

The Role of Strategy Workshops in Strategy Development Processes: Formality, Communication, Co-ordination and Inclusion

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Strategy workshops, the practice of taking time out from day-to-day routines to deliberate on the longer-term direction of the organisation, are a common practice, yet surprisingly little is known about them. This article presents the first substantial exploration of the role of workshops in strategy development through a large-scale UK survey of managerial experience of these events. The findings, based on 1,337 returns, show that strategy workshops play an important part in formal strategic planning processes; that they rely on discursive rather than analytical approaches to strategy formation; and that they typically do not include middle managers, rather reinforcing elitist approaches to strategy development. The authors conclude that strategy workshops are important vehicles for the emergence of strategy and discuss the implications of their findings for management practice and future research.

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“Strategy workshops and away days have been key elements in aligning the senior management in our business. They have often been difficult, and conflict has regularly been experienced. However, this has usually brought closer alignment and agreements. If completed thoroughly and honestly, these days are essential for a healthy company.” (Research participant number 1123)

“Both the strategic workshop and two away days were encouraged and attended by senior management. They supported the recommendations and allocated funding and resources. Sadly, one year on, NO actions from these three events are being actively pursued due to other more pressing deadlines. The enthusiasm has dried, morale is low and innovation no longer exists, which is why I resigned and joined another company: my customer.” (Research participant number 754)

Introduction

This article reports on the findings of a large-scale survey to address strategy workshops, a widespread but little studied practice in the making of strategy. These workshops typically involve taking managers away from their ordinary responsibilities for a day or two to consider their organisation’s long-term strategic direction. As the first of the above quotations from our survey participants suggests, these workshops have become for many organisations an essential if sometimes difficult managerial practice. The second quotation indicates some of the risks of badly-handled strategy workshops: inertia, cynicism and the departure of employees. It is clear that strategy workshops are an important and high-stakes activity in contemporary organisations.

Despite their prevalence, we have little academic knowledge on strategy workshops, lacking even basic details such as how often they occur, who gets involved, what end(s) they serve and what effects they achieve. We suggest that analysis of these workshops can shed light on three broad issues in strategic management practice: first, the question of how strategies develop in both formal strategic planning practices — widely seen as in decline — and the more informal strategy-making processes; second, the new roles that formal strategy-making may now be developing, including softer ones such as communications and co-ordination; and third, who is actually included in these important parts of strategy development, given apparent shifts towards flatter organisational forms.¹

The apparent status of strategy workshops is for formal strategy design. Contemporary thinking is cautious about the value of such a formal approach to strategy. Henry Mintzberg’s *Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* consigns formal processes of strategy-making largely to the past, while Gary Hamel and CK Prahalad, in their *Competing for the Future*, warn that traditional models of strategic planning tend to become formulaic and ritualistic.² Such authorities warn that strategies are better thought of as emergent rather than deliberately designed.³ From this perspective, strategy workshops will have a problematic role in organisations. First, we might expect limited use of such workshops in contemporary management practice. Second, to the extent that workshops do still occur, participants may find them disappointing in terms of strategic impact.

An alternative perspective is to see strategy workshops as part of a changing practice of formal strategy-making, the second issue to be discussed in this article. Henry Mintzberg advocates a less formal type of strategic planning, urging new roles for planners as catalysts, communicators and co-ordinators.⁴ Robert Grant’s study of strategic planning in the oil industry shows the growing importance of these softer roles in practice.⁵ While once strategic planning was seen as directing strategy formulation from the centre, led by specialists in staff roles, Grant finds that it is now more about co-ordinating strategies as they develop from within the business; communicating adopted strategies; and monitoring and controlling their implementation. In the oil industry, strategic planning systems are evolving to cope with the emergence of strategy from within organisations. Grant encapsulates this softer approach to strategy-making in the phrase “planned emergence”. Strategy workshops may play a significant role here. Typically involving general and line managers, rather than just planners, such workshops could be an effective bridge between formal design and informal emergence. This less formal perspective on strategic planning would, therefore, be more positive in its expectations for the prevalence and success of strategy workshops in contemporary organisations.

This more positive view on the role of workshops may reflect their potential to incorporate a broad constituency in the strategy development process, embracing middle managers and other

stakeholder groups more effectively than traditional formal planning approaches. This brings us to our third issue, the extent to which formal strategy-making may no longer be the exclusive preserve of top management and its advisers, given increasing decentralisation within organisations and the growing importance of knowledge.⁶ Flatter hierarchies thrust strategic accountability lower down the organisation, with operating managers closer to the action having the intimate knowledge essential to effective strategy-making. While the traditional elitist strategic planning criticised by Mintzberg may be ill-suited for contemporary conditions, workshops, because of their ability to include a larger range of constituents in the formal strategy process, may be particularly effective for coping with flatter organisational forms and a knowledge-based economy. To this extent, we would expect that workshops would be more inclusive than traditional planning approaches to strategy development, involving a wide range of stakeholders beyond the top management team.

Flatter hierarchies thrust strategic accountability lower down the organisation

This article, therefore, explores the three issues of formal strategy-making's survival, its potentially changing roles, and the extent of stakeholder inclusion, through a large-scale survey of contemporary managerial experience of strategy workshops. The next section introduces our empirical study, before we consider each issue in turn. Our conclusion discusses implications for managerial practice and further research.

