

MacIntosh, Robert; MacLean, Donald; Seidl, David

Working Paper

## Strategy Workshops and Strategic Change

Discussion Paper, No. 2008-04

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

University of Munich, Munich School of Management

*Suggested Citation:* MacIntosh, Robert; MacLean, Donald; Seidl, David (2008) : Strategy Workshops and Strategic Change, Discussion Paper, No. 2008-04, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Fakultät für Betriebswirtschaft, München, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5282/ubm/epub.2145>

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10419/104494>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

# Strategy Workshops and Strategic Change

Robert MacIntosh, Donald MacLean and David Seidl

Discussion Paper 2008-04

January 2008



Munich School of Management

University of Munich

Fakultät für Betriebswirtschaft

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Online at <http://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de>

## Strategy Workshops and Strategic Change

Robert MacIntosh  
Department of Management  
University of Glasgow  
Gilbert Scott Building  
Glasgow G12 8QQ  
[r.macintosh@lbss.gla.ac.uk](mailto:r.macintosh@lbss.gla.ac.uk)

Donald MacLean  
Department of Management  
University of Glasgow  
Gilbert Scott Building  
Glasgow G12 8QQ  
[d.maclea@mgt.gla.ac.uk](mailto:d.maclea@mgt.gla.ac.uk)

David Seidl  
University of Munich  
Institute of Strategic Management  
Ludwigstr. 28  
80539 Munich  
[seidl@strategic-management.de](mailto:seidl@strategic-management.de)

**Working paper**

## Strategy Workshops and Strategic Change

### **Abstract**

Despite the attention that strategic change as a topic of research has received, there remain considerable difficulties in conceptualizing the actual sources of strategic change. Strategy workshops represent one obvious and explicit research site since organizations often use such events as a means of effecting or initiating strategic change. This paper examines empirical data from ninety-nine strategy workshops in ten separate organizations to address the research question: Do strategy workshops produce strategic change? The paper concludes that workshops can produce change but that one-off workshops are much less effective than a series of workshops. The data presented indicates that the elapsed duration of the entire series of workshops, the frequency of workshops, the scope and autonomy of the unit concerned, and the seniority of participants have an impact on the success or failure of the venture.

**KEYWORDS:** Co-production of Knowledge; Engaged Scholarship; Strategic Change; Strategy as Practice; Strategy Workshops

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the attention that strategic change has received within the strategy research community, there remain significant difficulties in conceptualising the actual means through which change is achieved. From the research literature, much is known about conditions commonly associated with change, e.g. crises (Arthaud-Day et al, 2006) or organizational slack (Bourgeois, 1981), yet we know very little about the practice of effecting strategic change. Change can be traced back to external inputs such as changes in the composition of the top management team (e.g. Clark and Starkey 1988; Grinyer and Spender 1979b; Grinyer et.al. 1988; Johnson 1992; Child and Smith 1987; Grinyer and McKiernan 1990; Lant et al. 1992) or to the involvement of external consultants (e.g. Mezias et al. 2001; Pettigrew 1985), which bring with them new strategic practices and cognitive frames to replace the existing ones. Often strategic change is also explained as (more or less) a direct consequence of institutional changes in the organization's environment (e.g. Child 1997; Lounsbury 2001).

Difficulties in conceptualising strategic change have given rise to concerns with both the subject matter and methodological orientation of strategy research. As regards the latter, there has been a growing interest in new modes of knowledge production (Huff, 2000) or engaged scholarship (Van de Ven and Johnson 2006) which in this paper are expressed as a particular combination of mode 2 management research (MacLean et al. 2002) and multiple case-study methods appropriate to the study of project dynamics (e.g. Brown and Eisenhardt 1997). In terms of subject matter, frustrations about the adequacy of strategy theory have driven senior scholars to call for significant developments in strategy theorising. Porter appealed for a dynamic theory of strategy, more able to address the challenges faced by practitioners (Porter, 1991). Schendel drew

attention to the growing, and unhelpful, split between content and process (Schendel, 1992). In a similar vein, Pettigrew recognised the need for the meaningful integration of formulation and implementation (1992). Hamel and Prahalad (1996) urged us to break free of limitations of existing mindsets whilst, more recently, Mir and Watson have argued for the adoption of a constructivist orientation (Mir and Watson, 2000).

One observable response to such calls, particularly in Europe, has been a shift in the focus of attention from macro level studies of firms in their markets towards more micro level studies. This is variously described as the study of micro-strategy, strategizing (Johnson et al, 2003) or strategy as practice (Hendry, 2000; Whittington, 2006; Balogun et al., 2007). Taking interest in what managers actually do has a long tradition in the strategy process field starting with the seminal studies of Mintzberg (1973). Yet, in contrast to earlier research on organizational practices (Dalton, 1959; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982) that emphasized the informal side of managerial work, this so-called strategy-as-practice approach – while acknowledging the importance of emergence – is calling for a re-appreciation of the role of formal strategic practices (Whittington 2003: 118). Researchers have consequently started to look into the organizational effects of various formal practices such as formal administrative routines (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2001; Jarzabkowski 2003; 2005) or strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2006).

Recently, attention has begun to centre on the role of strategy workshops in overt attempts to effect strategic change. A survey of 1300 UK managers established that strategy workshops were a common occurrence in modern organizational life (Hodgkinson et al. 2006). The survey indicated that some 90% of such workshops last two days or less and that 73% take place away from the organization's premises.

Hendry and Seidl (2003) argued that it is this separation between workshop activity and the usual day-to-day activities that enable the participants to step out of their established routines and mindsets in order to critically reflect on the organization's strategic orientations. This has fuelled interest in the nature of the workshop experiences for the participants (e.g. Schwarz and Balogun, 2007). Adopting a view of such events as highly ritualistic (Bourque and Johnson, 2007), arguments have been developed that strategy workshops do not always have positive outcomes (Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002), that they are virtually meaningless (Mintzberg, 1994: 108) and that whilst such workshops might represent a "heightened experience" for the participants, "the very separation and anti-structure that they foster may hinder the transfer of ideas and plans back to the everyday work situation." (Johnson et al, 2006: 27). Johnson and his colleagues use a single vignette to illustrate the point that despite explicit intention to follow through the actions agreed at an off-site strategy workshop, little actually happened (also argued in Bourque and Johnson, 2007). This is in contrast to a study by Schwarz and Balogun (2007) who reported on workshop activities with substantial effects on the strategic directions of the organizations involved. This begs the obvious question: why do some workshops produce change while others do not? A potential explanation is revealed by a closer examination of these two studies. While Johnson and his colleagues refer to *one-off* workshops, the study by Balogun and Schwarz involves *series* of workshops. Yet, a systematic analysis of the differences in outcomes between single and multiple workshops is yet to be conducted.

Turning then to the focus of this paper, we address an obvious question: do strategy workshops produce strategic change? Unpacking this question immediately throws up subsequent questions. First is a definitional problem, what do we mean by a workshop? Second, what do we mean by strategic change? Third, what causal implications are

called to mind when the verb “produce” is used in this context. Before moving forward, short answers to all three questions are required.

In this paper, we take strategy workshops to be explicitly identified events which occur outside of the normal schedule of business meetings in the organization. This definition is particularly important when considering a series of strategy workshops since it allows one to distinguish between a sequence of gatherings where the specific intent relates to the strategy workshop from other meetings or gatherings that would occur anyway in the normal conduct of the organization’s business. Our second definitional problem related to strategic change. The express intention of these workshops is to effect some significant and consequential change to the organization’s existing strategy which may be observed in terms of such phenomena as the nature of the products or services offered, the segments or customers targeted, the mission and scope of the organization, the managerial structures and processes used in the organization, etc. A useful short hand that we have used elsewhere is to describe this as a shift in the organization’s archetype (MacIntosh and MacLean, 1999). Finally, in defining what we mean when we ask whether strategy workshops can *produce* change, we postulate that teams of managers (or others for that matter) can instigate a process which is intended to effect significant strategic change or reorientation. Elsewhere we have problematized the notion of rational managerial action (MacIntosh and MacLean, 1999; MacLean et al 2002). We are sympathetic to Chia’s observation of the “inherent dynamic complexities and intrinsic indeterminacy of organizational transformation processes” (1999: 210). Hence, we would acknowledge that the causal mechanisms that *produce* some organizational changes are not easily traced back to specific events. We are also happy to acknowledge that, even in circumstances where change is explicit and intended outcome of a workshop, any change which subsequently occurs may or may not be



precisely (or indeed remotely) what was imagined at the outset of the process. However, in this paper the focus of our inquiry is simply whether organizations appear to change in any significant way in those circumstances where management teams express the publicly stated desire to do so and pursue such desires through activities involving single or multiple strategy workshops.

