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Improving strategy through organizational design
by Angelica Larios
Advisory

Improving strategy through organizational design in I.T. consulting firms [1]

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Our days are pretty common to listen to questions such as defining strategy, having a strategy set of minds, making strategical decisions, etc. This type of terminology is expected in the business arena; however, when the concept of strategy realizes its importance, it becomes revealed that the idea is highly discussed and poorly understood.

A strategy is concerned with the creation and direction, alignment, and commitment needed to achieve the enduring performance potential of the organization. The strategy could be understood in two different but complementary aspects: thinking or conceptualizing and making the strategy. In other words, it is to determine the course of action that the organization should take according to its vision, mission, and goals that allow the organization to succeed and to endure.

On the other hand, there is implementing the decided strategical way, designing the structure, process, people, and incentives to help the strategy go live. It is when it becomes mandatory to implement the best possible way that is already decided regarding strategy. So together, we find a model of organizational design.

When it comes to I.T. consulting firms, organizational design is equally relevant to any other type of business with the difference that I.T. exists in a wholly volatile and constantly changing market. Innovation is crucial in the sector and has marked the industry and somehow the survival and success of the companies. Consulting firms evolve in the knowledge field, is what they sell, and what is focused on. So, both aspects make them unique, and it will be the focus of this paper.

The beginning

The first step before getting into the model of organizational design suggested by Burton, Obel & Håkonsson (2015) is to understand what the organization does and what the goals are searching for. The importance is to be aligned with the mission, vision, and organizational values that might vary from entity to entity. I.T. consulting firms, in general, have a core mission to benefit others from the use of the specific technology they develop, manufacture, use or recommend.

When discussing a consulting firm, the primary product is a service offered ideally with the best-qualified professionals who know the recommended technology. That will help the customer move to the next level in whatever needs they might have. So, an I.T. consulting firm should have in their mission, vision, and goals the aspects that deliver

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others the best technology possible at the moment with the best potential technicians or I.T. professionals.

Organizations in this industry have to review where they have located regarding goals, either efficiency or effectiveness oriented or even better in this sector, it is necessary to have focused on both aspects. Firms in this quadrant confront competitive, complex, and volatile environments that require both product innovations and low cost to compete successfully. Both high efficiency and high effectiveness will demand high information processing capacity. But the means to create the ability are very different. I.T. consulting organizations should leverage their knowledge and I.T. practices to implement efficiency/effectiveness goals better.

Assessing Strategy

Strategy

Burton et al. have stated that, as mentioned, a strategy is the operationalization of the firm's goals and efficiency and or effectiveness; and the structure is the means to achieve them. Achieving high performance in business results from establishing and maintaining a fit among three elements: the strategy of the firm, its organizational design, and the environment in which it operates. (Roberts, 2004).

Reviewing the organization's strategy should be aligned with the organization's goals, whether it becomes a reactor, defender, prospector, or analyzer without or with innovation. The I.T. industry is, by definition, an industry focused on innovation, an exploration strategy type of industry-focused on discovering new products or new ways of doing things, improving current outcomes, enhancing features, etcetera. At the same time as searching for new ideas, the industry mandates to exploit what is already developed and working fine in the market, either an actual product or service and profit it for at least some years.

The analyzer with innovation is a dual strategy combining aspects of both a defender and a prospector. It exploits its current position of resource utilization and market position. At the same time, it adopts an active innovation strategy of developing new products, services, and their delivery process. A consulting I.T. firm should search for this type of strategy in their organization.

Environment

The environment is everything outside the boundary of the organizational unit of analysis, the firm or the organization. The environment thus refers to the forces surrounding an organization that may impact its performance. For the firm as a whole, the environment usually is the competitive marketplace. It is being said that the strategy depends on the environment, and the environment affects the selected strategy; that is why it is so important to consider.

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The characterization's environment concerning complexity and uncertainty is essential and relevant because both increase the organization's information processing demand. If there is a high degree of complexity, more elements must be monitored, and the effect of change must be estimated. If there is a high degree of uncertainty, more plans may have to be established, and a higher degree of flexibility may be needed.

