

Strategic Planning: A Tool for Managing Organizations in Competitive Environments

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Abstract: Why some of the organizations in any industry in comparison to others are more profitable and why the performance of some organizations is more desirable and lucrative? Why some of the organizations tolerate political, economic and social changes and overcome them easily, while on the contrary some organizations fail easily and can not continue their business? In other words, how successful organizations gain competitive advantage? Since in each organization, the ultimate goal of strategy is achieving competitive advantage, for answering to the mentioned questions, there is a need to analyze the process of strategic planning. The purpose of this article is to analyze the process of strategic planning and factors influencing it, so that organizations by means of that identify the concepts and methods of strategic planning correctly and they will be able to formulate strategy in condition of uncertainty and intense competition and can protect themselves against environmental changes. Also, in this article, factors and dynamics that relate to the initiation of strategic planning efforts within organizations and the relationship between flexibility, strategic planning and organizational performance have been analyzed.

Key words: strategic planning, strategic thinking, strategy, flexibility, organizational performance.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning has suffered a downturn in popularity and influence since the early 1980s. However, during the 1990s, strategic planning regained some of the reputation that it had previously lost (Elbanna, 2010) and today there is a new interest in strategic planning as a means of monitoring a rapidly changing environment and taking effective decisions and action based upon that monitoring. Strategic planning has been around for centuries in the form of military strategy especially. However, in terms of strategic planning for business, it can probably be traced back to the 1920s when Harvard Business School developed the Harvard Policy Model, one of the first strategic planning methodologies for commercial businesses. One of the reasons that strategic planning is undergoing a resurgence is simply because many organizations have realized that the uncertainty of the current environment is precisely the reason why an organization should proceed with strategic planning

In times of uncertainty, managers need a way –a mechanism, a procedure, a methodology – to monitor and react to the environment. Strategic planning is that methodology. It is essential to remember that strategic planning is a process, not a product. It is ongoing and permanent (Carter, 1999). In fact, Strategic planning is a generally pursued as a rational undertaking to reduce the firms' performance uncertainty through trade-off decisions from controversial choices (Karnani, 2006). It determines end goals to be achieved and strategies for accessing, allocating, and managing resources to achieve predetermined goals.

In complex global environment, unpredictable changes, time and uncertainty play an important role. Such changes have removed many organizations from the competition area and predictions about the future have been failed (Hanafizadeh *et al*, 2006). In the strategic planning process, time and uncertainty have an important role too. Today organizations try to identify, strengthen and improve their capabilities for adapting and completing their knowledge and skills to cope with this turbulent environment, while in such a complex and competitive environment where there are saturated and compact markets, lacking strategic planning, place organizations in a poor competitive situation and eventually confront them to failure (Hamidzadeh & Shahri, 2007). Therefore, if an organization wants to adapt itself with external environment and customer needs, it requires a strategy. Porter says that an effective and strategic planning helps the organization to gain

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competitive advantage compared to other competitors. Indeed strategy renders choices about what not to do as important as choices about what to do. He believes that the root of the problem is the failure to distinguish between operational effectiveness and strategy, because most of organizations pay attention to effectiveness without considering how they can achieve desired effectiveness (Porter, 1996).

Nowadays organizations are so complex that without detailed planning, they can not survive. Strategic planning requires information about future opportunities and threats and it is prediction of the way of facing against those opportunities and threats. Planning cause to create a kind of commitment to action based on prospective thinking and serious determination to its continuity. Moreover, achieving individual and organizational goals requires planning. In fact, the need for strategic planning is based of this issue that all organizations competing in a dynamic environment, desire to spend their limited resources for their diverse and growing needs. Dynamism and turbulence of environment and uncertainty caused by environmental changes adds on the indisputable necessity of strategic planning (Rezaian, 2008).

