, strategic performance outcomes were viewed by executives in terms of productivity and an increase in profits. In the 1980s, the focus moved more towards increased operational effectiveness and in the 1990s towards business growth. Twenty first century organizations also include amongst others in their strategic performance outcomes, corporate social responsibility and being responsive to customers' needs [21].

It was found that 37% of organizations do not realize their strategies' full potential financial value [22]. Strategy implementation failure can be defined as the gap between planned activity and enacted activity which may be contributed to problems relating to the actionable plan, not allocating employees with specific tasks with specific objectives, and/or no specific timelines for implementation [23;19]. Organizations often overestimate the time needed to implement strategies [24]. The degree of formalization has a significant positive relationship with performance, but the relationship between performance and planning time horizon, frequency of control and strategic instruments used could not be established [25].

Strategy execution will suffer if employees are rewarded for doing the wrong "things" [2]. Management should provide employees with the necessary resources, put in place a suitable organizational structure and develop effective control systems that will provide timely and valid feedback about organizational performance [26]. Successful strategy implementation also depends on reward systems and requires rewards and incentives tied directly to the achievement of performance objectives [2;16].

These implementation activities are essential in ensuring successful strategy implementation and resultant strategic performance. Strategic performance can be measured multi-dimensional in terms of profit- and sales growth, market share, productivity, liquidity, profitability, value-based management, employee-, customer- and shareholders satisfaction [19].

3.2 Obstacles to strategy implementation

Obstacles to strategy implementation include inadequate leadership in particular direction by departmental managers, insufficiency of employee training, implementation taking place longer than anticipated, inadequate communication, ineffective coordination of implementation and inadequate information systems for control activities [19]. Another obstacle is that strategies are formulated in the strategic plan but no tactics to convert it into action were defined [27]. Strategic planning implementation often fails because [21]:

- Businesses don't understand their own organizational culture;
- Strategic plans has not been adequately executed;
- Executives and other level management do not function as a team;
- No values and culture to support the plans have been developed;
- Of not doing what needs to be done in time;
- Employees do not trust and support each other at the various hierarchical levels; and
- Ethical and legal problems.

A lack of systems that assist in incorporating the various organizational processes, as well as having the technology to implement the systems could lead to strategy implementation failure. With this in mind, this study will attempt to identify perceived obstacles preventing organizations in South African from implementing their strategies.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated to be empirically tested in the study:

H₁: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with profitability performance variances.

- H₂: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with productivity performance variances.
- H₃: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with organizational value performance variances.
- H₄: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with market share performance variances.
- H₅: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with liquidity performance variances.
- H₆: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with customer needs satisfaction performance variances.
- H₇: Strategy implementation success outcome is associated with profitability performance variances.
- H₈: Strategy implementation success variances are related to availability of effective information feedback systems.
- H₉: Strategy implementation success variances are related to availability of team performance accomplishment systems.
- H₁₀: Strategy implementation success variances are related to availability of receiving timeous information.
- H₁₁: Strategy implementation success variances are related to availability of effective control systems to measure progress.
- H₁₂: Strategy implementation success variances are related to availability of apt standards and measures.
- H₁₃: Strategy implementation success variances are related to availability of adequate remuneration systems.

5. Research Methodology

The quantitative research paradigm is utilised in this study. Both a descriptive- and exploratory research approaches are followed to describe and explore the strategy and implementation activities and obstacles of South African organizations. A survey was conducted amongst the target population which include all organizations in Nelson Mandela Metropole, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The non-probability sampling method used in this study is convenience sampling, whereby respondents were chosen due to availability. All respondents were informed that information provided will be treated as confidential and anonymous, if willing to participate. The final sample is 331 respondents.

5.1 Measuring instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was developed based on the literature overview. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A determines the extent of strategy implementation success in terms of no implementation, low-, moderate- and high implementation success with regards to six strategic implementation activities using a five-point Likert scale varying from five strongly agree to one strongly disagree. It also examines the impact of strategy implementation on organizational performance (profitability, productivity, value of the organization, market share, liquidity, addressing customer needs satisfaction and social responsibility) on a scale ranging from strong, moderate to low impact on performance. Frequency of monitoring of the implementation plan was determined with an open-ended question. The obstacles encountered when implementing their strategies were also investigated using nominal scales (yes/no). Section B provides classification data (demographic characteristics) of respondents.

5.2 Data collection

Both secondary and primary data were collected. Fieldworkers were used to distribute and collect the data using the self-administered questionnaires. The fieldworkers received training prior to the

data collection.