## **RESEARCH SETTING**

The empirical material discussed in this paper was collected as part of a research programme conducted with a network of firms operating in the UK. The research draws on a study of ninety-nine strategy workshops conducted within a set of ten organizations over a five year period. The first and second author of this paper acted both as facilitators and action researchers in these workshops and, in each case, these strategy workshops dealt with an explicit desire, on the part of at least some of the participants, to change the organizations concerned. The organizations participating in the research were drawn from a range of small and larger private sector firms and a variety of public sector organizations. Some of the larger multi-national organizations were not UK-based and in these cases our research was conducted with UK-based subsidiaries or production facilities. All of the smaller private sector firms and the public sector organizations were UK-based. As a backdrop to the strategy workshops conducted within the organizations, there was a research network where senior managers from each organization would meet bi-monthly to share experiences and discuss findings from the research.

The research process was longitudinal since the network ran over a five-year period. Over the duration of the study, strategic change processes varied from changes in

ownership, to mergers and re-engineering projects. Tables 1 and 2 provides an overview of the ten organizations, the workshops conducted and contextual factors which affected the change processes.

-----  
Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here  
-----

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

For many years, the management research community has debated the relative merits of different research designs. Recently, such debates have centered on the processes of knowledge production (Starbuck, 2006), in part because descriptions of new forms of scientific endeavor have risen to prominence (e.g. Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). Alongside more traditional-science approaches (labeled mode 1), Gibbons et al., point to the emergence of new ways of producing knowledge (labeled mode 2) “characterized by a constant flow back and forth between ... the theoretical and the practical ... [where] discovery occurs in contexts where knowledge is developed for, and put to use, while results which would have been traditionally characterized as applied - fuel further theoretical advances” (1994: 9). A number of scholars have called for greater use of mode 2 research in the management field (see Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Pettigrew et al, 2001). For a detailed account of mode 2 and its relation to mode 1 as regards management research methods, the reader is referred to the Special Issue of the *British Journal of Management* (2001 Vol 1(1)) and for our particular expression of it in practice to (MacLean et al. 2001; MacLean and MacIntosh, 2002).

Given our focus on strategy workshops and their effectiveness, we chose to adopt a research design which drew insights from both modes of knowledge production as argued by Huff (2000) and by Huff and Huff (2001). In terms of mode 1 research, we followed an approach based on the multiple case method used by Brown and Eisenhardt (1997), which was in turn a development of Yin's earlier work (1984). The ten organizations considered here were treated independently and a narrative account (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001) was prepared for each describing both organizational change experience(s) and the workshop(s) which had been conducted as part of that process. This formal research process might be described as "research on" practice and, given the lead role played by the academic researchers, is closer to mode 1 than mode 2. However, each of these narrative accounts was subsequently shared within the wider network of firms participating in the study (subject to the use of confidentiality agreements to deal with any commercial or other sensitivities). This meant that the study incorporated a high degree of reflexivity (Alvesson, 2003) because researchers and managers from other firms could comment upon accounts of change and workshop experiences from each of the cases.

As a complement to this mode 1 style of research, we also conducted a more highly-engaged, mode 2 form of research. We were influenced here by Boje's observation that context is essential for interpreting narratives that occur in organizational settings and that without participating in the organization that contextualizes a narrative, meaning is difficult if not impossible to grasp (1991). We were sympathetic to Hill et al.'s call for increased usage of forms of research where "closeness to, even involvement with, the objects of study is required." (1999: 144) In the ten organizations studied, two of the authors also played an active role as contributors by leading the strategy workshops that we were also studying. This then, is a form of action research which brings forth a

familiar debate about the relative advantages and disadvantages of such a dual role. Alongside access and insight, come the potential for bias and non-generalisability.

Action research has a long history in the field of management studies (see Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Yet Eden and Huxham, (1996: 78) report that action oriented approaches can experience difficulty in finding acceptance on the grounds that they are “not science”. Conversely, one might argue that recurring criticisms of the irrelevance of management research can be attributed to a reliance on traditional scientific methods that are based on objective distance from the research subject. Our “combined” approach thus constitutes an attempt at responding to both sets of criticism by aiming for the “best of both worlds”.

The data presented in this paper is drawn from ten sets of strategy workshops conducted with ten separate organizations over a five year period. These workshops ranged from one-off events (with Pharma Co and Electronix A) to a series of workshops running over as much as 30 months (with Univ Serv E). In total, the study examined 99 workshops. The duration of the individual workshops ranged from 2 hours to 3 days. In those organizations where more than one workshop was held, we introduce the term “elapsed duration” to denote the total length of time between the first and the final workshops in the series.

In all ten cases we interviewed a minimum of three managers from each organization during the research. In most cases we interviewed the whole management team and in two cases, the whole organization. Hence in addition to the study of 99 strategy workshops, we conducted a total of 63 individual interviews during the study. Our direct involvement in both the research and the strategy development processes within

these ten organizations also afforded us the opportunity to collect a wide range of other primary data as well as secondary data in the form of company documents, reports, minutes, field notes, flipchart records produced during the workshops, etc. Just as importantly, our engaged form of research gave us and our practitioner co-researchers a shared sense of the narrative backdrop which makes interpretation of data meaningful. We also attended key management meetings (i.e. regular meetings held as part of the on-going operation of the organization). The combined effect of our research activities allowed us to develop a level of familiarity with the organizations concerned which would not have been possible using other methods.

Given the longitudinal nature of the study, data analysis did not take place in a single burst. Rather, the data analysis was an on-going activity led by the academic researchers but involving the practitioners in the network at every stage. The process followed was consistent with that set out by Eisenhardt (1989) in that the construction of the individual narrative accounts initiated the within-case analysis. The focus of this within-case analysis was to establish the nature of the strategy workshops which had taken place. As these narrative accounts became available for circulation amongst network members, the cross-case analysis began and engaged all network members. Pairing of cases and refinement of insights happened in a temporally distributed fashion, as new narratives became available. Each new narrative was dissected and compared to other similar and dissimilar cases already in circulation. The focus of the cross-case analysis was to establish whether strategic change was occurring or had occurred in each of the ten organizations participating in the study. The presence of managers from each of the organizations during this process was invaluable since it offered richness, depth, genuine reflexivity and new insight during the theory building process. In many ways

this was far more helpful than the introduction of other researchers to cross-check and validate findings to date.

### **CRITICAL ASPECTS OF WORKSHOP ACTIVITY**

We have examined data from each of the ten organizations where workshops took place. Table 3 sets out some further information on the ninety-nine strategy workshops which were conducted in terms of which organizations were involved, the elapsed duration of those workshops which occurred as part of a series, the frequency of the workshops, the scope and autonomy of the unit concerned, the seniority of the workshop participants and effectiveness as judged on the basis of self-reported outcomes.

In framing each of the workshops, we asked the host organization to specify what “success” would mean at the outset and these statements then provided a comparatively clear set of criteria which we subsequently asked the organizations to use in evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy workshops. Such criteria ranged from processual observations (e.g. more participative decision making in Health Org B) to specific performance improvements (e.g. increase productivity by 25% in Baker A), to organizational issues (e.g. a change in ownership in Sign Up). Many organizations began their change process with more than one stated objective e.g. Health Org B hoped to introduce new areas of activity to its portfolio as well as behave in a more participative way at senior levels.