Strategic Planning:

Planning is not a new phenomenon. It has roots in military history (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011; Ruch, 2004). The Greek word *stratego* means "to plan the destruction of one's enemies." (Ruch, 2004). Planning has, over the years, been approached in many different ways by companies (Dyner & Larsen, 2001). Successful organizations will anticipate and address environmental turbulence through strategic planning (Rogers *et al.*, 1999). Bryson presents strategic planning as a set of concepts, processes, and tools for shaping "what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it". In the long run, its purpose is to promote strategic thinking, acting, and learning on an ongoing basis (Poister, 2010). Strategic plans are those which are designed to achieve the comprehensive goals of the organization, so that to ensure the execution of organization's mission (Rezaian, 2008). Hence Strategic planning is not just planning like long-term financial planning or capital planning, but involves a thorough assessment of the environment and organization (Hendrick, 2010). This kind of planning is done with foresight and in an organized process. The purpose of strategic planning is helping organizations to gain competitive advantage. However, with strategic planning, future state is not predicted, but in turbulent environments, strategic planning can help organizations to

- think strategically and develop effective strategies
- develop a coherent and defensible basis for decision making
- improve organizational performance
- deal effectively with rapidly changing circumstances
- anticipate future problems and opportunities
- build teamwork and expertise
- provide employees with clear objectives and directions for the future of the organization and increase employee motivation and satisfaction (Kriemadis, 2009).

Strategic planning can be used successfully by:

- Public agencies, departments, or major organizational divisions
- General purpose governments, such as city, county, state, or tribal governments
- Nonprofit organizations providing what are essentially public services
- Purpose-driven interorganizational networks (such as partnerships, collaborations, or alliances) in the public and nonprofit sectors designed to fulfill specific functions, such as transportation, health, education, or emergency services
- Entire communities, urban or metropolitan areas, regions, or states (Bryson, 2010).

Strategic Planning Versus Strategic Thinking:

When strategic planning arrived on the scene in the mid-1960s, corporate leaders embraced it as "the one best way" to devise and implement strategies that would that enhance the competitiveness of each business unit. True to the scientific management pioneered by Frederick Taylor, this one best way involved separating thinking from doing. In fact *strategic planning* is not *strategic thinking*. Planning has always been about analysis—about breaking down a goal or set of intentions into steps, formalizing those steps so that they can be implemented almost automatically, and articulating the anticipated consequences or results of each step. Strategic thinking, in contrast, is about synthesis. It involves intuition and creativity. The outcome of strategic thinking is an integrated perspective of the enterprise, a not-too-precisely articulated vision of direction (Mintzberg, 1994). In fact, strategic thinking implies on understanding the dynamism of environment and capability to see future and the effective presence of organization for gaining continued success over time (Rezaian, 2008).

According to Mintzberg, promoting strategic thinking leads to the formulation of better strategies. He believes that managers who have capability of strategic thinking are able to encourage staff for finding innovative solutions to achieve success for organization (Moshbeki & Khazaei, 2009). Thus, strategic thinking should precede strategic planning' (Heracleous, 1998). Strategic planning is a series of concepts, procedures and tools that are designed to help leaders, managers and planners to think and act strategically. Then, strategic planning is not a substitute for strategic thinking, but both interact with each other in a dialectic process and both of them are essential to effective strategic management (Moshbeki & Khazaei, 2009). Moreover, given that strategic planning's sole purpose is to improve strategic performance, improving, assessing and monitoring the effectiveness of the strategic planning process would appear to be a key managerial task (Phillips & Moutinho, 1999).

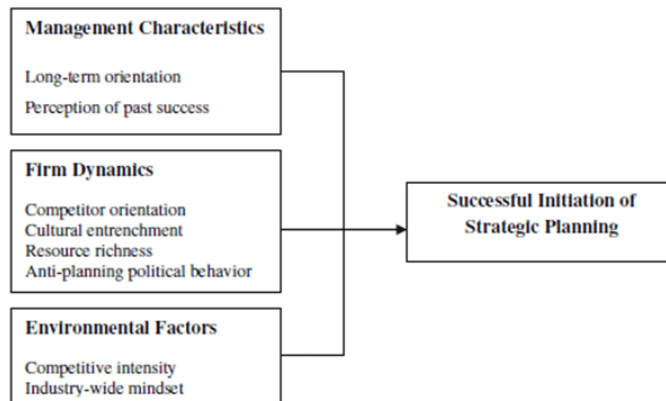
The Antecedents of Strategic Planning Initiation:

According to Harris and Ogbonna (2006) the initiation of strategic planning is driven by eight factors grouped into management characteristics, firm dynamics, and environmental factors that are shown in fig. 1.