5.3 Data analysis

Of the 331 questionnaires received, only 258 questionnaires were usable (response rate = 78%). Thereafter data was edited, coded and transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis and record keeping purposes. The data was analysed by means of the statistical software package Statistica Version 11. Data analysis techniques used are descriptive statistics (e.g. mean and standard deviation) and frequency distributions (percentages) to describe the sample, exploratory factor analysis to determine construct validity, and Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficients to determine internal reliability of the items. Chi-square analysis was used to determine whether significant variances exist between organizations experiencing low, moderate and high strategy implementation success and organizational performance measures as well as the implementation of specific strategic activities.

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 summarizes the biographical data of the organizations and the respondents.

Table 1. Biographical data of organizations and respondents

Biographical data	%	Biographical data	%
Size of organization		Industry	
< 50 employees (small)	53	Food and beverages	15
50 – 200 (medium)	17	Financial services	9
200+ employees (large)	30	Government	1
Entity form		Electrical	2
Sole proprietorship	1	Automotive and components	12
Close corporation	1	Office furniture and equipment	7
Public company	24	Transport	2
Private company	18	Real estate	3
Partnership	43	Health and fitness	2
Trust	8	Building	9
Incorporation	2	Consulting	7
Missing values	3	Clothing and shoes	14
Work experience		Service	3
< 5 years	16	Tourism	3
6 – 10 years	19	Retail	10
11 – 15 years	18	Missing	1
16 – 20 years	11		
20+ years	36		

More than half of the respondents (53%) are employed in small organizations, operating mostly as a partnership (43%). Organizations comprising the sample operate mainly in the following industries: food and beverages (15%), clothing and shoes (14%) and automotive and components (12%). This distribution of organizations is not surprising as the Nelson Mandela Metropole is known for their contribution towards the automotive industry as well as towards the confectionary industry. The respondents have extensive working experience as nearly 65% of the respondents have in excess of 10 years working experience.

6.2 Validity and reliability

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to ensure construct validity as shown in Table 2. The analysis of variance, Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient and basic descriptive statistics are also summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient, mean and standard deviation results

Construct	Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
Strategic implementation activities	SIA4	0.831170	0.122019
	SIA5	0.793013	0.097673
	SIA3	0.730089	0.142654
	SIA2	0.723075	0.068396
	SIA1	0.685448	0.120042
	SIA6	0.608154	0.272460
Organizational performance	BP3	0.132785	0.748099
	BP4	0.018132	0.712395
	BP1	0.189709	0.692506
	BP2	0.359353	0.533103
	BP7	0.264050	0.462276
	BP5	0.047254	0.453755
	BP6	0.362053	0.422954
Percent of variance		27.70	19.75
Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient (Ca)		0.838	0.708
Mean		4.212	3.880
Standard Deviation		0.648	0.526

All the items for the two factors, namely organizational performance and strategic implementation activities, loaded as expected which confirms construct validity. The reliability of the inter-item consistency was confirmed as the Cronbach's alpha values were all greater than 0.7. The mean for the variable *strategy implementation activities* was 4.212, implying that the respondents tend to agree that the strategy implementation activities were in place and applied in the organizations. The mean for the variable *organizational performance* was 3.880, implying that the respondents tend to agree that the intended performance outcomes materialised. The standard deviation scores were 0.648 and 0.526 respectively, indicating not much variance in responses.

6.3 Chi-square results

A Chi-square analysis was conducted to determine whether the extent of selected strategy implementation activities by South African organizations could explain organizational performance variations. The results of the Chi-square analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Chi-square analysis results for strategy implementation success and organizational performance

Item	Scale	Extent of strategy implementation success in %				Chi-square	Df	p-value
		No	Low	Mod	High			
Profitability	Agree	3.74	0.00	22.46	73.80	53.09	6	0.000*
	Uncertain	11.11	1.59	42.86	44.44			
	Disagree	0.00	12.50	37.5	50.00			
Productivity	Agree	4.40	0.55	21.98	73.08	25.69	6	0.000*
	Uncertain	7.58	0.00	42.42	50.00			
	Disagree	10.00	10.00	40.00	40.00			
Organizational value	Agree	5.26	0.88	25.88	67.98	5.007	6	0.543
	Uncertain	7.69	0.00	42.31	50.00			
	Disagree	0.00	0.00	50.00	50.00			
Market share	Agree	2.99	0.00	20.90	76.12	16.79	6	0.010*
	Uncertain	7.00	2.00	35.00	56.00			
	Disagree	12.50	0.00	37.50	50.00			
Liquidity	Agree	4.32	0.00	24.69	70.99	16.64	6	0.011*
	Uncertain	10.29	2.94	36.76	50.00			
	Disagree	0.00	0.00	25.00	75.00			