The study

Our research takes a strategy-as-practice perspective, prioritising what managers *do* in strategy-making, rather than focusing on the types of strategies organisations might adopt.⁷ Hendry and Seidl have argued that much strategy practice is episodic in nature, in other words bounded by time periods, with discernable beginnings and endings.⁸ The most obvious example here might be a board meeting, but strategy workshops also fit this episodic pattern. While boardroom behaviour has been studied, workshops have received very little attention.⁹ The only three empirical papers that consider strategy workshops do so indirectly, for example in the context of strategy projects, failed strategising episodes and facilitated strategic change programmes.¹⁰

In short, we know very little about a phenomenon that, on the face of it, appears to be important in understanding the practice of making strategy. To remedy this shortfall, we used a large sample, survey-based research design. As explained in the [Appendix](#), the survey was conducted in collaboration with the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), one of the UK's leading professional associations serving managers of all levels (for further details see [Exhibit 1](#)). The survey yielded more than 1,300 usable returns, of which 864 were from participants experienced in strategy workshops.

Exhibit 1

The Chartered Management Institute

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) is a professional association offering a range of services to its individual and corporate members, including developmental programmes, professional qualifications, information resources and events. With a total membership of 71,000 individuals, spanning all levels of management from trainee to senior executive, across a wide range of sectors (plus 450 corporate members), it constitutes a good cross-section of the UK's population of managers.

As detailed in the [Appendix](#), the findings reported here are based on a sufficiently wide-ranging cross-section of individuals, sectors and types of organisation to allow generalisation beyond the present sample.

In the following analysis, we shall concentrate on responses relating to the place of workshops in strategic planning systems, the changing nature of strategic planning and the breadth of stakeholder inclusion, thereby shedding light on the three key issues identified at the outset.

Findings

Workshops and Strategic Planning

As episodes of formal strategy-making, strategy workshops might seem vulnerable to Mintzberg’s alleged “fall” of strategic planning. In fact, strategy workshops remain common events. [Exhibit 2](#) shows that they occur in almost 77 per cent of the organisations we surveyed. Moreover, in almost half of all our organisations and more than 60 per cent of those organisations in which strategy workshops were held, they were frequent, being held at least once a year. The workshops are generally short, most lasting just a day ([Exhibit 3](#)). Nevertheless, just over half (54.1 per cent) are part of a longer series; of these, 44.6 per cent run over two or three sessions, 23.3 per cent have four to five sessions, while the remaining 31.9 per cent are made up of six or more sessions. It is evident, therefore, that such formal events still play a substantial role in the management of strategy in organisations.

These strategy workshops are typically part of regular formal strategy development processes in organisations. [Exhibit 4](#) shows that they are overwhelmingly triggered as part of the regular strategy development process rather than, for example, a reaction to a particular incident. Strategy workshops are rarely triggered by external pressures or crises. In so far as they arise from other causes than a regular strategy development process, in approximately 36 per cent of organisations they are triggered by organisational development needs, such as teambuilding; changes in organisational structure trigger workshops in just over 29 per cent of instances. Organisational development needs (for example teambuilding) and strategy development are not seen as mutually exclusive: they may go hand-in-hand.

Strategy workshops are triggered by the regular strategy development process rather than a particular incident

Strategy workshops still appear tightly linked to strategic planning systems. A total of 62.5 per cent of our respondents reported that their organisation had a formal strategic planning system.

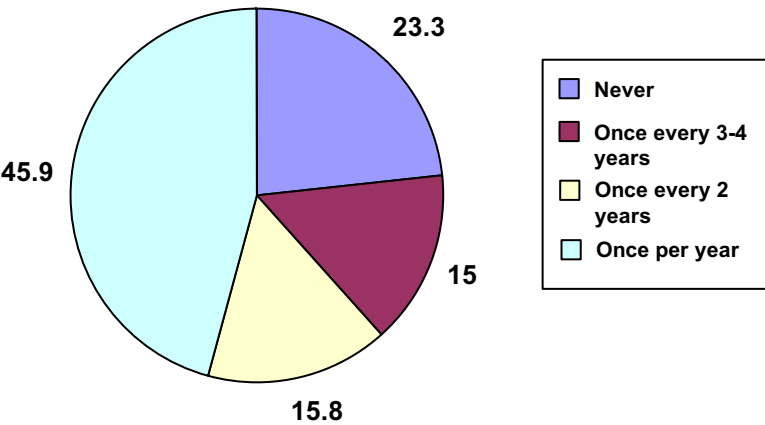


Exhibit 2. Responses to the question “How often do strategy workshops occur in your organisation?” (%)