1. Management Characteristics:

A. Long-term Orientation:

Time orientation is the extent to which the management of the firm is focused on short-term horizons or longer-term issues. Intuitively, an organization that is focused on short-term gain and rewards is less likely to plan, while a firm with a longer-term perspective is more likely to take steps to plan for the future.



Source: (Harris and Ogbonna, 2006)

Fig. 1: Factors associated with the successful initiation of strategic planning.

B. Perception of past Success:

Where management view immediate past performance as “successful” ,management action to improve performance through planning is unlikely. Conversely, where organizational crisis ensues as a result of perceived poor past performance, strategic planning is more likely to be initiated.

2. Firm Dynamics:

A. Competitor Orientation:

It encompasses the extent to which firms are oriented toward and understand not only the strengths and weaknesses but also the tactical and strategic capabilities of both current and potential competitors. So whatever the extent of competitive orientation is greater, the likelihood of successful strategic planning initiation is greater.

B. Cultural Entrenchment:

Harris defines cultural entrenchment as “the extent to which the culture of an organization is firmly established and widely held”. He argues that the existence of strongly-held and widely-shared entrenched cultural values restricts the ability of firms hampers the initiation of strategic planning.

C. Resource Richness:

The term “resource” is used to denote accumulated resource endowments and can be equated to assets. The focus here is principally on financial and management time resources. Firms that are rich in time and money are more likely to initiate planning efforts in an attempt to ensure that such conditions continue.

D. Anti-planning Political Behavior:

Harris argues that the initiation of planning is most frequently stopped by the political maneuvering of managers opposed to planning. He argues that seven political acts can be associated with the impediment of planning initiation. These include tactics of deflecting process, moving the goal-posts, creating a situation of scarce resources, impeding decisions, condemning planning, forming a coalitions, and tenacious resistance. It seems logical that whatever the level of political activity is lower; the likelihood of successful strategic planning initiation is greater.

3. Environmental Factors:

A. Competitive Intensity:

Intense competitive environmental conditions are associated with the initiation of planning. Findings of various researches show whatever the competitive intensity of environmental conditions is greater the likelihood of successful strategic planning initiation is greater.

B. Industry-wide Mindset:

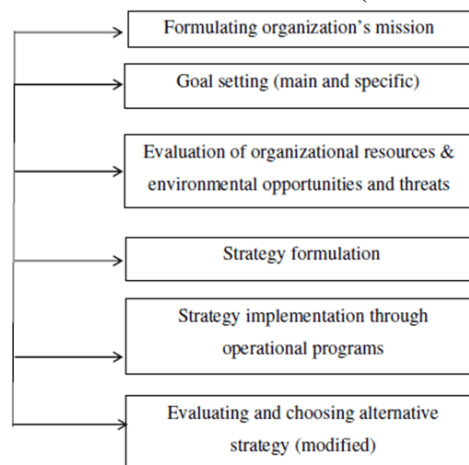
The extent to which firms share strong industry-wide assumptions, values, and artifacts is linked to their likelihood to initiate planning. “Industry mindset” is akin to the term “macroculture”. Whatever the industry-wide mindset is stronger the likelihood of strategic planning initiation is lower (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006).