-----  
Insert Table 3 about here  
-----

In reviewing the data we noted four characteristics in relation to these self-reported outcomes. First, we considered the elapsed duration, which we defined as the time between the start of the first workshop and the end of the series of workshops. Elapsed duration ranged from 1.5 days for the single workshop held with Electronix A, to 30 months in the case of the series of workshops held with Univ Serv E. These elapsed durations are grouped as long, medium and short in Table 3. Second, where more than one workshop took place, the frequency of the workshops was classified. We describe the frequency of workshops as high when the intervals between sessions spanned no more than four weeks. Moderate frequency indicates that workshops took place every 5-10 weeks, whilst low frequency indicates that more than 10 weeks passed between workshops. Using these categories of high, moderate and low, the frequency of the workshops conducted with each organization are noted in Table 3. Third, the organizational scope of the workshops could be considered. Some of the workshops were attempting to achieve change in one part of the organization (such as Univ Serv E) whilst others related to the whole of the organization and some workshops featured high levels of autonomy (e.g. Sign Up) but for others autonomy is described as lower because strategic decisions in the workshop setting had to be ratified or negotiated elsewhere (as was the case in Gas Works). Finally, we considered the participants in the workshop(s). As stated in Table 2, these were typically the directors and senior managers of the organizations concerned though some cases featured middle managers (e.g. Gas Works). In Table 3 we have distinguished between high and low levels of seniority according to whether senior managers were or were not involved in the workshops.

These descriptive categories of the participants, the organizational scope and autonomy of the units concerned, the frequency of the workshops and the elapsed duration of the workshops offered an initial set of dimensions on which cases could be compared with one another and of correlating workshop characteristics with self-reported outcomes.

Referring back to the criteria set out by the organizations, only three of the ten cases produced outcomes which satisfied the prior stated objectives of the workshop(s). In terms of successful self-reported outcomes, the shortest elapsed duration to achieve strategic change was 12 months (in the case of Health Org B). The frequency of the meetings was never below our “moderate” level (Health Org B met every six weeks). Furthermore, the scope and autonomy of the organization or unit which the strategy workshop(s) focussed upon might be important. In the data, successful outcomes were achieved with both whole organizations (such as Baker A) and parts of organizations (such as Univ Serv E) but in all our successful cases, the level of autonomy was high. Univ Serv E, for example, managed to effect strategic change within a narrower organizational scope in that the unit concerned was only one element of a wider organizational system and where the wider organization did not participate in the change process. However, the workshops held with Univ Serv E featured a divisional management team which had high levels of autonomy such that those concerned could set their own strategy with reasonable degrees of freedom. There was support and enthusiasm for the change process in the wider university but this did not translate into active interest or control being exerted over the changes taking place. Perhaps these high levels of autonomy were attributable to the fact that the division in question offered specialist building and maintenances services that required particular skill sets and did not overlap with the rest of the organization in content terms. Likewise, Health



Org B was an autonomous unit sitting within a broader network of related but distinct organizations in the NHS.

By considering the ten cases, we can begin to build tentative explanations of the success or failure (in terms of effecting desired change) of strategy workshops. First, our data suggests that a series of workshops is more likely to succeed than a one-off event. Echoing the findings of Johnson and his colleagues (2006), one-off workshops did not produce strategic change in our data set.

Based on the three cases where the participants reported to have achieved the desired change, one could argue that the elapsed duration of workshop activity is related to success: each of the three successful workshops ran over at least 12 months. Yet, there are other cases in our data which indicate that elapsed duration may be a necessary but insufficient condition for success. Eng Consult and Engineer Co ran workshops over 14 and 24 months respectively but did not achieve desired outcomes. In both cases, early successes (the development of new services at Eng Consult and restructuring of the business in Engineer Co) did not produce the desired strategic outcomes in the longer term. Both organizations which undertook one-off workshops (Electronix A and Pharma Co) did not report successful outcomes.

Similarly, the frequency with which workshops occur seems to be significant. None of the organizations with a low frequency of meetings achieved successful outcomes. In our data, those cases where workshops were held more than 10 weeks apart proved problematic. Where low frequency meetings occurred, those involved reported that the workshops were individually successful and that the organization “remained committed to making the process work” [Director Eng Consult]. Yet, continuity and follow-

through seemed more difficult in these cases and the self-reported outcomes indicated a failure to achieve stated objectives. In an interview about the workshops conducted with Engineer Co., one business unit director commented “I like the workshops. But we seem to spend most of our time figuring out why we were so excited last time we were working on this stuff [the workshop agenda] then a bit more time figuring out why things haven’t moved on, then finish off the day fixing a date in the middle distance again.”

Combining frequency of meetings and elapsed duration gives an indication of the total amount of workshop activity involved (see Table 2). Baker A and Univ Serv E both combined high frequency of meetings with a longitudinal programme of workshops. However, comparing the cases of Health Org B and Sign Up reveals a more subtle dynamic. Both cases involved similar numbers of people (8 and 7 respectively) and the delivery pattern produced a similar number of workshops (9 and 7 respectively). Thus Health Org B and Sign Up had roughly equivalent numbers of people involved in a similar number of workshops for the same total length of time. Sign Up’s failure to achieve strategic change might be attributed to the fact that the workshops “came too thick and fast” [Sales Manager Sign UP]. Despite the fact that there was real time pressure to achieve the change in ownership of the firm because the incumbent owner-director was keen “to conclude a deal by summer time” [MD Sign Up] and the project took place in April.

The seniority of the participants in the process also appeared to have some effect in our data. The labels senior manager, director or senior management team can mean different things in different industries or in different countries. We have used the language that the organizations themselves used in Table 3 to describe those who participated in the

strategy workshops. In most cases, participants were described as senior managers or directors and this appeared to mean that these were the most senior staff in hierarchical terms. However, the board of directors in a private sector firm such as Engineer Co. were equivalent to the senior management team of a public sector organization such as Univ Serv E where the label “director” was less commonly found. Those who used middle managers (i.e. somewhere between first line supervision and the directors or senior managers) in the workshops did not achieve successful outcomes, perhaps because of an inability to take action between the workshops on the basis of agreements struck during the workshops. Our data appeared consistent with that of Hodgkinson et al (2006) in that only a minority of the workshops we studied involved middle managers. Univ Serv E achieved its objectives whilst involving more junior staff and union representatives but these participants were introduced as the workshops progressed and were not involved at the outset.

The ten cases described here can be grouped into three sets where self-reported outcomes were positive (Baker A, Univ Serv E, Health Org B), transient (Sign Up, Engineer Co, Eng Consult, CommuniCo) and negative (Gas Works, Electronix A, Pharma Co). We now consider in more detail, examples from each of these groups in order to build a richer understanding of the ways in which the descriptive characteristics of the workshops (e.g. the nature of the participants, frequency, etc.) played out in terms of the contents and consequences of the workshops.

### *Exploring Successful Workshops*

Of the successful cases, i.e. those which produced change in line with original aims, we will examine Baker A which was a family-owned business and was facing difficult

trading circumstances for the first time in its 80 year history. The owner-directors of the business approached us with a remit of effecting a culture change within the organization. The initial aspiration of the programme was framed as “creating a learning organization ... where some of our managers actually begin to manage instead of the four of us [the four owner-directors] having to do everything..... and where we begin to see some new products and new markets being developed – because it’s pretty clear that our traditional markets won’t sustain us” [MD Baker A]. The initial request from Baker A was not specifically for a strategy workshop, rather the notion of a workshop developed during early diagnostic conversations with the organization. Similarly, the notion of a series of workshops was only framed during the first, off-site workshop. In fact, the workshops occurred in three distinct phases but each phase was specified as it emerged. The first phase of the process centred on a 3-day, off-site workshop with the four owner-directors and focused on reviewing the espoused strategy of the firm, the motivations and ambitions of its four owner-directors and the ambition to become a learning organization. This then framed a series of three workshops in phase two which involved the whole management team of the organization, perhaps mimicking what was seen to have been a successful workshop format at director level. During this second phase, three specific project teams were established to deal with three related but distinct tasks: restructuring the firm, achieving productivity improvements and developing new products and markets. Also during the second phase, inputs to the strategy workshops were provided by other third parties on topics specified by the workshop participants (for example, the product development team identified the desire to “know more about marketing” so we arranged for a seminar on marketing techniques for this team). Thus, the content of the workshops were not prescribed and fixed at the outset but rather themes emerged as relevant and expert input was then sourced to meet these needs as the workshop series unfolded.

In the third phase, the entire management team of Baker A (18 staff) was divided amongst the three project teams and each project team was led by one of the owner-directors. Each project team then held regular workshop sessions which were outside of the normal schedule of business meetings. These sessions were minuted and produced action points providing an accountability framework which was highly visible. The managing director oversaw the progress of all three project teams and monitored progress toward the specific targets each had developed.