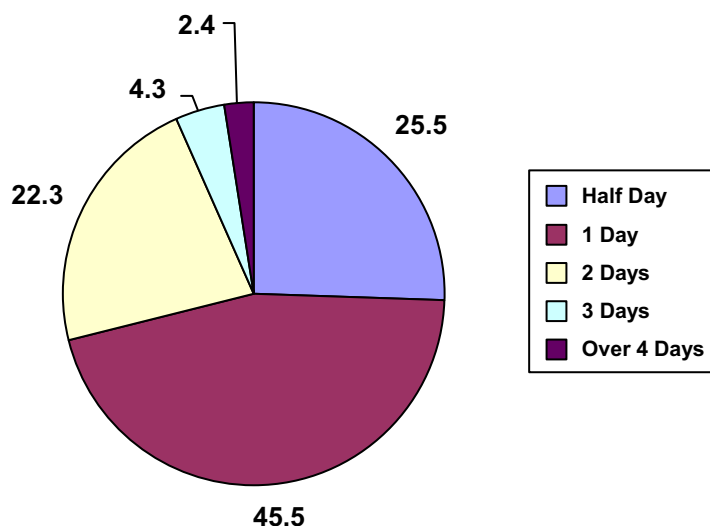


Exhibit 3. Duration of the most recent strategy workshop attended (%)

Of those that did, 63.7 per cent reported that the strategy workshop was related to that system, either in terms of providing an input into the system (41.3 per cent), or being an output of it (22.4 per cent), presumably tackling issues raised as a result of the planning system. However, judging from the comments of a number of our research participants, the links between the formal planning system and strategy workshops are not always tight and effective:

“Strategy workshops and/or away days, are usually very useful to motivate, raise visibility, [and] understanding of the strategy... if well planned and get people thinking. But they raise expectations and need to be followed by a communication plan and an implementation plan to become tangible. That’s where lots of us struggle.” (Participant number 358)

“Strategic workshops are very useful for senior management, but the decisions made must be brought back to the organisation for comment on the practical application of the ‘new vision’. Communication to the whole organisation is key... Change is difficult and workshops can help identify the potential areas of difficulty, but cannot provide all the answers.” (Participant number 366)

“...I was completely disgusted by the amateurish way that the company had used the strategic planning process for no other reason than to hang a plaque on the wall. The people running the

Exhibit 4. Responses to the question: “What was the trigger or cause for holding the last strategy workshop you attended? (Please tick all that apply)”

Workshop triggers	%
Part of the regular strategy development process	62.6
Organisational development needs (e.g. teambuilding)	35.8
Change in organisational structure	29.3
Change in management team	15.0
Increased competitive activity	10.3
Downturn in company performance	7.1
Technological change	7.1
Takeover or threatened takeover	1.4
Other	9.8

Exhibit 5. Purpose(s) of workshops broken down by number of participants (percentages are based on valid returns within columns)

PURPOSE(S)	10 or fewer participants (401 valid responses)	11-15 participants (152 valid responses)	16 or more participants (266 valid responses)
Generate new ideas and solutions	197 (49.1%)	66 (43.4%)	132 (49.6%)
Reconsider or challenge existing strategy	185 (46.1%)	77 (50.7%)	141 (53%)
Formulate new strategy	163 (40.6%)	38 (25%)	74 (27.8%)
To undertake strategic analysis as a contribution to strategy development	140 (34.9%)	59 (38.8%)	102 (38.3%)
Plan implementation	132 (32.9%)	61 (40.1%)	88 (33.1%)
Communicate strategy	75 (18.7%)	54 (35.5%)	96 (36.1%)
Monitor progress of a strategy	71 (17.7%)	27 (17.8%)	53 (19.9%)
Achieve buy-in to a strategy	69 (17.2%)	50 (32.9%)	75 (28.2%)
Examine blocks to implementation	68 (17%)	41 (27%)	68 (25.6%)
Skill and capability development of attendees	65 (16.2%)	35 (23%)	68 (25.6%)

workshop knew nothing of standard processes for strategic planning and instead decided to invent their own tools...” (Research participant number 697)

Nonetheless, in terms of purpose, it seems that strategy workshops give a prominent place to traditional issues of strategy formulation (Exhibit 5). About a third of these workshops are specifically concerned with the formulation of strategy, but the majority (57 per cent) address both strategy formulation and implementation, suggesting a less strict division between the two than in traditional planning. However, as Exhibit 5 also shows, in so far as there is a distinction between workshops with the purpose of “strategy formulation” as distinct from either “communicating strategy” or “achieving buy in” to strategy, it is smaller organisations that have a bias to the former and larger organisations that have a bias to the latter.

The Roles of Strategy Workshops in Contemporary Strategic Planning

In the last section, we saw that strategy workshops are a common practice in contemporary organisations, and, moreover, that they are typically linked to regular processes of formal strategic planning. We have also seen that these workshops are often designed to address both strategy formulation and implementation. In this section we explore the role that such workshops might play in the light of Grant’s findings in the oil companies, where softer roles such as co-ordination and communication were prominent.¹¹

Our survey reveals that typically there is little information gathering and analysis in preparation for these strategy workshops. As indicated in Exhibit 6, in almost half the cases participants prepared for only a few hours before their most recent event, and in 72 per cent of the cases preparation was for no more than a day. Strategy workshops appear to be forums in which the existing experience of managers is brought to bear on issues, rather than new research and analysis. This impression is confirmed by the types of strategy tool used during the workshops themselves (Exhibit 7). By far the most common tool is SWOT which has been shown elsewhere to be very largely an organising framework for discussion, rather than a tool for analysis.¹² The other common tools, such as stakeholder analysis, scenario planning and market segmentation, all lend themselves for use as conceptual frameworks for discussion. More analytically demanding tools, such as Porter’s Five Forces or value chain analysis, are less popular.¹³