Steps of Strategic Planning Process:

There are 6 steps for strategic planning process that are shown in fig.2 and discussed in the following:

1-Formulating Organization’s Mission:

The nature of a business is often expressed in terms of its mission indicating the purpose of the business; for example, to design, develop, manufacture and market specific product lines for sales based on certain features to meet the identified needs of specific customer groups via certain distribution channels in particular geographic areas (Hosseini-Nasab, 2011). In other the mission of every organization is actually the main reason for founding and establishing of that organization and it represents the existential philosophy of that organization (Rezaian, 2008). The mission of an organization determines the future objectives and executive activities of that organization. Therefore, the mission is a unique fundamental object which distinct organization from other similar organizations and determines its operation range in terms of product, technology, and market. Formulation of such a mission should be done in a way that the values ??and strategic decision makers’ priorities and preferences should be reflected in it (Pearce & Robinson, 2009).



Source: (Rezaian, 2008).

Fig. 2: Steps of strategic planning process.

If managers formulate the organization's mission properly, they can choose and use strategies which lead to preserve and strengthen unity among all members of the organization (Rezaian, 2008).

2- Goal Setting (Main and Specific):

After formulating the mission of organization, the arisen problem is how to achieve it. At this stage, a set of clear and given goals for specific time periods must be defined in a way that achieving to those goals, cause realizing the organization's mission. It should be noted that these goals are used as a basis for planning, policy making and setting performance standards and they play a vital role in the success of the organization (Rezaian, 2008). Therefore an important part of the planning process is in understanding how the 'objectives, policies, and plans are formulated' (Papke-Shields *et al*, 2006).

3- Evaluation of Organizational Resources & Environmental Opportunities and Threats:

The next step in the process of strategic planning is to identify strengths and weaknesses of organization compared to other organizations and to identify environmental risks and threats compared to opportunities available in it. In fact, the effectiveness of organization's strategies is influenced by factors existing in the internal and external environment of the organization. One of the useful ways for selecting the appropriate strategies is "SWOT" technique which was presented by Anderson in 1980. This technique is used as one of the strategic planning tools (Rezaian, 2008).

SWOT is the acronym for internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization or business and opportunities and threats existing in the external environment. SWOT analysis is the organized identifying of these factors and strategies that reflects the best combination among them. This analysis is based on this logic that effective strategies maximize the strengths and opportunities, while minimize its weaknesses and threats (Pearce & Robinson, 2009).

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats):

Strength:

It is a resource, skill or other advantage compared to competitors and the needs of markets that the institution or organization operates or will operate in them. Strength is a distinctive competence which it becomes the comparative advantage of the institution or organization in the market.

Weakness:

It is a limitation or shortage in resources, skills and capabilities that prevents effective functions seriously.

Opportunity:

It is a major desirable situation in organization's environment. For example improving relationships with customers or suppliers.

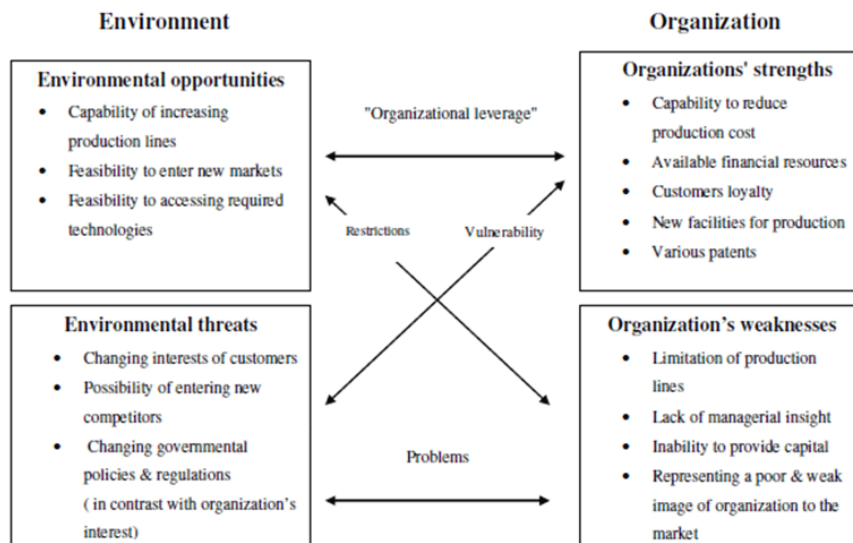
Threat:

It is a major undesirable situation in organization's environment. Such as change in regulations and laws, low growth of the market (Pearce & Robinson, 2009).