So, two dimensions are the main aspects of the environment, complexity and unpredictability. Complexity is measured as the number of factors in an organization's environment and their interdependency. Unpredictability is the lack of understanding or ignorance of the environment concerning the nature of the elements and their variance; more significant variance means shorter predictability.

Assessing the environment again will depend on the specific circumstances of each company. However, there are some general aspects to be considered; for example, if the company does its business in the political environment being a supplier, then the background is varied, which means complex for many factors to consider that can be interdependent. They fit in other cases such as direct competitors, companies that depend on only one primary supplier or commercial partner, and commercial conditions. The financial and economic environment becomes volatile, where human resources are not natural to be obtained or not well-developed or trained or specialized enough; where there is a price war to see whom the competition sells cheap. Where quality is highly required and where financial conditions are not in place are many factors to consider. Some of them are interrelated, that the environment becomes varied.

A locally rugged environment is analogous to the prediction of rain with a 0.5 probability for a farmer; the environment is highly unpredictable but not very complicated. There are a few factors in the background that are relatively independent, but they are unexpected. Unexpected means that the response time in which the organization has to react is much shorter than if the environment were predictable. In a predictable environment, a firm has time to plan for the future. Still, in an unpredictable situation, the peak information requirement is much higher, as you have to do many things when the unforeseen factors in the environment suddenly become known.

Software developers or manufacturers might be in a locally rugged environment that competes with individual competitors in other industries such as gaming, phones, or others, making the environment not complex but highly unpredictable.

The turbulent environment has both sides complexity and unpredictability high. A turbulent climate requires an organization to have a significant and fast information-processing capacity to choose among alternative courses of action for the organization quickly.

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• **Assessing the Structure**

The configuration of the firm

The choice of a firm's configuration is sometimes called its structure or architecture, which relevance stays in the fact that will enable the organization to perform well for its given goals and strategy in its environment. The firm's configuration or organization is commonly pictured as an organizational chart, tells us how the firm partitions big tasks into smaller tasks either by specialization or product, and then indicates the formal communication patterns.

In the organization design, two fundamental dimensions have been used to distinguish the necessary configurations: product/service/customer orientation and functional specialization. The product/services/customer dimension suggests that the entire firm task will be partitioned by the entity's outputs, which gives it an external focus.

In the I.T. consulting firms, the matrix configuration seems to be a very productive way of configuration that enables the company to be focused on efficiency and effectiveness at the same time. The matrix configuration (focus on both product/service/customer and function specialization) works fine in a turbulent environment with the dual goal of efficiency and effectiveness. The analyzer strategy goes well with the matrix configuration since the analyzer position, either with or without innovation, helps the organization focus on the exploitation of existing business and the exploration of the innovation or technology enhancement, where the effectiveness of new ideas and products is crucial.

When both efficiency and effectiveness are needed, the matrix configuration is an appropriate choice. Therefore, the matrix is often suitable when environments are unpredictable and complex – it provides opportunities for functional specialization and divisional adaptation, which, depending on the size of the company and the environmental requirements, could work very well in an I.T. consulting firm.

New organizational forms

New organizational forms are changes or modifications of the traditional ways of the organization along four dimensions: task division, task allocation, provision of rewards, and the provision of awards and the provision of information. It has become common to hear about this new organizational form resulting from pressures from new technology and new ways of working in an increasingly global economy.

Optimal sourcing refers to the decision to locate operations globally that brings the most significant advantage to the firm regarding customer contact, cost efficiency, human resource skill need, or other objectives. Local responsiveness refers to distributing work in many locales versus consolidating positions in a few centralized locations.

This optimal sourcing and local responsiveness represent trade-offs in organizational design that correspond to the firm exploitation and exploration strategies, according to

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these four types of distributed (1) global; (2) international; (3) multi-domestic; and (4) transnational. Existing some relation to the kind of the structure; global correspond to a simple configuration, international to the functional, multi-domestic to divisional and transnational corresponding to the matrix.