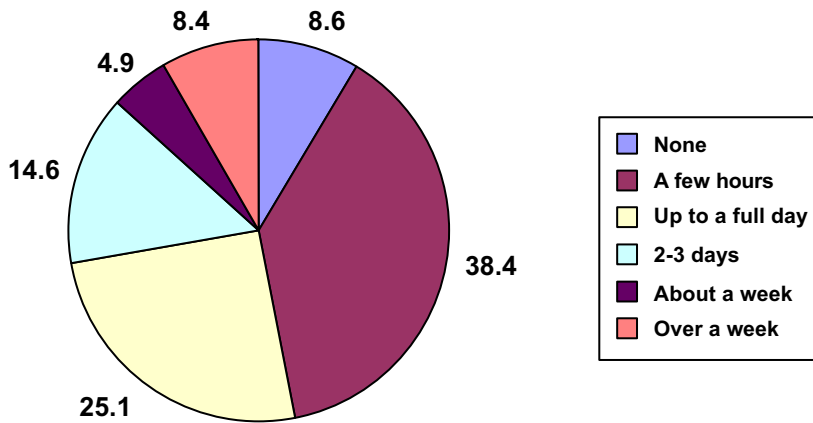


Exhibit 6. Amount of personal preparation prior to the most recent strategy workshop attended (%)

Several respondents commented on the widespread unwillingness to use analytical tools in strategy workshops. One experienced facilitator recalled his involvement in a recent workshop:

“The main difficulty was persuading senior managers that time spent on activities such as SWOT/STEP/scenario planning was worthwhile - they wanted to drive straight into facts and figures! I overcame this by co-facilitating the workshop with another (well respected) senior manager who could reassure them of the value this approach. The results from the workshop, since January, have proved the value of this approach to some real cynics!” (Research participant number 401)

If this case is typical, it seems that tools need to be introduced sensitively and with the backing of credible authority figures.

This apparent preference for informal discussion at the expense of preparation and formal tools and techniques supports the emphasis on communication and co-ordination noted by Grant.¹⁴ This is reinforced by our research participants’ views on workshop outcomes. Those attending strategy workshops were generally positive about their effects ([Exhibit 8](#)). By far the most positive outcome was seen in terms of the workshop having an impact on the business plan or strategy itself,

Exhibit 7. Analytical tools applied in the strategy workshop most recently attended (%)

“Which of the following analytical tools were applied during the workshop?”	%
SWOT	62
Stakeholder Analysis	30
Scenario Planning	28.5
Market Segmentation	22.6
Competence Analysis	21.5
PEST(EL) Analysis	17.2
Value Chain Analysis	15.1
BCG Matrix	8.6
Porter’s Five Forces	8.5
Cultural Web	5.5
McKinsey’s 7 S’s	5.3
Other	12.5

Exhibit 8. Distribution of responses (%) to the question: “What impact did the strategy workshop [i.e. the most recent event attended] have upon the following aspects of your organisation?”

	Very negative	Negative	No impact	Positive	Very positive
Business plan/strategy	0.2	1.3	12.3	61.7	14.3
Vision/mission statement	0.6	1.7	35.2	38.7	11.2
Understanding of corporate values	0.4	2.4	30.6	43.0	9.8
Business processes	0.2	2.5	30.1	46.4	7.1
Products and services	0.5	1.8	32.3	42.0	7.6
People development	0.8	4.6	28.0	45.2	8.5
Motivation & morale among employees	1.3	7.9	26.8	42.0	7.9
Organisational structure	0.2	3.8	43.6	32.0	5.8
Internal communications	0.5	4.4	29.5	42.6	8.5
Brand management	0.5	2.1	52.9	19.6	4.7
Innovation levels	0.7	2.8	43.2	29.4	4.7
Use of technology	0.6	1.9	49.5	26.1	4.1
Productivity	0.5	4.6	39.1	33.6	3.8
Profitability	0.1	3.4	39.7	30.5	5.2

in particular the specific clarification of strategy, again supporting our finding that these are forums for debate leading into a wider strategy development process. However, there were a wide range of other benefits reported and it is here that we witness the role of workshops as a vehicle for more general communication and the co-ordination of strategy. Around 50 per cent of workshops are seen to have benefits in terms of a general vision or mission, a better understanding of business processes and of a better understanding of corporate values. There is also evidence of perceived benefits in terms of the development of people and the internal communication of strategy. Strategy workshops are also perceived to improve working relationships with peers, but less so with junior colleagues or external stakeholders.

Strategy workshops are perceived to improve working relationships with peers, but less so with junior colleagues or external stakeholders

The value of workshops is, then, seen in relation to the development of strategy and its wider communication. However, there is less evidence that strategy workshops lead to “harder” outputs such as increased levels of innovation, the use of technology, and/or enhanced productivity or profitability, where there is a greater reporting of “no impact”, or even negative impact in a few cases. Indeed, in so far as strategy workshops are seen to have a negative impact, the most commonly reported outcome is in terms of motivation and employee morale (9.2 per cent of our respondents reported such a negative impact), perhaps not surprising as very few employees below senior management tend to be involved in these events. The question of wider stakeholder inclusion and the role of middle management in strategy workshops is the third and final issue to be addressed in this article, which we consider next.