Fig.3 presents analysis of "strength-weakness, opportunity-threat". According to it "Organizational leverage" by comparing the environmental opportunities with organizations' strengths is determined, also focusing each one of environmental threats on one of the organization's weaknesses, will warn the existence of a "problem" and in many cases, environmental threats against the organization's strengths place the organization in an "constraint" , at last convergence of environmental opportunities with organization's weakness implies to a kind of "vulnerability" in the organization (Rezaian, 2008).

4- Strategy Formulation:

A fundamental tenet in strategic management is that an effective organization should attempt to align its characteristics with the challenges posed by its external environments. Strategies are viewed as the 'tools' containing the 'means' that will be employed by the organization in an attempt to attain that alignment (D'Aveni, 1995). Through attainment and alignment of resources and capabilities organizations build competitive advantage and prosper. In other words, to survive and gain competitive advantage, organizations of all sizes increasingly need to pursue well developed and clear cut strategies (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990). Hence after evaluation of organizational resources and environment, the choice of suitable strategy for optimum



Source: (Rezaian, 2008)

Fig. 3: Analysis of “strength-weakness, opportunity-threat”.

use of existing requirements will be possible (Rezaian, 2008). Here the key issue is that what is strategy and how to choose the best strategy? Different definitions for strategy are presented by management experts as follows:

Porter declared that “strategy is the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities. If there were only one ideal position, there would be no need for strategy. Therefore, the essence of strategic positioning is to choose activities that are different from rivals. At general management’s core is strategy: defining a company’s position, making trade-offs, and forging fit among activities (Porter, 1996).

According to Ansoff “Strategy is comprehensive understanding to important and growing responsibility of management whereby organization moves according to environment and determine its place in a way that it will provide the success of organization.”(Forouzandeh, 2005).

Strategy is large-scale and foreseeing programs for interaction with the competitive environment in order to optimize to achieve organization goals. Strategy is actually the game plan of an organization and provides a framework for managers’ decision-making (Pearce & Robinson, 2009).

Robbins defined strategy as a process of setting fundamental long-term goals, adopting labor practices and allocating required resources to achieve these goals. According to Robbins there are two common theories about the strategy:

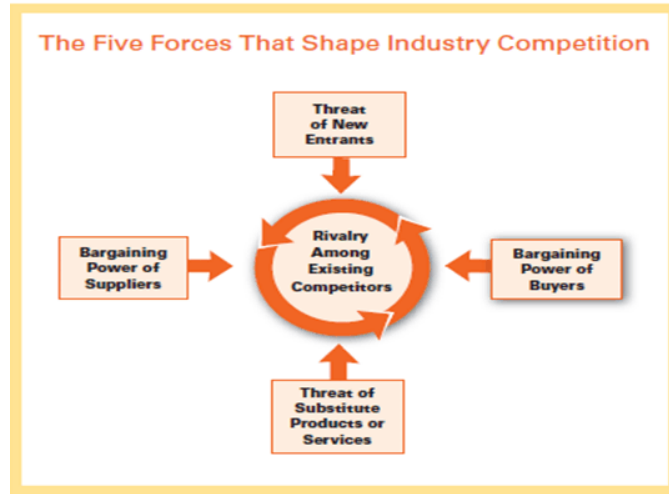
- **Theory I:** Strategy has planning and scheming state. It is clear guidelines developed and formulated previously and managers determine where they want to go and then for reaching to that destination, they formulate a principled and organized plan and after that provide the necessary resources to achieve their goals.
- **Theory II:** Strategy has "evolutional" state. It means that strategy is not basically deliberate and systematic plan and as time passes it emerges as a pattern during the important decisions (Robbins, 2008).