These new ways of operating in a consulting firm will have a relationship with the company's size and overall the geography presence of the intention of expansion. These concepts are not directly implicated in business consulting or I.T. This is more external or outsourcing aspects related, such as providing foreign programmers located in India because of the cost-benefit delivered to the business. Suppose the firm is in the local market with a local presence. In that case, it is to say that that will not make so much sense in the global quadrant unless the company is big enough, such as Microsoft, IBM, Oracle, or SAP that might think concerning transnational organizations that yield both the location advantage of regional or country-based design and the economic efficiencies of optimal sourcing.

These new organizational forms also analyze the number of external agreements the consulting I.T. firm could have for external activities or people. Firms engage individuals' specialists in several aspects such as I.T., law, accounting, and others that are not well developed inside the organization and are not the core of their business. For example, an I.T. consulting firm might need accounting or law services but not be part of their headcount and payroll. That also happens with external activities that could bring formal or informal contracts for products and services, such as leasing equipment.

- **Assessing the Process and People**

Task design

As the implementation of the selected strategy continues, it is vital to design the task; it is to say the decomposing work into sub-tasks while considering the coordination among the sub-tasks to meet organizational goals.

Scott and Davis (2006) described task design along three dimensions: the complexity of items requiring simultaneous consideration; uncertainty or unpredictability; and interdependency, where a change in one requires a change in another thing. In the task design of any organization, these two aspects have to be considered, repetitiveness and divisibility. This category results in the following categories: orderly, complicated, fragmented, and knotty. The orderly task design is highly divisible and highly repetitive; it requires relatively little coordination among the sub-tasks to accomplish the work. The complicated task design is not very divisible but is highly repetitive. It needs more coordination of the related and repetitive tasks. The fragmented task design is highly divisible but not very repetitive, and the knotty task design is neither divisible nor repetitive.

Thinking in our example case of the I.T. consulting firm, inside the software development business trying to grow. The needs of their customers are entirely different, so they are

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not repetitive, and the specific work of each sub-unit is independent of one and the other; this represents a fragmented design task type of organization.

People

"An enterprise is its people," stated Matsushita Konosuke, founder of Panasonic and well-known and recognized entrepreneur and philosopher Japanese, and in my opinion, he is right. People are fundamental to any entity in the world; no matter the purpose, orientation, mission, vision, strategy, etc., people are the heart and soul of any organization.

Regarding people, the organization needs to think about the size and capabilities of the firm. The size of the labor pool and the degree of professionalization (skills, knowledge, and capacity to generate and process information) are factors in the design of people for the organization.

So, the possible combinations concerning the number of employees and the professional degree or level of each possibility are a shop, factory, laboratory, and office. The shop approach involves employing a few people who are low on professionalization. Factory, manage people involving hiring many individuals who are deficient in professionalization. The laboratory approach to managing people consists in employing a few people, each with high professionalization. Professional routines obtained through extensive education, training, and experience allow relative independence among the individuals or small collections of individuals. An I.T. consulting firm could fit the laboratory type of people design since specific profiles are required for the particular service offered. It could be that the consulting firm is not that big but has to invest in developing and training specific skills besides the level of education or experience.

Finally, the official approach to managing people involves employing many people with high professionalization. This type of organization is focused on efficiency and effectiveness. Large consulting organizations have highly skilled professionals who must be coordinated in intricate detail to meet the client's needs; this could also be the case of an I.T. consulting firm with significant dimensions.

Leadership and organizational climate

According to Burton, Obel, & Håkonsson (2015), leadership style and organizational climate are two of the most widely used, debated, and researched concepts in management. Their importance stays in the fact that there are two sides to how the people in the organization think and act. The leadership style is the predominant model used by the company's top management, department, area, entity, or the entire organization. The organizational climate is the internal environment or working atmosphere as experienced by corporate employees.