Wider Stakeholder Inclusion

Many have argued for the importance of incorporating a wider range of stakeholder groups in the strategy-making process, especially middle managers.¹⁵ As noted earlier, the potential value of wider inclusion has become more prominent in the context of apparent shifts towards flatter, decentralised organisations and a more knowledge-intensive economy.¹⁶ However, as Frances Westley has

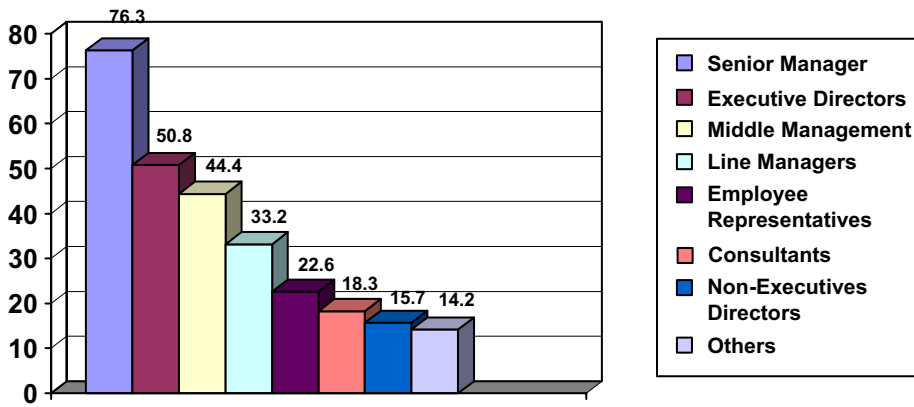


Exhibit 9. Stakeholder groups involved in the strategy workshop most recently attended (%)

written, middle managers struggle to succeed in the “dynamics of inclusion”, often finding themselves marginalised because of power and status issues.¹⁷ Nevertheless, because of their flexible nature, strategy workshops potentially offer a vehicle for middle management and wider stakeholder inclusion.

In fact, workshops turn out to be typically exclusive events (overall, 49.3 per cent of workshops have fewer than 10 attendees, while 18.5 per cent are attended by 11-15 participants and 32.3 per cent have 16 or more). This is especially the case where the focus of the workshop is on strategy formulation; the larger workshops are those that tend to be orientated towards strategy implementation, and further analysis shows that these may have the purpose of communicating strategy or achieving buy-in to a strategy that may have been developed, or at least formally expressed, by top management.

Strategy workshops are predominantly for senior management. As Exhibit 9 shows, 76.3 per cent of workshops are attended by senior management and 50.8 per cent by executive directors. Middle managers are present in less than half the workshops and line management in only a third. Further analysis (not reported here) indicates that middle managers tend to be more involved in workshops related to strategy implementation and in larger firms.¹⁸ There are also relatively low levels of involvement of non-management stakeholders: perhaps surprisingly the attendance by consultants is relatively low (just over 18 per cent), and even less (almost 16 per cent) for non-executive directors. A breakdown of the “others” category (14.2 per cent), reveals that hardly any customers (5.5 per cent) or suppliers (2.4 per cent) attend these events.

Middle managers tend to be more involved in workshops related to strategy implementation and in larger firms

The potentially damaging impact of this general lack of involvement of wider stakeholders, especially middle-level managers and junior colleagues, in workshop events should not be underestimated. The comments of our participants are illuminating on this issue:

“Strategy in my organisation is conceived as top-down command and control in a highly centralised organisation. As such the strategy process is a charade that does more to alienate colleagues than involve them. Consequently, I consider my organisation ... to be a very poor one that is going nowhere. The strategic incompetence of senior managers is staggering.” (Research participant number 45)

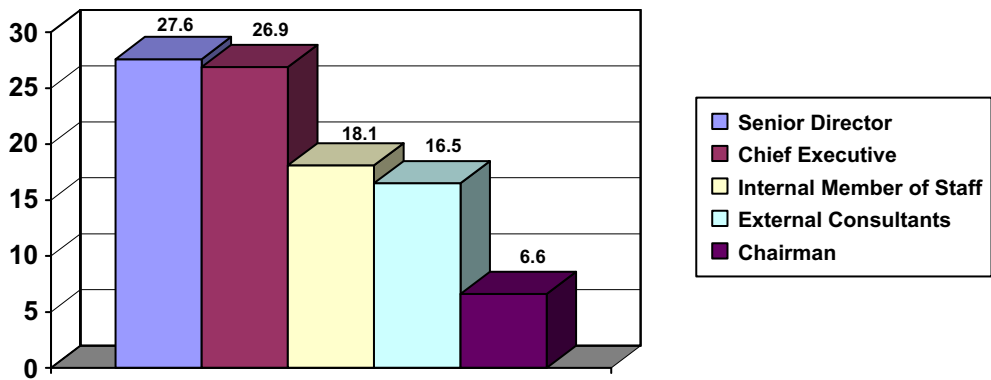


Exhibit 10. Distribution of responses (%) to the question: "Who led the strategy workshop?"