To formulate the strategy for an organization, various models and methods are provided by management experts. It should be noted that the use of any model depends on the correct understanding of that organization and its requirements. Here, we represent two models introduced by Michael E. Porter and Fred R. David for strategy formulation.

According to Porter (2008), awareness of the five forces can help a company to understand the structure of its industry and stake out a position that is more profitable and less vulnerable to attack

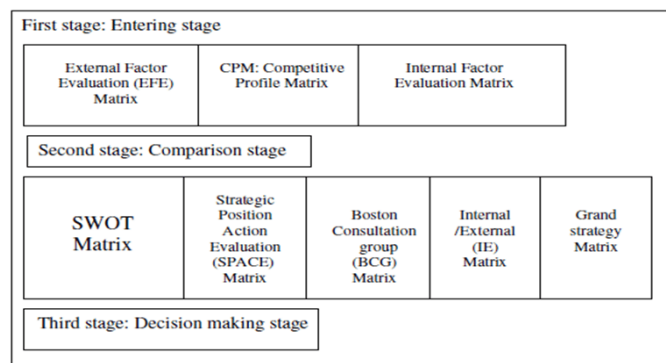
Generally the creation basis of all strategic planning methods is competitive environment and strategic planning is used to achieve goals and vision, while the organization is competing with its competitors (Tohidi et al, 2010).In 1979, *Harvard Business Review*, published “How Competitive Forces Shape Strategy” by Michael E. Porter. He expressed that industry competition is based on five forces. In fact understanding the forces that shape industry competition is the starting point for developing strategy. Every company should

already know what the average profitability of its industry is and how that has been changing over time. The five forces reveal industry profitability is what it is. Only then can a company incorporate industry conditions into strategy (Porter, 2008). The five competitive forces are shown in fig.4 and also QSPM: Quantitative Strategic planning Matrix introduced by Fred R. David is presented in fig.5.



Source: (Porter, 2008).

Fig. 4: The five competitive forces that shape strategy.



Source: (David, 2003).

Fig. 5: QSPM: Quantitative Strategic planning Matrix.

5- Strategy Implementation:

After strategy formulation, its implementation must be programmed. Best formulated strategies without correct implementation don't have practical value. For strategy implementation the following tools should be utilized:

- Organizational structure appropriate to strategies
- Coordination of organization's skills, resources and capabilities in the executive level.
- Create an organizational culture appropriate to the organization's new strategy.
- Cooperation and sympathy among managers and employees of all sections and units of organization (Rezaian, 2008).

Also successful implementation of these strategies will depend on suitable support from the planning systems. The managers and operators in the organization require varying amounts and kinds of information for discernment of strategically-based opportunities, threats, strengths, and weaknesses (Brock & Barry, 2003).

6- Strategy Evaluation:

To determine how much the goals are achieved, implemented strategies should be monitored and

controlled. Strategy evaluation includes three following main activities:

- Review of main principles of organization’s strategy
- Compare expected results with actual results
- Taking corrective actions to ensure the accuracy of performance and operating based on plans.

Meanwhile, there are four criteria for strategy evaluation.

- 1- Procedure stability
- 2- Compatibility with environmental factors
- 3- Feasibility
- 4- Having a competitive advantage (Forouzandeh, 2005).

The Relationship Between Flexibility, Strategic Planning and Organizational Performance:

Flexibility means that to what extent new and alternative decisions are used during strategic planning and to what extent this flexibility causes positive organizational change and to what extent organizations can adapt themselves with environment and comply with environmental turbulence (Daft, 2009; Rudd *et al*, 2008; Combe and Greenley, 2004; Grewal and Tansuhaj, 2001). Theory predicts that successful organizations will anticipate and address environmental turbulence through strategic planning. It also predicts that they will demonstrate flexibility in strategically planning decision options about how they will adapt when the environment changes, in a preparatory or “ex-ante” state. Through flexibility organizations are better prepared to cope with environmental turbulence, enhancing the influence of their strategic planning on performance.