It is perhaps worth pausing at this stage to consider the significance of this accountability framework. Minutes of meetings, including agreed actions, were posted on a public notice board in order to keep the whole staff of the company apprised of progress within the project. Every workshop started with a review of progress against previously agreed actions and discussion of unexpected developments that had occurred in the interim. This was then followed by a reflection on what could be learned from such events. We played a strong role at the outset in ensuring that this practice was adhered to and “championed” by the directors – particularly by ensuring that the directors themselves completed actions agreed at the previous workshop and taking them to task if this wasn’t the case. Gradually, responsibility for this practice migrated to the team members through reference to “ground rules” which they had developed to “keep them learning” [quotes from team members at Baker A]. The key point here is that the workshops had a specific remit to connect or link with day to day practices in the organisation. For example one of the teams held workshops relating to the theme of production improvements and the outcomes of these strategy workshops were fed back into regular weekly production meetings that occurred within the business. Thus, the linkage between the strategy workshops and the on-going conduct of business was

effected through actions agreed in one setting being communicated to the other. An action-theoretic perspective would point to there being only *one* organization, but this illustrative example offers some indication of the means of translating from what Hendry and Seidl call the strategic episode (2003) to the wider organization.

In many ways there should be nothing surprising about the above practices; they may be regarded as common sense or sound project management. What might be significant, however, is that they draw attention to the fact that the successful workshops were embedded in a strategic development project that was managed as a series of linked activities combining workshops, normal business and strategic development. This was also the case in the other two projects which delivered in accordance with initial intent; in both Healthcare Org B and University Serv E, workshops started with a review of actions and unexpected changes since the last workshop, with a view to “keeping things on track” [Director, Univ Serv E] and learning from experience. This is in stark contrast to the somewhat more confusing experience reported above by a Director of Engineer Co, where the workshops were held more 6 or 12 months apart and continuity was reported as a key blocker by the majority of the workshop participants. In all the three cases where the self-reported outcomes were positive, the workshops were a means to an end in a high profile transformation project; they were not end in themselves. The broader project provided both a context and a mechanism for ensuring that workshops were linked.

The workshops themselves had an informal atmosphere and, partly because of the longitudinal nature of our engagement, we developed strong ties with both the business and the individuals concerned. One of the recurring difficulties was that the MD would intervene in operational issues on the shop floor and at one point we convinced him to

get his work wear embroidered with the message “I shouldn’t be here” so that colleagues could remind him of his commitment to allow his managers to manage. This too demonstrates a senior level commitment to enacting in the workplace, practices that were agreed in the workshops – i.e. in this case transference or linkage was embodied in the MD’s work-wear.

During the workshop series, Baker A posted a financial loss for the first time as a result of the BSE crisis in the UK but work on new product development and new markets eventually produced a significant rise in turnover (25%), a return to profitability and increases in productivity (20%). During the period of the workshops, HR practices improved and development plans were introduced for individuals which focused on their learning and development needs. These changes in both organization structure and training and development processes were taken by those involved as indicative of a wider culture change within the organization.

It is also perhaps worth noting that a “crisis” – in this case a financial loss, and thus a threat to survival – may have emphasised the importance of the project in which the workshops were embedded. This was a project with a great deal at stake. Indeed, in the other two successful cases, one organisation (Healthcare Org B) was under threat of absorption into another civil service agency (a possible explanation of their desire to move away from bureaucratic modes of organising) whilst University Serv E was the subject of rumours that it’s entire operation was under consideration as a candidate for outsourcing.

*Exploring Transient Success in Workshops*

Of the seven firms in our data set that did not achieve their stated goals over the longer term, there were some cases where eventual disappointment was preceded by positive signs early in the process. Four firms (Eng Consult, Engineer Co, Sign Up and CommuniCo) offered extremely positive reactions to the initial workshops. This points to the value of a longitudinal research process because the self-reported diagnosis in the early months was that the change process had been successful. As facilitators, such positive feedback was welcome but illusory. In Sign Up, the process was deemed to be working effectively up until about the mid-point of the project. In Engineer Co and Eng Consult, initial changes subsequently produced “a sense that we have reverted to type” [Production Director, Engineer Co]. In all four of these cases, the conclusion was eventually reached that the organization had not achieved its objectives. In the case of CommuniCo, the launch workshop went extremely well, even the participants themselves evaluated the workshop as “absolutely first rate” [Senior Manager, Communico], but at the follow up workshop 3 months later it became apparent that the workshop had not delivered change back into daily organizational life. Once the participants had left the workshop and gone back to their daily routines they had difficulties transferring anything from the workshop to the organization.

We will now consider the case of Engineer Co where one explanation of the failure to deliver stated objectives could be argued to be the intermittent nature of the workshops (the same was also true of Eng Consult). The successful cases used a regular series of workshops to deal with a rolling agenda of change related items, whereas in these two cases there were 6 or 12 month gaps between workshops. The participants in the



workshops did see them as related events with a sense of follow-through but the long pauses in the strategic conversation appeared too stultifying.

Engineer Co. was also an established business and had been operating for over a hundred years. The firm had transferred ownership to a US-based corporation some years earlier and so there was also a corporate strategist from the US headquarters who had some influence over the strategy of Engineer Co. This influence had been stronger during recent years as performance had been below corporate norms. Like Baker A, the stated intention of the workshop(s) had a cultural dimension and a focus on performance improvement. The management team expressed a similar desire for “a radical transformation project, to break with past ways of thinking about the business and to begin to reinvent our future” [MD Engineer Co.]. The MD of Engineer Co. was more focused in his request than his counterpart at Baker A and he specifically suggested the use of an off-site strategy workshop to kick start the change process within the firm. However, unlike Baker A, the frequency of the workshop sessions was low (Table 3) and our role as facilitators was channelled through the MD to a greater extent ostensibly owing to travel logistics where he would come and see us as opposed to us visiting the site. We thus met with the other members of the senior team infrequently.

This project too used a clear accountability framework, but it may have been that the infrequency of project team meetings made the project generally lower velocity or momentum than was the case in the successful cases. Moreover, whilst it is difficult to quantify, the quality of the relationships built between members of the project team and, in particular, between ourselves and the practitioners was discernibly different –cordial and business-like with Engineer Co but more friendly and personal with the successful cases. This perhaps allows both for franker and more probing exchanges in more robust

relationships on the one hand, and a greater degree of mutual understanding of each others' concerns on the other.

Also, after the initial round of workshops, the senior management team (the directors and heads of the SBUs) handed ownership of the change project to a "change team" drawn from the middle management layer of the firm. The intention was "to allow us, the senior guys to focus on running the business whilst the change team are freed up to change the business" [MD Engineer Co]. In reality, the change team felt somewhat more confused about their remit and did not feel that they had the authority to change aspects of the organization's structure, the product range or the markets served. Instead of focusing on the originally stated intention of whole-scale transformation, the strategy workshops began to focus on operational issues under the strap line "better, faster, cheaper." This served to signal that changes within the firm should produce outcomes (e.g. organizational arrangements, production techniques or product designs) which were better, faster and cheaper than their predecessors. The resultant reductions in operating costs etc. were welcome but seemed to indicate that "[we] had lost the bigger picture" [Finance Director, Engineer Co].

This illustrates a phenomenon which was largely common to the cases in the second category of cases – where some change was produced, but not on the scale or scope initially envisaged. After the project had been scoped and kicked off, the senior players gradually withdrew to varying degrees in Engineer Co., Eng Consult and Sign Up – partly under the banner of encouraging others to "own the change by taking charge of it" [MD, Engineer Co] and partly because they had "businesses to run" [Director, Eng Consult].

One might argue that the real effect of this withdrawal was a weakening of the accountability framework, which was in turn exacerbated by lower momentum within the project. Indeed, these two issues may then have operated in a self-reinforcing cycle to take the steam out of the efforts to see things through, though one might equally argue that cause and effect could be reversed here.

In contrast to Engineer Co and Eng Consult, SignUp's and CommuniCo's problem in effecting significant changes seemed not to lie in the frequency (high and medium respectively) or seniority of participants (both high) but rather in the elapsed duration. In both cases the elapsed duration was only three months. We have already reported that participants in the workshops held at SignUp felt that the process unfolded too quickly with workshops coming thick and fast. This offers another inhibiting factor in relation to the accountability framework that we have discussed. When the gap between workshops is as little as 1 week, as was often the case in SignUp, participants have little opportunity to follow up on actions between workshops due to the pressure of on-going business. A key figure in the SignUp project was the sales director who commented that "I'm out of the office most of the time, on the road, drumming up business. Pretty much the only time I spend with the others [his colleagues] is during these workshops and I just can't spare the time in between just now to follow up on action points."

