

Agility

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Introduction

In turbulent environments, a key success factor for organisations is strategic agility, i.e. “the ability to remain flexible in facing new developments, to continuously adjust the company’s strategic directions, and to develop innovative ways to create value” (Weber and Tarba, 2014, p. 5). Thus, agility is usually considered a capability that enables organisations to respond quickly to unprecedented environmental change (Renzl et al. 2021). However, the term agility is often confused since it refers, both, to the capability of organisations to cope with environmental dynamics and to agile methods such as Scrum or extreme programming (Renzl et al., 2021).

Agile methods have gained popularity particularly in information systems development. In 2001, a group of software developers coined the term “agile” when they published the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development” (Beck et al., 2001). This manifesto introduced several guiding principles, including a clear orientation towards individuals and their interactions, working software over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration, and responding to change over following a plan. Practices that adhere to those principles allow teams to quickly adapt and keep pace with ever-changing demands in software development and beyond.

Practice-theoretical accounts of agility focus on the internal dynamics of practices to accomplish agility in organisations. These accounts reflect how to develop organisational capabilities for agility (e.g. Renzl et al., 2021; Ritter et al. 2021; Walter and Rätze 2021), how agility can be a goal of strategizing (e.g. Kohtamäki et al., 2020; Grand & Bartl, 2019), how to enable actors to effectively manage uncertainty in their work (e.g. Dönmez and Grote, 2018), and how strategic agility is accomplished over time (Heracleous et al., 2023).

Key themes

Organisational agility has been well researched in the last decades. In the following, we highlight the key themes for Strategy-as-Practice research: how agility is enacted through practices, agility as a goal for strategizing, and agile methods in practice research.

How organisational agility is enacted through practices. Practice-based research on organisational agility centres on developing insights into the processual nature of organisational agility, and thereby accounts for the endogenous dynamics of change (e.g. Renzl et al., 2021). Practice studies on organisational agility acknowledge that agility is a phenomenon that emerges, is continuously enacted, and reproduced through organisational practices. For example, Kohtamäki et al. (2020) show that organisational agility is enacted through everyday practices of collaboration, such as informal dialogues and idea-sharing between colleagues. These practices enable organisations to increase the speed of adaptation and, consequently, enable organisations to survive and prosper. Similarly, Walter and Rätze (2021), building on the capability origins of the agility concept, develop a perspective on capability development as a process that leads to organisational agility through a collective pattern of behaviour. To accomplish agility, organisational actors introduce and continuously update the capability development process collectively. Moreover, Mahringer, Dittrich, and Renzl (2024) show how the typical patterns of routines enable actors to react quickly to changing situations, and thus enact agility.

Agility as a goal of strategizing. Research on the role of practices in agility suggests that it is advantageous for organisations to aim for agility, because it helps them to compete in dynamic environments (Kohtamäki et al., 2020). Some studies view agility as a goal for **strategic change** that is incorporated into strategizing and explain agility as resulting from the practices involved in the strategizing of actors. Sarpong et al. (2013), for example, identify the critical role of strategic **foresight** in enabling agility and propose that strategic conversations and **reflexivity** of actors contribute to ‘finding a way’ to a successful future. Grand and Bartl (2019) find that agility is based on the enactment of a specific set of **strategizing routines** such as abstraction from familiar perspectives, reassessment of strategy criteria, experimentation, and resource reconnection. Their study reveals that managers enact agility through the interplay of these practices. Since strategic agility evokes tensions such as flexibility versus stability, its paradoxical nature has been examined and leadership practices addressing these challenges have been proposed (Lewis, Andriopoulos & Smith, 2014).

Agile methods and practices. Scholars also analyse how agile methods are used in practice. Agile practices are well-suited to be theorised in practice research because they allow researchers to observe recursive patterns of action on a micro-level and in real social settings that involve **temporal** boundaries (e.g. clearly defined projects, sprints). Dönmez and Grote (2018), for example, examine how agile software development teams manage uncertainty in their daily work. They show that agile teams use practices from different agile software development methods complementarily to adapt flexibly to various sources of change. In this case, the combination of practices derived from agile methods such as Scrum, Kanban, or XP provide the necessary structure to be able to respond to change. Practices of agile methods as a level of analysis also allow scholars to show the **routine dynamics** of stability and change in organisations. Scrum routines, for instance, provide stability in terms of how to perform agile practices and at the same time facilitate change by allowing them to adapt whenever necessary (Mahringer, Dittrich & Renzl, 2019). Methodologically, research on agile practices is mostly based on **ethnographic** observations and/or **interviews** that allow for longitudinal investigations of organisations introducing or employing agile methods in practice.

Future research

Although agility has gained widespread interest in academia, business, and education over the past decades, further Strategy-as-Practice research is needed to examine the **microfoundations** and social dynamics that either facilitate or inhibit the successful implementation of agility in organisations. First, studies need to address the diverse contexts in which the concept of agility is incorporated in contemporary organisations and describe agile practices for strategizing beyond the context of software development. Second, rather than focusing on reactive approaches to agility, research should also analyse how agility helps to proactively shape the organisational environment, e.g. the role of agility in the enactment of strategizing routines. Furthermore, studies should build on **paradox** research and analyse practices that enable leaders to manage the tensions of strategic agility. Third, further research is needed to study how agile methods contribute to organisational agility and vice versa. Finally, research with a more **processual perspective** on organisational agility might reveal the relevance of **temporality** and allow for a deeper understanding of the various contexts influencing agility in organisations.

See also

Practice theory (Theories)

Routine Dynamics (Relations to SAP)

Foresight (Phenomena)
Interviews (Methods)
Microfoundations (Relations)
Strategic Change (Phenomena)
Strategizing Routines (Phenomena)
Ethnography (Methods)
Process Perspectives (Methods)
Paradox (Concepts)
Reflexivity (Concepts)
Strategy-as-Practice (Concepts)
Time and Temporality (Concepts)

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