The leadership style can be summarized in two main aspects; one is decision-making preferences that are a function of a leader's choice for delegation and, on the other hand, the tendency to avoid uncertainty. Combining these two aspects results in four leadership

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style categories, maestro, manager, leader, and producer. Maestro has a low preference for delegation and low uncertainty avoidance. The manager has high uncertainty avoidance and little choice for the panel. The leader has a high priority for delegation and low uncertainty avoidance. The producer has a high preference for delegation and scores high on uncertainty avoidance.

As it has been analyzed, the I.T. consulting firm works in an environment that requires a focus on efficiency and effectiveness at the same time. That faces many challenges in a turbulent environment, and that one requirement or assumption is the innovation process. The producer type of leadership for the entire company would be recommended since this leader is focused on both efficiency and effectiveness. If the firm has this type of leadership, it is likely to be well-positioned vis-à-vis its competitors. The producer also ensures that new products and services are developed and introduced; the focus is on both sides, short-term and long-term.

Concerning organizational climate is the relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of an organization that its members experience, influences their behavior, and can be described regarding the values of a particular set of characteristics or attitudes of the organization. According to Burton, Obel, & Håkonsson (2015), there are two aspects to consider to assess the organizational climate. Tension is defined as the degree of stress or a psychological edge in the work atmosphere. These include trust, conflict, morale, rewards, leader credibility, and scapegoating. On the other hand, it is a readiness to change, which is the degree to which the people in the organization are likely to shift direction or adjust their work habits to meet new, unanticipated challenges.

With organizational climate, four types of configuration can be obtained: a group, internal process, developmental goal, and reasonable goal. The group climate is characterized by low readiness to change and few events of high tension. The internal process climate is characterized by increased pressure and humble willingness to change. The developmental environment has low stress and increased readiness to change. The last one is the rational goal climate that has high tension and high readiness to change. Emotional reactions to such environments are anger, anxiety, and distress. Depending on where the company is located with the rest of the aspects and what the strategy is focused on, I would suggest that an I.T. consulting firm focus on developmental or rational goals climates. The developmental seems to be a great place to work in, and that would rest much tension in the developers or programmers while at the same time the focus on effectiveness will grow. The other possibility is the reasonable goal that is focused on efficiency and energy. Still, it might result in unnecessary tension and a detrimental performance not recommended for the type of business.

- **Analyzing coordination, control, and incentives**

Coordination, control, and information and knowledge systems

Aligning the entire company with its goals and strategy implies the review of several aspects. It was enlisted people and process are equally important, and the coordination, control, information, and knowledge systems help the organization work together in

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harmony. Coordination, power, and information and knowledge systems support the organization's integration. They provide monitoring and support for decision-making so that managers can anticipate and react to internal and external changes requiring organizational adjustments.

Coordination and control systems are methods for linking together the otherwise disparate elements of the organization's structure and supporting responsiveness to change in the environment or task demands. Information and knowledge systems are methods for providing meaningful data to decision-makers. Both systems can be considered the organization's infrastructure, which facilitates the healthy integration of the organization's structure, the functioning of its business process, and interactions among its people. On the other hand, information and knowledge systems will provide the data necessary for operating coordination and control systems.

For coordination and control systems, formalization is a measure to help us identify where the entity is; this formalization is the degree to which the organization specifies a set of rules or codes to govern how work is done. The other dimension is decentralization which is the degree to which decision-making authority and responsibility for coordination and control lies in the sub-units of the firm and individual managers, rather than corporate headquarters or one specific level of the hierarchy. This combination results in four coordination and control quadrants, family, machine, market, and clan or mosaic.

Family is both formalization and decentralization low, then coordination and control systems are designed to rely on informal and centralized means of control. There are few written rules and procedures, and people know what to do based on what they are told. The machine has an emphasis on the high degree of formalization and a high degree of centralization. In machine, the model has considerable attention to how work should be done, how it should be monitored, and how feedback and correction systems should be designed.