#### *Exploring Failure in Strategy Workshops*

Finally, the third group of cases consisted of those companies in which the workshops did not effect any changes at all. This group comprised one company (Gas Works) which conducted a series of workshops and two companies (Electronix A and Pharma Co) which conducted single workshops.

Gas Works shared many common features with workshops held in firms where transient change was reported, at least in terms of elapsed duration and frequency. This case is interesting however because it was the only example which featured middle managers as the sole participants in the workshops. Those selected to participate in the workshops were given little information on the workshops and were both confused and suspicious at the first workshop. The workshops focused on the organization's quality systems and the commercial impacts that quality procedures had on product development and subsequent reliability. The directors of the firm hoped that by inviting middle managers to "help shape a key part of our business, they'll grow into more commercially astute and more proactive people in the business" [Technical Director, Gas Works]. Yet, attempts at proactivity stalled each time permission had to be sought from directors who were not in attendance during the workshops.

Finally there were the two firms who hoped that a one-off strategy workshop would effect strategic change. The participants at the workshops held with Electronix A and PharmaCo reported the events as a success at the conclusion of the workshops. However, follow up interviews revealed that nothing had changed in the organization and that many of the actions and intentions were never followed through. The participants in the workshops held with both Electronix A and PharmaCo were senior managers and in both cases, the workshops tackled key strategic issues relating to competitiveness and new markets. Each workshop generated lists of tasks including further research on competitors, analysis of competences, etc. Subsequent interviews with those involved in the workshops indicated that none of these action points were followed up in any systematic way and that "in any case, there was no forum to report them back to" [Marketing Director, Electronix A].

## DISCUSSION

Having presented the data from our study, we now move on to discuss our findings. Given that we have three cases where such (self-reported) observable change did occur in line with prior wishes, we now shift our attention to the obvious supplementary question: are there any common characteristics in those workshops which do achieve change? We have already alluded to the relationship between overall duration and frequency of the workshops. In our data, those organizations which stretched the process out over 12 months or more but had only intermittent workshop activity fared no better than those where the events were one-offs. A number of participants spoke about the momentum of the workshops, in some cases as “the thing that made it work” [Service Manager, Health Org B]. We see an analogy with Brown and Eisenhardt’s study of high velocity industries (1997) and would describe each of the successful cases described here as having high momentum rather than high velocity since those workshops with high velocity, such as SignUp, felt overwhelmed by the combined pressures of the workshops and on-going organizational activities.

Compressing intensive work into a few months appeared to be an unsuccessful tactic in our data set. Why might this be the case? One argument may be that genuine strategic change challenges fundamental assumptions about the nature of the organization and is therefore problematic. Such processes effectively challenge organization members to reconsider the identity of the organization (Beech 2000). This process requires a comparatively safe environment and Hendry and Seidl (2003) argue that renegotiation of this type occurs within episodes where normal practices are suspended. Hendry and Seidl (2003: 183) argued: “The basic function of episodes is simply to make it possible

to suspend and replace structures for a certain time period”. Such episodes make it possible for the members of an organization to step out of their daily routines in order to critically reflect on them (Doz and Prahalad, 1987; Roos and Von Krogh, 1996). In most cases the organizations we studied made conscious efforts to suspend day-to-day practice during the workshops. This was also described in other studies on strategy workshops (Johnson et al., 2006; Schwarz and Balogun, 2007; Bourque and Johnson 2007). Practices such as holding the workshops off-site and framing interactions during the workshops in a very informal manner and on non-hierarchical grounds were common. In Engineer Co, the first workshop began with an agreement that “status don’t count” [Flip Chart, Engineer Co, Workshop 1]. Yet, whilst Engineer Co’s senior management team initiated the strategic change process, part way through they passed responsibility on to a group of middle managers who they described as “the change team”. The change process eventually lost momentum in part because of perceived “top management ambivalence” (Sillince and Mueller, 2007) and some participants in the process argued that status did count after all.

In the three successful cases, there was a sense in which the organizations concerned needed a period of adjustment before becoming comfortable with the change process. Both Baker A and Univ Serv E “edged up to the precipice” [Sales Director, Baker A] on several occasions before finally implementing real and lasting changes. Indeed, in Univ Serv E, there was explicit discussion of the frustrations that resulted from being “always on the cusp of change” [field notes]. Table 4 shows excerpts from the minutes of a succession of strategy workshops relating to an agreement to use multi-skilled work teams

Univ Serv E Workshop Minutes	
June Meeting	<i>Reach agreement that our actual objective is to transform way we work and our culture</i>
July Meeting	<i>"seeds of REAL progress now at hand" ... in reference to discussions about multi-skilled working</i>
August Meeting	<i>Agree to identify team members for pilot project</i>
October Meeting	<i>Group in total agreement that we should commence [the multi-skill pilot] as soon as possible</i>
November Meeting	<i>Agree that supervisor post [for multi-skill pilot project] will be advertised this week.</i>

Table 4: Univ Serv E Pilot Project

Managers at Univ Serv E expressed real frustration that the change project was becoming bogged down and that it took 5 months to reach the stage of agreeing to advertise the post of team supervisor for the multi-skilled maintenance project. Actual work on the pilot project did not begin for several more months. Nevertheless, this example also serves to illustrate the role that basic practices such as recording minutes and action points played in the three successful sets of strategy workshops. Where senior officers of the organization are meeting on a regular basis and there is an accountability framework in place, the chances of transferring from the strategic episode or workshop back to everyday organizational life increase.

When asked to reflect on the project conducted with Gas Works, managers described the workshops as “a space and time for the management team to meet ... in a context which was not a production meeting, progress meeting, etc” [Middle Manager, Gas Works]. Those involved also commented that the workshops “started with a loosely

formed agenda and progressively tightened up as it became clear what had to be done.” Interestingly, participants also identified two key departures from “the Gas Works way of working.” First, the project team checked with the directors less frequently than usual and second, the project featured input from everyone as opposed to only those responsible for implementation. Given that organizations “find it very difficult to generate higher level discourses” (Hendry and Seidl, 2003: 178), these managers appear to be arguing that the strategy workshop represented an opportunity for such discourses to take place. Since the project at Gas Works did not subsequently produce strategic change, one might argue that the opportunity was not sufficiently lengthy and that the organization may have experienced switching pressures to revert to its normal mode of operating (MacIntosh and MacLean, 1999) particularly with regard to consultation of the directors.

Our results might also explain why Johnson et al. (2006) and Bourque and Johnson (2007) found that workshops did not lead to any change, while Schwarz and Balogun (2007) actually did observe change. Johnson et al. (2006: 27) identified a paradox in the effectiveness of workshops: the very same separation of the workshop activity from everyday practice that is necessary for new ideas to emerge prevents the transfer of ideas and plans back from the workshop to the everyday work situation. In their study they referred to one-off workshops. Our observations on the effectiveness of single workshops support this view. Yet, what Johnson and his colleagues did not analyse were *series* of workshops. We would argue that the effectiveness paradox is handled by conducting series of workshops: such series allow the combination of separation and reconnection over the course of several workshops. This again is in line with the study of Schwarz and Balogun (2007) who reported on such series. Johnson and his colleagues themselves hinted at this when they wrote at the end of their paper: “it may



be unrealistic to expect significant outcomes from a one-off event; a series of strategy workshops may instead be more effective” (Johnson et al., 2006: 29). Similarly Bourque and Johnson (2007) speculate that “the shift from intention to realization may benefit from a nested series of strategy workshops”

In the context of a short paper there is also much that is not said, but which could be relevant. Some of the organizations faced impending crises, some instigated change whilst some were prompted by external or environmental forces. Indeed, the three organizations where successful change outcomes were reported did each face some sense of crisis. This was real and immediate for Baker A. During one financial quarter, early in the project, the BSE crisis wiped almost 40% of the organization’s turnover out because sales of meat-based products collapsed amid health scares about the safety of beef products. The fact that many of their meat products contained pork or mutton did not save Baker A from a significant downturn in revenue. In both Health Org B and Univ Serv E, management teams appeared to act pre-emptively to deal with crises which were predicted to take effect within the next 12-18 months. In Univ Serv E’s case this was the prospect of maintenance work being put “out to tender on the open market, such that we’ll need to demonstrate best value” [Director, Univ Serv E]. In Health Org B’s case, it was the emergence of a large “competitor” organization which would undertake audit work nationally “for all services, except the four areas we cover” [Chief Executive, Health Org B]. Electronix A actively fabricated crises to push change through or to improve performance standards. “I drop in to the sales team and tell them that our biggest customer is walking away. Then I’ll tell the production staff that we better be able to double our capacity in 3 months. Neither is strictly true but they have the desired effect” [Managing Director, Electronix A]. In our data, the presence of real,

anticipated or fictitious crises was not a significant determinant of the success or failure of the workshops.