Customer satisfaction needs	Agree	3.65	0.46	25.57	70.32	22.66	6	0.001*
	Uncertain	17.65	2.94	44.12	35.29			
	Disagree	0.00	0.00	20.00	80.00			
Social responsibility	Agree	4.08	0.00	23.81	72.11	11.37	6	0.078
	Uncertain	7.25	1.45	27.54	63.77			
	Disagree	7.14	2.38	42.86	47.62			

*Statistically significant at a 95% confidence level, $p < 0.05$

From Table 3 it is evident that five of the relationships are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level. Distinct differences were noted between organizations with perceived moderate and high strategy implementation success and increase in performance variables such as profitability, productivity, market share, liquidity and customer needs satisfaction. Therefore, the degree of attainment of these performance measures can be linked to extent of strategy implementation success. There were no statistical differences found between the perceptions of respondents on the extent of strategy implementation success in their organizations and performance variables, organizational value and social responsibility.

Table 4 summarizes the Chi-square analysis results for strategy implementation success and the strategy measurement system used to measure strategy implementation.

Table 4. Chi-square analysis results for strategy implementation success and strategy measurement systems

Item	Scale	Extent of strategy implementation success in %				Chi-square	Df	p-value
		No	Low	Mod	High			
Information systems provide sufficient feedback on activities and performance	Agee	5.36	0.00	20.83	73.81	21.30	6	0.002*
	Uncertain	3.08	1.54	41.54	53.85			
	Disagree	12.00	4.00	40.00	44.00			
Performance results can be linked per area, unit, department, project of function	Agee	3.21	0.00	21.93	74.87	32.11	6	0.000*
	Uncertain	8.33	2.08	43.75	45.83			
	Disagree	17.39	4.35	43.48	34.78			
Information is timeously received	Agee	5.45	0.00	21.21	73.33	46.88	6	0.000*
	Uncertain	1.22	1.22	40.24	57.32			
	Disagree	36.36	9.09	36.36	18.18			
Sufficient control measures ensuring actual performance corresponds with plan	Agee	3.03	0.61	19.39	76.97	53.01	6	0.000*
	Uncertain	5.13	0.00	43.59	51.28			
	Disagree	33.33	6.67	40.00	20.00			
Standards and measures used are suitable	Agee	3.37	0.56	23.03	73.03	44.23	6	0.000*
	Uncertain	4.55	0.00	40.91	54.55			
	Disagree	35.71	7.14	28.57	28.57			
Remuneration system is suitable to identify and reward superior performance	Agee	4.73	0.00	21.62	73.65	18.41	6	0.005*
	Uncertain	2.70	1.35	35.14	60.81			
	Disagree	13.89	2.78	38.89	44.44			

*Statistically significant at a 95% confidence level, $p < 0.05$

It is evident from Table 4 that all the relationships between the six strategy measurement systems and the extent of strategy implementation success are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level. The results show that organizations with moderate and high strategy implementation success differ in respect of having effective information feedback systems in place. Organizations with a high implementation success have more effective information feedback systems than those that obtain moderate implementation success. Differences were also found between moderate and high strategy implementation success and the availability of team performance accomplishment systems, receiving timeous information, effective control systems to measure progress, having apt standards

and measures as well as the availability of adequate remuneration systems. Therefore these results point to the need to ensure that certain strategy implementation activities need to be in place to ensure successful strategy implementation in South African organizations.

6.4 Results of review period of strategic implementation activities

According to the literature, it is imperative for organizations to frequently review strategic implementation activities to ensure that the organization remains on the correct path to fulfil the intended vision and the mission. The results of the review periods as indicated by the respondents are indicated in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency of strategy implementation review

Review period	Frequency	Review period	Frequency
Continuously	24	Trimester	1
Weekly	2	Semi-annually	53
Bi-weekly	2	Annally	95
Monthly	18	3-5 yearly	13
Bi-Monthly	3	Not often	6
Quarterly	38	No response	3

Three non-responses were obtained with regards to review period. According to most respondents strategy implementation reviews take place quarterly, semi-annually or annually. This confirms literature which state that the strategy implementation activities should be review regularly.

6.5 Results of obstacles

Respondents identified various obstacles hindering strategy implementation in their organizations. Table 6 summarizes these obstacles identified by the respondents. It must be noted that respondents could indicate more than obstacle.

Table 6. Obstacles to strategy implementation

Obstacle	Frequency
Staff do not understand job expectations	105
No staff commitment	95
Lack of organizational structure alignment	83
Lack of capital	76
Lack of organizational culture	73
No clearly defined goals and plans	65
Labour strikes	37
Natural disasters	36
Not viable	21
Not feasible	20
Systems	1
Declining market	1

Three of the respondents did not indicate any obstacles preventing them from implementing their strategies. From Table 5 it is evident that the major obstacles to strategic implementation are staff being unclear about their job expectations and lack of staff commitment to execute the strategic plan which could be linked to no clearly defined goals and plans due to ineffectively communication to staff. This may also be the result of lack of staff participation resulting in no buy-in from staff during strategy formulation and implementation. Lack of organizational structure alignment was also indicated as an obstacle which would further impact effective and efficient staff communication to execute strategies. Lack of an open, participative organizational culture also lessens strategy implementation success and increase staff satisfaction which could decrease labour disputes and strikes.