The market model for the design of coordination and control systems emphasizes low formalization and high decentralization. It is to say that informal approaches to setting expectations and detecting difficulties occur through training, custom, and everyday interaction. The clan is considered when decentralization and formalization are both high.

An I.T. consulting firm could select either a market or a clan approach to design coordination and control systems. The market is more innovation-oriented and leaves employees to relate to each other more freely, being less formal and trusting in the assignment they have in mind. Companies such as Google or Yahoo have been very famous for this laissez-faire way of coordinating. The other possibility could be that the clan moves for high formalization and decentralization, which simultaneously fosters efficiency and effectiveness. Job descriptions and procedures are all written down and help employees understand how to do day-to-day activities, but at the same time, business units are more in control of their own decisions.

Information and knowledge systems are related to the amount of information shared and the tacit nature. The quadrants are event-driven, data-driven, people-driven, and

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relationship-driven. Event-driven emphasizes a person-to-person contact or interaction for small groups to share knowledge as needed; this works fine with small companies. What is required is an email.

A data-driven approach is appropriate when there are high volumes of information to be processed, detailed, and delivered timely for decision-makers. People-driven is highly in tacit knowledge but low in the book, emphasizing the capture, processing, and transfer of data embedded in people's minds and actions. Face-to-face meetings are a classic type of information system for sharing this knowledge; phone conversations, rich online media, videoconferences, and other types of systems help this design. Finally, relationship-driven combines data and people-driven; it is combined with information-intensity and the boundary-spanning approach.

From an I.T. consulting company standpoint, software selection or implementation should not be a problem because of the nature of the business; however, data-driven and people-driven are equally essential and adapt well for the kind of the business. It is vital to control the sales and the projects in several aspects such as finance, advance, performance, customer satisfaction, etcetera. Also, the interaction of the people among them, the face-to-face meetings inside and outside, to deliver updates on the status and share information inside the company for maintaining the business is equally important.

Incentives

Incentives are related to what you give to individuals or groups to make decisions and take actions that fit well with the other design characteristics and help meet organizational goals. Incentives support the firm's infrastructure of coordination, control, and information and knowledge systems and thus help to ensure that work tasks are executed and organizational goals can be achieved.

Incentives are means or instruments designed to encourage specific actions or behavior on employees or a group of employees. Incentives are not just the objective set of rewards offered by the firm but also how people interpret the rewards and act on the rewards provided by the firm. Monetary rewards in salaries, wages, and benefits are incentives, but they are not the only ones. People respond to praise, acceptance, a sense of belonging, and recognition of self-worth.

The type of incentives about strategy are personal pay, skill pay, bonus-based, profit sharing-gain sharing. Private pay incentives individual compliance with rules or directives instead of results or outcomes on an individual basis. Skill payment or position-based incentives are the development of specific skills or expertise or seniority instead of results. Bonus-based incentive systems focus on the behavior of results. Goals are set for employees and rewards that support the achievement of organizational goals and performance. Profit or gain sharing focuses on compensation tied to outcomes rather than behaviors but on group performance and not just individual performance.

There are "no cure no pay" types of contracts in the consulting business, helping the organization emphasize the importance of results. Consulting companies are generally

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customer-oriented, and the income depends on the invoice and payment from the customer that is also tied to satisfaction or project advance. Either bonus-based system oriented to accomplished projects and customer satisfaction will work as an incentive. If the customer is not satisfied and has no pay, employees won't receive any compensation or salary. The profit or gain sharing is another effective way to incentivize group performance that would fit I.T. consulting firms to work toward the same goals and strategies.

• **Designing the architecture**

After diagnosing all elements or components of the organizational design, there are two remaining processes to follow: creating the architecture and the sequence of change and implementing the new architecture and evolution.

Designing the architecture and the sequence of change

Designing the new architecture for an organization represents an opportunity to align goals and strategies elected and optimize the short-term and essential long-term performance. There will be changes and fits and misfits among all steps already studied; what is critical is to understand where the organization is and where it wants to be. Start-ups commonly remain in quadrant A for some time, and when the growth starts, misfits also start, moving then to a functional configuration as it grows or is divisional. If more prominent is probably a matrix, it will depend on many factors whether the company should move back or not.