Finally, we must consider our own role(s) as facilitators in this set of workshops. We undoubtedly brought particular theories to the workshops. The ten organizations concerned knew that we were interested in developing our understanding of complexity theory as it applied to social systems. However, in the workshops we also deployed a range of fairly standard analytical tools and techniques from the strategy literature, similar to those described by Bourque and Johnson (2007). These included SWOT analyses, scenarios, PEST, Five Forces, Core Competences, etc. The theories deployed by facilitators of strategy workshops are a source of some concern but we would point to the fact that the same facilitation process and the same explanatory theories were used by the same facilitators in each of the ten cases considered here. This is not to suggest a “randomised control test” mentality for the treatment of our data but simply to imply that the ten cases are contemporaneous. Perhaps, the success of more longitudinal delivery patterns seen in our data is actually a reflection of our style of facilitation, or of facilitation that centres to some extent round theories of emergence, or both. In our method statement, earlier in the paper, we pointed out that the trade-off between detailed and rich personal access to data and generalisability of outcomes is significant. There is no evidence in our data to support the contention that one-off strategy workshops produce strategic change. However, perhaps a more limited claim would be that we have no evidence to suggest that we as facilitators can help to produce strategic change through one-off interventions. A more subtle reflection on the data presented here would be to question the direction of causality that we appear to imply. The data could be interpreted as suggesting that some configurations of frequency, elapsed duration and membership produce strategic change. A counter argument would be that

the three organizations enjoyed our particular approach to strategy workshops and therefore engaged in the process over the longest time. This could mean that the subsequent success or failure of the workshops is a side issue. Whilst this merits consideration, we explicitly agreed with each organization that we would not seek to prolong the engagement.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this paper we have analysed the extent to which strategy workshops can be used as a means of effecting strategic change. For this purpose we analysed ten case studies of companies that organized strategy workshops with the explicit aim of initiating some change. Our findings show that strategy workshops *can* lead to change, but that only three out of ten companies reached their stated goals. In our analysis we identified four aspects of workshop design that appear to impact upon success or failure: elapsed duration, frequency, organizational scope and autonomy, and seniority of participants.

Our paper makes four main contributions to the literature. First, it contributes to the literature on strategy-as-practice, which takes a particular interest in the role of formal practices (Whittington 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2003). As Whittington (2003: 118) argued, formal practices deserve our particular attention since not only are they pervasive phenomena in organizational life – a large share of organizational activity is concerned with formal practices in one way or other – but they also inflict considerable costs on the respective organizations. Whilst many researchers have dismissed formal practices as “mere rituals” without any wider bearing, strategy-as-practice scholars have drawn attention to the significance of rituals as such. They have shown that a “ritualized event may be highly significant in and of itself” independently of whether they have any

wider effect on the respective organization (Bourque and Johnson, 2007). In this vein some are beginning to analyze strategy workshops as ritualised events (e.g. Johnson et al., 2006; Bourque and Johnson, 2007). In this paper we have gone a step further by showing that the formal practices such as workshops are not only significant as rituals per se but that they can indeed lead to significant changes in the organization. This is in line with other studies on formal practices like administrative practices (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2001; Jarzabkowski, 2003; 2005) or meeting practices (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2006) that could also be shown to be highly consequential for the organizational development.

Second, the paper contributes to our understanding of strategy workshops as a phenomenon. We have pointed to an important distinction between single workshops and those that occur as part of a series. In particular since we have studied 99 workshops conducted over a 5 year period with 10 organizations we have been able to comment on the impacts of issues such as the frequency with which workshops are held and the level of attention paid to action points, continuity and commitment from senior managers. We have highlighted the mechanisms by which series of meetings overcome the difficulties identified by Hendry and Seidl (2003) and Johnson et al (2006) in terms of translation from the workshop to the wider organization. We have also demonstrated the benefits of mixed method approaches to the study of such phenomena and our results therefore allow us to draw tentative conclusions about the circumstances under which strategy workshops are likely to succeed or fail.

Third, we have contributed to the wider literature on strategic change by identifying a mechanism of *endogenous* strategic change. Most studies on strategic change trace the change back to sources external to the organization, e.g. changes in the composition of

the management team (e.g. Lant et al., 1992), input from consultants (e.g. Pettigrew 1985) or institutional changes in the environment (Lounsbury, 2001). Some authors even argue that fundamental change *can only* come from outside otherwise the organization would lose its own basis for action. As Spender and Grinyer (1996: 31) write about this line of reasoning: “The source [of change] cannot be... the organization itself. It must come from some other level because, as it enters this period of critical change, the organization loses its identity and its ability to make sense of the world.” In contrast to this, our study showed strategy workshops to be an *organizational* source of strategic change. With their strategy workshops organizations create a kind of “liminal space” (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Bourque and Johnson, 2007; Sturdy et al., 2006) with its own structures and practices from which the members of the organization can reflect the organization *as if* from outside. Strategy workshops constitute a separate social context within the organization from which the organizational members can question the organization’s identity and instigate change without dissolving the workshop itself as their basis for reflection and action (cf. Seidl, 2005). In this sense strategy workshops provide separate frames of reference to which the members of the organization can routinely turn back during the course of the change process in order to discuss and make sense of their problems with the change process (cf. Weick 1995). While the organization itself is changing the strategy workshops themselves can provide a stable ground from which to reflect and decide on action.

Our fourth contribution relates to the methodological approach adopted in this study and connects to recent debates on new modes of knowledge production (Huff, 2000). Our research project provides an empirical example of what Van de Ven describes as “engaged scholarship” (2007). In particular, the role of the practitioners in both framing and conducting the research process represents something of a break with the

conventional division of labour applied in much of the social sciences. Starbuck recently pointed to the folly of building hypotheses and theory around “random noise” (2006: 15) but in our approach, practitioners were central to the research process. Their participation in a network forum where research findings from one firm were presented then contrasted with findings from other firms within the network suggests a much more active form of participation in the research process. A number of the practitioners from the research network have co-published with us on both theoretical and methodological issues and indeed at some points practitioners participated in the research process underway in other firms in the network. Many scholars have raised calls to adopt new and more engaged ways of bridging the relevance gap but forms of co-production such as the one described here represent an attempt to enact these calls.

Finally, for practitioners the paper has important implications. First of all, it has shown that single strategy workshops are very unlikely to be successful if one’s purpose is to effect organizational change. Workshops designed as series are more likely to be effective since this allows participants to combine distance and connection with the organization. Second, in the design of the series it seems important to attend to the overall duration of the workshops, the frequency of the workshops, the organizational scope and autonomy, and the seniority of participants. While all of this does not guarantee any success, our study at least implies that it will raise the chances for workshops to have the intended impact. For those considering the use of strategy workshops or for those attempting to design and facilitate them, these may form useful inputs to the decision process.