Another prevailing obstacle is the lack of capital. Lack of capital can hinder the expansion and growth of organization. Access to capital is crucial to obtain necessary resources (right quality staff) to execute strategies. Lack of feasible and viable strategy implementation plans could be related to lack of capital. Furthermore, lack of capital translates to the freezing of promotions and new appointments, which can have a severe influence on the staff morale. Staff will see themselves as overworked and underpaid as they will have to do the work of more than one employee. If staff is unmotivated and dissatisfied, it may result in labour disputes and strikes in the organization or even industry as was indicated by 37 respondents as an obstacle to strategy implementation success. In the last few years, the South African economy was disrupted by numerous strikes, especially in the automotive and component and transportation industries.

South Africa has experience a number of natural disasters over the last few years, such as floods, veld fires and droughts, over which organizations have no control. Water restrictions, for example, have an influence on certain activities of organizations and the quality of the water supply may also influence the quality of the products and services delivered to customers. If the quality of products and services do not meet minimum standards, then customer satisfaction may be negatively influenced.

7. Conclusions

Literature indicate that strategic performance can be measured multi-dimensional in terms of profit- and sales growth, market share, productivity, liquidity, profitability, value-based management, employee-, customer- and shareholders satisfaction. The extent of strategy implementation by South African organizations could explain organizational performance variations in profitability, productivity, market share, liquidity and customer needs satisfaction. It is evident that a high rate of strategy implementation success leads to higher performance attainment. It is interesting to note that high performance organizations not only use quantitative performance measures (profitability, productivity, market share and liquidity), but also qualitative performance measures such as increased customer needs satisfaction.

The empirical results confirm literature findings that it is important to ensure that information systems provide accurate, sufficient and timeous information. Furthermore, the results confirmed that teams performance are critical since teams must be committed to the team goal(s), and the various departments within the organization cannot operate on their own as performance results are linked to specific areas, units, departments or projects. The empirical findings also confirm literature findings that proper standards and control measures should be developed after consultation with staff to ensure staff buy-in which will increase staff commitment. The remuneration system should be suitable and adequate for the organization. Further confirmation of literature findings are that staff should be encouraged to make suggestions with regards to the remuneration system and the system implemented must be evaluated to see which have merits with the staff member making the suggestion, and if accepted, receive a token of appreciation.

The results support literature that strategy implementation success is hindered by various obstacles facing organizations. The empirical results indicate that the major obstacles to strategy implementation success are staff that is not clear on what is expected from them and lack of staff commitment. Other obstacles are lack of organizational culture, team work, organizational structure alignment and commitment at all organizational levels as well as not been included in the organizational values and plans. Lack of information control systems is also an obstacle to strategy implementation which may hinder feasible and viable strategy implementation. The results of this study confirmed literature findings indicating that it is important to formulate feasible and viable strategy implementation plans in order to successfully implement strategies.

8. Guidelines to successful implementation

Table 7 highlights some guidelines to successful implementation.

Table 7. Guidelines to successful strategy implementation

No.	Guidelines to successful strategy implementation
1	Establish quantitative performance measures to assess strategy implementation success in terms of profitability, productivity, market share, business value
2	Establish qualitative performance measures to assess strategy implementation success in terms of customer satisfaction and social responsibility
3	Put information systems in place to provide sufficient feedback on activities and performance
4	Link performance results to area, unit, department, project or function
5	Have good communication system to ensure information is timeously received
6	Set up sufficient control measures to ensure actual performance is aligned with plan
7	Put in place suitable standards and measures to guide strategy implementation
8	Design a remuneration system suitable to identify and reward superior performance and avoid labour disputes and strikes
9	Ensure staff are clear about job expectations
10	Obtain staff commitment
11	Align organizational structure to intended strategies
12	Ensure there is adequate capital to obtain necessary resources
13	Instil a positive organizational culture
14	Clearly define goals and plans
15	Ensure strategies are viable and feasible

To conclude: “Strategy implementation requires 3Cs namely, clarify your strategy, communicate your strategy and cascade your strategy. For a strategy to be implemented well, managers must help to translate the elements of the strategy to their functional areas which requires having team and customers meetings, improving the processes, one-on-one coaching, and market responses aligned to the strategy.”[29]

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