When the entity has components that fall within the typologies of the same quadrant, there is no need to change because there are none or few misfits. On the opposite side, when the firm's components fall across the four quadrants, there are many misfits, and a redesign is required for alignment.

Re-alignment an organization no matter what the industry is or what type of business do, in our case, it has been studied an I.T. consulting company but could be any type. The difficulties for change and fixing misfits are two important ones; the first is that misfits are easier than others to correct. The second, fixing misfits, is not a simple linear procedure; once one misfit is fit, it could create another one.

As discussed during this document, all suggestions for an I.T. consulting company have remained inside the quadrant D or probably C; however, it will be different if it is a start-up company, a middle size, or a huge corporation. It will depend on the current status and the goals and strategy the consulting is searching for; there are no one-size-fits-all feet.

• **Implementing the architecture**

Implementing the change

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The change is realized as a project-based change management type of project. It is to say that a change management project will specify the what, who, and when of each step or change. What needs to be fixed is the optimal sequence and who will be responsible for each activity. In this way, the project is treated like any other project, defining the scope, planning, executing, controlling, and closing while managing the time, cost, scope, risks, communications, acquisitions, resources, and the necessary integration to correctly accomplish the change.

Many implementations plans of this type fail because they are not adequately communicated inside the organization. When delays occur, when risks appear when the deadline is missed, or any other consideration, communication is vital to the success of the change implementation. Communication will help progress be visible and follow-up activity consistent but will ensure employee involvement.

Conclusion

After reviewing the organizational design model proposed by Burton, R. M., Obel, B., & Håkonsson, D. D. (2015), it is evident that possibilities and combinations are exponential, representing a significant challenge to think and implement the selected strategy. However, the model comes with a practical step-by-step approach to help people apply this type of assessment even with no previous experience. After each phase, it will be discovered either where the organization is or where it will be in the future.

Any change in the variables considered initially will have to be revisited and has to be some thinking in how to get back to the starting point or move to the following step. There will be misfits in the entire process and during the business's existence; however, being aware of the presence of the misfit and the possible cause of alienation will help executives get back on track.

Sometimes misfit is necessary when the firm is growing or facing certain adjustments that will move business as usual for a better place in the market or the industry. As long as the organization is aware of the misfit and understands the several elements to be aligned, there will be a base to help the decision-making process and refocus on the strategy and the structure accordingly.

After assessing all thirteen elements, there is a step for thinking and determining what and how the new architecture will look like and what the changes need to be done. It is a careful study and investment of time and energy because most companies won't stop their operation while changing into a new direction. Thinking about the unique architecture before making any changes and considering costs will help the implementation of the architecture more beneficial.

For project managers it is beneficial to be aware and have an understanding on how to implement a strategy and organizational design, whether you participate directly or indirectly, project management is always and ally on strategy matters.

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Angelica Larios, MBA, PMP, is a project manager with more than 20 years of experience in implementing software projects related to business intelligence, planning and budgeting, and financial consolidation solutions based on software applications to support the business decision process. She is the owner of ALACONTEC, an I.T. consulting company founded in Latin America. She has held several professional positions in private and public organizations, such as the Health Ministry in Mexico as an I.T. director and a business manager for several Mexican firms.

She holds a master's degree in business administration and a bachelor's degree in computer science from the National University of Mexico (UNAM) in addition to her studies in project management and her Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification, which have helped her to consolidate her career and have a better understanding of what businesses and projects need nowadays. She is a doctoral candidate in strategic leadership at Regent University, VA; she has been a volunteer since 2007, starting in the local Mexico chapter, being Past President, and in several positions within PMI (CMAG, VBAC, EMAG) that supports the PMI Global Operations. Angelica has been elected as a member of BOD of the ILA (International Leadership Association) (2021-2024).

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