## REFERENCES

- Alvesson, M. (2003) Beyond Neopositivists, Romantics and Localists: a reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research, *Academy of Management Review*, 28(1) 13-33
- Arthaud-Day, M. L.; Certo, S. T.; Dalton, C. M.; Dalton, D. R (2006) A Changing of the Guard: executive and director turnover following corporate financial restatements. *Academy of Management Journal*. 49(6) 1119-1136
- Balogun, J., Jarzabkowski, P. and Seidl, D. eds. (2007) Special Issue „Strategizing: The Challenges of a Practice Perspective”. *Human Relations* 60(1).
- Beech, N. (2000) Narrative Styles of Managers and Workers, *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 36(2) 210-229.
- Boje, D. (1991) “The storytelling organisation: study of story performance in an office-supply firm” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 36: 106-127.
- Bourgeois, L (1981) On the Measurement of Organizational Slack. *Academy of Management Review*. 6(1): 29-39
- Bourque, N. and Johnson, G. (2007) “Strategy Workshops and “Away-Days” as Ritual”. In Oxford Handbook of Organizational Decision Making.
- Brown, S. and Eisenhardt, K. (1997) “The Art of Continuous Change: Linking and Time-Pacing evolution in Relentlessly shifting Organizations”. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 42: 1-34.
- Czarniawksa, B. and Mazza, C. (2003) ‘Consulting as a Liminal Space’ *Human Relations* 56: 267-290.
- Chia, R. (1999) “A ‘Rhizomic’ Model of Organizational Change and Transformation: Perspective from a Metaphysics of Change” *British Journal of Management* 10: 209–227

- Child, J. (1997) "Strategic Choice in the Analysis of Action, Structure, Organizations and Environment: retrospect and prospect." *Organization Studies*. **18**(1): 43-76
- Child, J. and Smith, C. (1987) "The context and process of organizational transformation—Cadbury Limited in its sector". *Journal of Management Studies*: 565-593.
- Clark, P. and Starkey, K. (1988) *Organisation Transitions and Innovation-Design*. London: Francis Pinter
- Dalton, M. (1959) *Men Who Manage: Fusions of Feeling and Theory in Administration*. New York: Wiley
- Doz, Y. and Prahalad, C.K. (1987). 'A process model of strategic redirection in large complex firms: the case of multinational corporations' In Pettigrew, A., ed., *The Management of Strategic Change*, pp.63-82. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eden, C. and Huxham, C. (1996) "Action Research for Management Research", *British Journal of Management* 7: 75-86.
- Eisenhardt, K. (1989) "Building Theories from Case Study Research" *Academy of Management Review* 14: 532-550.
- Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S, Scott, P. and Trow, M. (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage et al., 1994
- Grinyer, P.H. and Spender, J.-C. (1979a) *Turnaround: Managerial Recipes for Strategic Success*. London: Associated Business Press.
- Grinyer, P.H. and Spender, J.-C. (1979b) 'Recipes, Crises and Adaptation in Mature Businesses.' *International Studies in Management and Organisation* 9: 113-133.
- Grinyer, P.H., and McKiernan, P. (1990). 'Generating major change in stagnating companies'. *Strategic Management Journal*, **11**, 131-146.



- Hamel, GL and Prahalad, CK. (1996) Competing in the New Economy: managing out of bounds. *Strategic Management Journal* 17 (3):237 – 242
- Hendry, J. (2000) “Strategic decision making, discourse, and strategy as social practice”. *Journal of Management Studies* 37: 955-977.
- Hendry, J., and Seidl, D. (2003) “The structure and significance of strategic episodes: Social systems theory and the routine practices of strategic change”. *Journal of Management Studies* 40: 175-196.
- Hill, T; Nicholson, A and Westbrook, R (1999), “Closing the Gap: a polemic on plant-based research in operations management,” *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, Volume 19, Number 2 , pp 139 - 156
- Hodgkinson, G.P., Johnson, G., Whittington, R. and Schwarz, M. (2006) “The Role of strategy workshops in strategy development processes: Formality, communication, coordination and inclusion” *Long Range Planning* 39: 479-496.
- Hodgkinson G P and Wright G (2002) Confronting Strategic Inertia in a Top Management Team: learning from failure, *Organization Studies*, 23(6) 949- 977
- Huff, A. (2000) “Changes in Organizational Knowledge Production: 1999 Presidential Address” *Academy of Management Review* 25: 288-293.
- Huff, A. and Huff, J. (2001) “Re-Focusing the Business School Agenda” *British Journal of Management* 12: 34-46.
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2003). ‘Strategic practices: An activity theory perspective on continuity and change. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40/1: 23-55
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2005) *Strategy as Practice: An Activity-Based Approach*. London: Sage.
- Jarzabkowski, P. and Seidl, D. (2006) „Meetings as Strategizing Episodes in the Social Practice of Strategy“. *AIM Research Working Paper* 36-March-2006.

- Jarzabkowski, P. and Wilson, D. (2002) 'Top Teams and Strategy in a UK University', *Journal of Management Studies* 39: 355-383.
- Johnson, G, Melin, L., Whittington, R. (2003) "Micro Strategy and Strategizing: Towards an Activity-based View". *Journal of Management Studies* 40/1: 3-22.
- Johnson, G., Prashantam, S., Floyd, S. (2006) "Toward a Mid-Range Theory of Strategy Workshops" *AIM Working Paper Series* 35-March-2006.
- Kotter, J. (1982) *The General Managers*. New York: Free Press
- Lant, T.K., Milliken, F.J. and Batre, B. (1992). "The role of managerial and interpretation in strategic persistence and reorientation: An empirical exploration". *Strategic Management Journal* 13: 585-608.
- Lounsbury, M. (2001) "Institutional Sources of Practice Variation: Staffing College and University Recycling Programs" *Administrative Science Quarterly* 46: 29-56
- MacIntosh, R. and MacLean, D. (1999) Conditioned Emergence: a dissipative structures approach to transformation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 20:4. 297-316
- MacLean, D., MacIntosh, R and Grant, S. (2002) Mode 2 Management Research. *British Journal of Management*, 13:3. 189 – 207
- MacLean, D. and MacIntosh, R. (2002) One Process, Two Audiences: on the challenges of management research. *European Management Journal*, 20:4.383–392
- Mezias, J.M., Ginyer, P. and Guth, W.D. (2001) „Changing Collective Cognition: A Process Model for Strategic Change". *Long Range Planning* 34: 71-95.
- Mintzberg, H (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Harper and Row, London
- Mintzberg, H. (1994). *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. Prentice Hall, UK
- Mir, R and Watson, A. (2000). Strategic Management and the Philosophy of Science: The case for a Constructivist Methodology. *Strategic Management Journal* 9 (21): 941-953

- Nowotny, H., Scott, P. and Gibbons, M. (2001) *Re-thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pettigrew, A M (1992) The Character and Significance of Strategy Process Research. *Strategic Management Journal*, **13** (s):5-16
- Pettigrew AM, Woodman, RW and Cameron, KS. (2001). Studying Organizational Change and Development: Challenges for Future Research. *Academy of Management Journal* 44 (4):697-714
- Porter, M E (1991) Toward a Dynamic Theory of Strategy. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12 (s):95 - 117
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H., eds. (2001) *Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Roos, J. and Von Krogh, G. (1996). *Managing Strategy Processes in Emergent Industries: The Case of Media Firms*. London: Macmillan.
- Schendel, D (1992) Introduction to the Winter 1992 Special Issue on Fundamental Themes in Strategy Process Research, *Strategic Management Journal* **13** (s):1 - 3
- Schwarz, M. and Balogun, J. (2007) "Strategy Workshops for Strategic Reviews. A Case of Semi-Structured Emergent Dialogues". *AIM Research Working Paper Series* 54-February-2007.
- Seidl, D. (2005) *Organizational Identity and Self-Transformation. An Autopoietic Perspective*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Sillince, J. and Mueller, F. (2007) "Switching Strategic Perspective: The Reframing of Accounts of Responsibility" *Organization Studies* 28: 155-176.
- Spender, J.-C. and Grinyer, P.H. (1996) 'Organizational Renewal. Deinstitutionalisation and Loosely Coupled Systems.' *International Studies of Management and Organisation* 26: 17-40.
- Starbuck, W H (2006) *The Production of Knowledge: the challenge of social science research*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

- Sturdy, A., Schwartz, M. and Spicer, A. (2006b) 'Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner? Structures and Uses of Liminality in Strategic Management Consultancy', *Human Relations* 59: 929–960.
- Tranfield, D. and Starkey, K. (1998) The Nature, Social Organisation and Promotion of Management Research: towards policy, *British Journal of Management*, **9** 341-353.
- Tsoukas, H. and Hatch, M-J. (2001) "Complex Thinking, Complex Practice: A Narrative Approach to Organizational Complexity" *Human Relations* 54: 979-1013.
- Van de Ven, A. (2007) *Engaged Scholarship: a guide for organizational and social research*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Weick, K., (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. London: Sage.
- Whittington, R. (1996) "Strategy as practice". *Long Range Planning*, 29: 731-735.
- Whittington, R. (2003) "The work of strategizing and organizing: For a practice perspective." *Strategic Organization* 1: 117-125.
- Yin, R. (1984) *Case Study Research*. London: SAGE.