The potentially hierarchical nature of many workshops is reinforced by [Exhibit 10](#), which shows that they are typically led by senior executives, often the chief executive or another senior director. External consultants, who might have the facilitative skills to foster egalitarian discussion, rarely lead workshops. The emerging picture overall is one of strategy workshops as intensive episodes of strategy debate, designed for and led by senior executives.

Discussion and conclusions

This research, based on a UK survey, has shown that strategy workshops are an important strategy practice. However, the mainstream strategic management literature barely acknowledges their existence and importance.¹⁹ Despite their clear connection to the organisation's strategic management systems, there is still very little research available.

We have presented evidence to show that strategy workshops are institutionalised as regular events, with certain common characteristics in terms of length, participation and purpose. How, then, do our findings help us understand the role of these workshops as episodes within the wider strategy development processes of organisations?

As vehicles for the planned emergence of strategy

The results of our survey suggest that most strategy workshops need to be seen within the context of strategy development. Our findings fit well with Grant's, in that strategy workshops seem to play an important role in introducing a degree of emergence within a wider formal strategic planning framework.²⁰

This does not necessarily contradict the concept of emergent strategy. It could be that strategy workshops are the very forums in which such emergent strategy is thought through, translating, perhaps even legitimising and formalising, that which has its origins lower down the organisation. We also concur with Hendry and Seidl that the episodic form of the workshop is, in itself, likely to be significant in a number of ways.²¹ The workshop is "time out" when the threads of strategy development, likely to be disparate and unco-ordinated throughout the organisation, may be disentangled and made sense of. Their prevalence suggests that they are seen as a more appropriate way of doing this than relying on planning systems alone. Arguably, the fact that these events are both time-limited and bracketed might well be the antidote, if not a conscious reaction, to what were seen as over-protracted and bureaucratic planning procedures. Moreover, there is little evidence that workshops are the locations where formal or in depth analysis takes place. They seem more likely to be occasions when the experience of those attending provides the basis for the reconciliation of different views. So much is evident in the limited amount of preparation by participants, the limited use of tools of analysis and the brevity of the workshops themselves.

However, there is also evidence of design. The spatial removal from the day-to-day operations reinforces and emphasises the episodic nature of workshops, underlining the sense that “strategy is different”. Certainly, participants see the role of workshops primarily as strategy formulation. As noted earlier, the fact that workshops may be very largely forums for debate does not mean that more formal analysis does not take place elsewhere in the organisation and feed into workshop deliberations.

Our findings allow us to reflect on how strategy workshops contribute to intended or realised strategies in organisations; or to put it another way, the extent to which such workshops actually affect what happens in practice, as distinct from the formally-stated strategy.²² Again, this relates back to the extent of wider stakeholder involvement in such events. It seems likely, given the top management orientation and brevity of these events, that the output will be in the form of broad strategic intentions rather than detailed plans for implementation, except in those instances where attainment of the latter is the specific purpose of the workshop. Moreover, given the seniority of people attending most strategy workshops, the translation of their output into organisational action will be dependent on others, very likely not present at the workshop. We know that such output is inevitably interpreted subjectively by middle management and at other levels throughout the organisation, resulting in unintended outcomes.²³ In short, one view might be that workshops, in the form our survey shows, may shape intended strategy more than realised strategy.

There is, however, an alternative view. As strategy workshops may be forums for senior executives to make sense of and co-ordinate emergent strategy from lower down in the organisation, realised strategy may be underway anyway and the role of workshops might be to put such realised strategy into more formal, intended shape.

As means of co-ordinating and communicating

We have seen that strategy workshops play the roles that both Mintzberg and Grant argue have increasingly become those of strategic planning itself, namely the co-ordinating and communicating of strategy. We have shown that this is so in terms of their being forums for strategy debate, probably focusing on key issues that may well have been identified elsewhere in the organisation, drawing on the knowledge and experience of participants and feeding into a wider strategic planning system. As such, these workshops provide a forum for dialogue and discourse for managers.²⁴ But other co-ordinating roles are also apparent. Our findings suggest that workshops may play a positive relationship-building role among managerial peers at senior levels. They are about “team-building” and further analysis of our data (not shown in the exhibits) confirms that our respondents recognise this.²⁵ There is, however, less evidence of an impact with regard to personal relationships with junior colleagues or relationships with stakeholders external to the organisation.

Workshops may play a positive relationship-building role among managerial peers at senior levels

Other workshop outcomes focus on organisational benefits, in particular improved understanding of corporate values, benefits to business processes and the development and motivation of people, though again this is likely to be limited to participants. There are also indications that workshops involving larger groups, especially in larger organisations, may be being used for communicating or disseminating strategy, though too few involve external stakeholders or internal stakeholders below middle management.

The overall picture that emerges from our analysis is that strategy workshops are primarily forums for the socialising of strategy. There is limited evidence of analytic processes and there does not seem to be an expectation that there will be direct or measurable benefits to “bottom

line” performance measures. Presumably, the contribution of strategy workshops to such “hard” measurable outcomes takes the form of indirect benefits, in terms of discourse, co-ordination, communication and relationship building.

As elite forums for strategy debate

It is clear from our data that strategy workshops are predominantly top management events led by top management. There is much less involvement of middle management, except in the larger organisations or where strategy implementation is on the agenda, and even less for other line managers and frontline employees. This might suggest that senior managers might be resistant to including middle managers and other stakeholders in strategic conversations.²⁶

This is, perhaps, not surprising if strategy is seen as the province of top management. However the increasing evidence is that innovative capacity in organisations arises from diversity, often from the periphery of organisations and significant challenges to strategy are unlikely to come from those most associated with its development.²⁷ The implication here is that, insofar as such influences are taken on board, it is through the filter of top management experience rather than the involvement of the people concerned or those able to stand apart from commitment to current strategy. There are questions here about appropriate involvement according to the purpose of such events.²⁸ Presumably, involvement might be expected to differ according to purpose. Is the workshop intended to a) define or refine current strategy; b) to make sense of emerging ideas; or c) to challenge and question the fundamentals of strategy? On the basis of the evidence of involvement here it is tempting to conclude that, even if c) is espoused, workshops typically are top management forums for a) or b).

Implications for managerial practice

The findings of this survey into the roles of strategy workshops in organisational strategy-making raise a number of implications and questions with regard to the design and expectations of such events:

- It is perhaps surprising that strategy workshops are so much the province of top management, given the increasing recognition that lower levels of management may be key contributors to innovations and will certainly play a key role in translating strategy into action. The broader participation of middle and line managers, as well as other stakeholders, would enrich the discussion by bringing a wider range of strategic issues to the fore and enabling a greater diversity of views to be fed into the process. In preparing for strategy workshops, at the very least, careful consideration is needed in selecting participants in such a way that the overall composition of the group matches the purpose of the event.
- Our survey showed that the use of external facilitators for workshops was low; [Exhibit 10](#) shows that only 16.5 per cent of workshops were led by external consultants. Given the apparent reliance on managerial experience at such events, it may be beneficial to employ external facilitators to neutralise political pressures and conflicts and to prevent an over-reliance on such experience-based knowledge, which otherwise might limit the range of strategic issues discussed and the perspectives considered.
- Our survey highlights the role of strategy workshops as discussion forums. In this context, it seems that the analytical tools adopted during these events are employed more for introducing or guiding the discussion of strategic issues than for analytical purposes. This raises significant questions. If tools of analysis are not used for such purposes, taken together with the evident low level of preparation for workshops, what are the analytic bases for debate and discussion? Perhaps participants ultimately eschew rational-analytic thought in favour of intuition and the use of heuristics, i.e. basic rules of thumb to help shortcut the need for analytic detail. There are of course a number of potential dangers in the adoption of such an approach, not least the possibility of blind spots in strategic awareness and other forms of cognitive bias and inertia.²⁹ While the use of a greater range of tools and techniques may

be a recipe for more positive outcomes, this requires further investigation, beyond the scope of the present article. The qualification may be that such tools are used for analytical purposes elsewhere, perhaps by specialist analysts or consultants and the results fed into the formal workshops, or used to analyse the output of these events. If this is so it is not clear from our data how such analyses are represented or used; nor, indeed, by whom. If formal analytical tools are not seen to be especially relevant to strategy workshops, why are they taught at business schools and disseminated in books and by consultants? Is this wasted intellectual effort?

Workshops are temporally and spatially disconnected from daily organisational life. Just as others have indicted strategic planning for becoming ritualised and removed from organisational relevance, there is presumably the danger that strategy workshops could suffer a similar fate. If this is to be avoided those who design them need to consider how they might be better connected to the organisation's informal discourse, everyday routines and wider decision-making processes. Clearly this raises issues of involvement, as discussed above. But it also suggests that there needs to be careful thought given to just how much "removal" is desirable for such workshops. It may be an attractive idea for an elite group of managers to remove themselves to a luxury hotel for a day or so, but it may not be the most successful way of ensuring that their deliberations are translated into day-to-day practice. And if such deliberations are to be so translated, a second challenge is to consider the processes by which the managers and the outcomes of their deliberations might be incorporated into the wider organisation.

Implications for future research

The findings of this research suggest that strategy workshops are an important area for future investigation. In the general UK context we now know that they are frequent, occur in a wide range of organisations, in different industry sectors, they involve a variety of stakeholders (predominantly managers drawn from the most senior levels), they feed into strategic planning systems that exist in organisations and they are seen to influence both the strategies of organisations and the coherence of stakeholder groups concerned with strategy. But to what extent does the overall pattern of findings we have observed generalise across sectors and to other national contexts, particularly sectors and countries with markedly different business systems and approaches to corporate governance? This study provides a useful basis for follow-up work to address these issues.