**TABLE 1**

Organization	Case Overview	Contextual Factors
Baker A	A family owned firm, Baker A had operated successfully for the majority of its 80 year history. However, recent trends in the market had led to a decline in sales as customers began to shop at large supermarkets (which Baker A did not supply) instead of small local shops (which were Baker A's primary distribution channel). The organization recorded a substantial financial loss for the first time and this instigated a change programme to reduce costs, introduce new products and penetrate new markets. This change process occurred over an 18 month period.	The gradual changes in consumer behavior were accentuated by the BSE crisis in the UK. This had the effect of decimating demand for meat-based products which, at the time, represented 40% of turnover.
Univ Serv E	A large, non-academic unit in the administration of an older UK university, this service felt the need to transform its working practices as its services might be under consideration for open tendering in the near future. Responsible for the maintenance of the university's estate, the organisation employed several hundred staff ranging from cleaners to architects and chartered surveyors. The process extended over 30 months.	Potential outsourcing of services as part of a value-for-money drive in the public sector in general and in the University's senior management team in particular.
HealthOrg B	Provided a form of quality assurance service to the rest of the National Health Service in Scotland. A small core team of staff was augmented by a much larger group of reviewers and a specific range of health services were audited on a rolling basis when one member of the core staff and a team of reviewers would visit a particular site for a one week period. Health Org B felt the need to transform the way it operated in light of the changes in its operating environment. This process extended over 12 months.	A number of triggers included changes in the political system (as a new Scottish parliament was established) and the fact that a new health inspectorate was set up covering a far broader range of health services.
Sign Up	A small independent manufacturer based in the UK and selling signage exclusively to the local market. The owner and founder of the business was approaching retirement and wanted to hand the business over to his employees. Recent attempts to professionalise the sales force had proved somewhat difficult and the firm recognised the need to tackle potential markets beyond their immediate geographic territory. The process lasted 3 months.	An impending change of ownership prompted by the decision of the owner and managing director to retire.
Gas Works	An SME which manufactured testing equipment for the gas industry wanted to expand its current activities, growing in both size and scope. The incumbent management team felt that the business was being stifled by a relatively dormant layer of middle managers. The intention of the programme was to adopt for proactive and participative approaches to the management of the firm, thereby increasing its capacity to tackle new products, technologies and markets. The workshops ran over a 3 month period.	Dissatisfaction with a relatively stagnant market position, despite the absence of real commercial or financial pressures to change.

Engineer Co	A UK based subsidiary of a US engineering firm, Engineer Co manufactured complex products for the energy industry. Originally an independent company founded in the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century, Engineer Co was now under increasing pressure from its US parent to improve performance in financial terms or run the risk of disposal and possible closure. A new MD was appointed and he instigated a change programme aimed at restructuring the business and restoring profitability, which ran over a period of 24 months.	Trading difficulties had been exacerbated by exchange rates which effected the firm's competitiveness in export markets. The key trigger was however, the appointment of a new MD.
Eng Consult	A small, independent group of highly qualified structural engineers who offered consultancy services to major clients in the construction of big infrastructure like bridges, dams, etc. The firm had been the subject of a management buy-out when the founder reached retirement age. Now, a few years into the new ownership of the firm, the management team felt a strong desire to develop new markets as well as change the culture of the business. The process lasted 14 months.	A recognition that the head-office (in London) was not financially viable unless it attracted major new business or reduced costs, or both. At the time of the study, losses in the London office were being off-set by profits from overseas activities.
CommuniCo	This study took place within the UK division of a global IT services organization which employed over 100000 staff world-wide and had an annual turnover of \$15billion. Several years of rapid expansion had come to an end, and as the business stabilised there was increasing pressure to reduce costs in order to maintain the kind of margins that shareholders had come to expect. The change process studied related to the development new ways of delivering a key service contract. The new contract was to be arranged on a rolling basis, valid for 3 years but revisited every year. Two workshops took place over a 3 month period.	The driver for this change process was a corporate plan to improve productivity and profitability. This was generated by "head-office" and was being operationalised by the various divisions.
Electronix A	Electonix A supply a variety of components for use in a range of electronic devices. This US based organization was establishing a manufacturing plant to service the European mobile phone industry. The change process being studied here was the establishment of a new manufacturing facility. A single workshop was held lasting 1.5 days.	Whilst the initial trigger for change was external (i.e. the decision by the parent company to establish a new site), on-going changes once the plant was opened were driven internally.
Pharma Co	A sales organization which sold and distributed pharmaceutical products to the health sector in the UK. The head of the sales operation wanted to see a far more dynamic approach to market development. The intention was to transform the culture of the organization. A single workshop was held lasting 2 days.	Relatively poor performance in comparison to key competitors who were now actively targeting markets and customers of Pharma Co.

---

### Background Data on Each Organization

TABLE 2

Organization	Whole / Part of Organization ?	Strategy Workshops	Location(s)	No. of Workshops	Typical Duration of Workshops	Elapsed Duration	Participants
Baker A	Whole	Monthly then becoming fortnightly workshops	Off-site launch then on-site	34	Ranged from 3 days (for off-site) to 2 hours (for on-site)	18 months	Owner-directors plus management team
Univ Serv E	Part	Monthly Wworkshops	Off-site	32	Typically 3 hours	30 months	Senior management team plus union representative(s) from month 5
HealthOrg B	Whole	Six-weekly workshops	Off-site launch followed by alternating pattern of on then off-site	9	2 days at first workshop then half-days	12 months	Senior management team
Sign Up	Whole	Weekly then fortnightly workshops	Off-site launch then on-site	7	1 day at first workshop, then 2 hours	3 months	Owner-director plus all organization staff (total of 9)
Gas Works	Part	Weekly then fortnightly workshops	Off-site launch then on-site	6	1 day at first workshop, then 2 hours	3 months	Middle managers
Engineer Co	Whole	Annual 2-day workshops plus intermittent shorter workshops	Two off-site workshops, on-site follow-up workshops	4	2.5 days (off-site) 1 day (on site)	24 months	Directors plus change team (made up of middle managers) from month 12
Eng Consult	Whole	3 day workshop plus two shorter workshops	Off-site launch then on-site	3	3 days (off-site) half-day (on-site)	14 months	Owners / directors
CommuniCo	Part	Initial workshop with follow-up workshop	Off-site launch then on-site follow-up	2	2 days (off-site) 3 hours (on-site)	3 months	Senior management team
Electronix A	Whole	Single workshop	Off-site	1	1.5 days	1.5 days	Directors and senior managers
Pharma Co	Part	Single workshop	Off-site	1	2 days	2 days	Senior management team

## Overview of Data Set

TABLE 3

Group	Organization	Elapsed duration	Workshop Frequency	Scope and Autonomy of Unit Concerned	Seniority of participants	Self-Reported Outcome
1	Baker A	Long	High	Whole organization and high levels autonomy	High	Strategic change achieved
1	Univ Serv E	Long	High	Part of organization but high levels of autonomy	High	Strategic change achieved
1	Health Org B	Long	Moderate	Whole organization with only minor restrictions to levels of autonomy	High	Strategic change achieved
2	Sign Up	Medium	High	Whole organization and high levels of autonomy	High	Some initial change but failure to achieve stated aims
2	Engineer Co	Long	Low	Whole organization but moderate autonomy	Only initially high	Significant early success but eventually reverted to former archetype
2	Eng Consult	Long	Low	Whole organization and high levels of autonomy	High	Some initial change but failure to achieve stated aims
2	CommuniCo	Medium	Moderate	Part of organization but high levels of autonomy	High	Some initial change but failure to achieve stated aims
3	Gas Works	Medium	High	Part of organization and low levels of autonomy	Low	Failed to achieve stated aims
3	Electronix A	Short	Single workshop	Whole organization and high levels of autonomy	High	Failed to achieve stated aims
3	Pharma Co	Short	Single workshop	Part of organization and moderate levels of autonomy	High	Failed to achieve stated aims

Self-Reported Outcomes