In the wake of a growing number of high-profile scandals, particularly in the US, the need to understand better the nature and role of strategy workshops has received added impetus, not least because following several recent formal inquiries, boards of directors are now required to sign off strategy (and therefore have to be seen to make it). These changes could well be having a significant impact on the composition and conduct of strategy workshops, both here in the UK, and in the US and beyond. Ironically, a latent consequence of this increasingly regulated approach to corporate governance could be greater involvement of directors in strategy workshops, thereby further reinforcing their exclusiveness. Longitudinal work to investigate this possibility is now required.³⁰

In this article, we have provided a basic understanding of the structure of strategy workshops. We do not claim to understand the dynamics of such workshops: there is a need to know more. What are the appropriate measurement systems for determining the effectiveness of these events? To what extent and in what ways do the outputs of strategy workshops feed into formal statements of strategic intent, or indeed translate into the realisation of those intentions? What is the role of analytical tools and techniques? In what ways and with what effect do the analytical, discursive, and no doubt political, elements combine in strategy workshops? Is it possible that the form or nature of a workshop, as opposed to other approaches to strategic planning, might be more or less suited to the realisation of strategy? What roles are played by

senior/middle managers, facilitators (external and/or internal) and how do these potentially powerful actors influence the process, content and context of strategy workshops? More generally, how might such events be managed effectively, given their diversity of purposes? The findings reported in this article represent only the first steps of an exciting and potentially fruitful journey.

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Appendix

Research methods

In collaboration with the Chartered of Management Institute (CMI), the survey instrument, a structured questionnaire, was distributed in summer 2004 to a stratified random sample of 8,000 CMI members. A total of 1,337 usable returns was received, a response rate of 16.71 per cent. However, roughly one third of the returned questionnaires, 34.2 per cent, were completed by individuals who have never personally taken part in strategy workshops. Consequently, a number of the findings reported in the main body of the article are based on a reduced number of “valid responses”.

The sample is fairly evenly divided in terms of organisational size, with the largest proportion in medium-sized organisations, comprising 251-5,000 employees (see [Exhibit A1](#)). A wide cross-section of sectors and management functions is also represented in the sample, as detailed in [Exhibits A2 and A3](#).

The sample is also fairly evenly divided in terms of managerial seniority: 30.7 per cent of the participants are directors; 45.7 per cent occupy senior management roles. The remainder are drawn from a range of roles and levels. In total, 75.8 per cent of the sample are male.

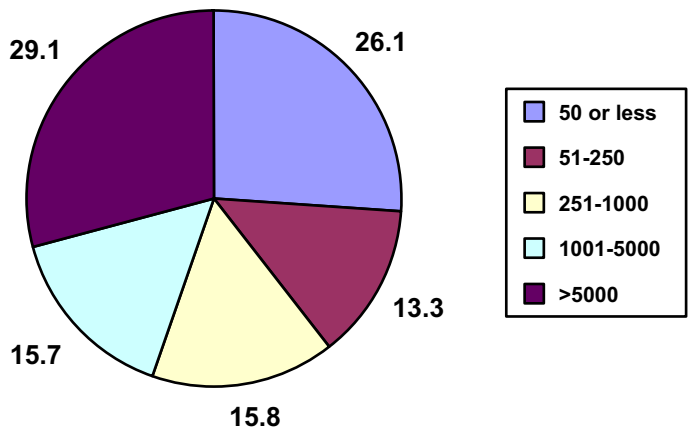


Exhibit A1. Sample broken down by organisational size in terms of number of employees (%)

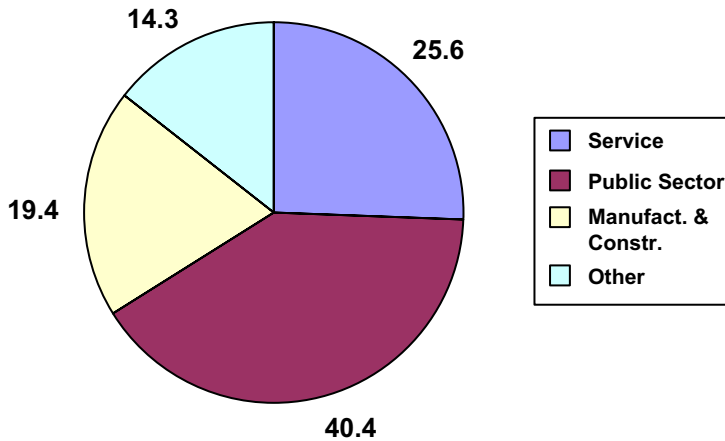


Exhibit A2. Sample broken down by sector (%)

Exhibit A3. Sample broken down by management function

Function	%
General management	31.5
Management consultancy	10.2
Production/operations	9.3
Administrative/management services	8.9
Business Development	7.7
Finance/accounting	3.8
Marketing/sales	3.4
Personnel/HR	3.4
Miscellaneous	21.1

Our questionnaire comprised 36 questions, sub-divided into six major sections:

1. demographic data about the research participants and their organisations (10 questions);
2. the research participants' involvement in strategy workshops (two questions);
3. the format of strategy workshops (eight questions);
4. the purpose of strategy workshops (four questions);
5. the nature of workshop participants, facilitators and the tools adopted during workshops (five questions);
6. the outcomes of workshops (six questions).

In Sections 3 to 6, participants were asked to report on the most recent strategy workshop in which they had participated. In addition to the highly structured questions that formed the bulk of the survey, participants were also encouraged to provide narrative statements to clarify their responses and a final question encouraged open-ended reflections on successful and/or unsuccessful strategy workshops. As explained in the main text, our reporting of the data is largely confined to a focused consideration of the three issues identified as particularly salient at the outset: (1) formal

strategy-making's survival; (2) its potentially changing roles; and (3) the extent of stakeholder inclusion in strategy workshops.

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