There are four types of flexibility exert mediating influences on the strategic planning and performance relationship that are presented in fig.6.

Operational Flexibility:

Operational flexibility is organizational ability to rapidly adjust market offerings, product/service mix and production capacity.

Financial Flexibility:

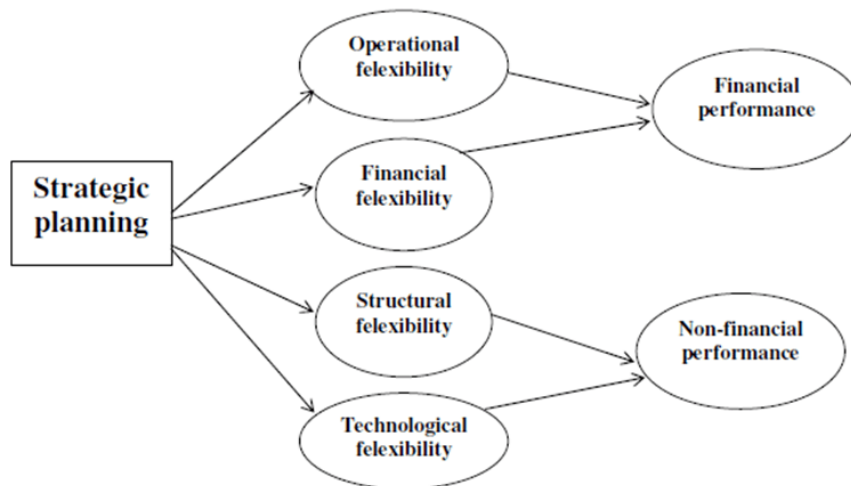
Financial flexibility is organizational ability to rapidly gain access to, and deploy financial resources.

Structural Flexibility:

Structural flexibility is organizational ability to rapidly restructure.

Technological Flexibility:

Technological flexibility is defined as organizational ability to alter technological capacity in line with competitive requirements (Rudd *et al*, 2008).



Source: (Rudd *et al*, 2008).

Fig. 6: The relationship between flexibility, strategic planning and organizational performance.

Conclusion:

Managing Directors face increasingly dynamic, complex and unpredictable environments where technology, the nature of competition, globalization, industry boundaries and the rules of the game are changing dramatically. The degree and complexity of change in the current economic environment is driving firms to seek new ways of conducting business to create wealth (O'Regan & Ghobadian, 2005). The need to design strategic planning systems to fit particular organizations and their unique contexts has been addressed by numerous management writers (Drago & Clements, 1999). Therefore, to succeed in such competitive markets, having a strategic planning is obligatory. As mentioned before, Strategic planning is defined as the process of determining an organization's long-term goals and then identifying the best approach for achieving those goals (Lisinski and Saruckij, 2006). In fact, innovative and unique strategies which are the result of strategic thinking must be operationalized through convergent thinking or in other words, strategic planning (Moshbeki & Khazaei, 2009).

Strategic planning provides a framework for steering operations in the desired direction over the future (Barton, 1988) and it is often used as a way to introduce a period of change, assessment, and self-identification (Stephan, 2010). Strategic planning is in business like a map for a rally driver (Isoraite, 2006) and it is now a powerful tool for organizations to cope with an uncertain future (Duncan, 1990). An organization without a strategic planning in unpredictable and uncertain environments will lose the way and can not fulfill its mission. Although, strategic planning has a series of limitations and restrictions, but using it properly by thoughtful managers can cause impressive and positive results. Reported case studies indicate that organizations using the principles of strategic planning are by far in better condition in marketing, profitably and beneficitation (Rhee & Mehra, 2006; Terziovski *et al*, 2003) and also organizations that embrace strategic planning are better able to pursue growth opportunities in a time of crisis (Wilson & Eilertsen, 2010). It should be noticed that successful strategic planning is dependent upon broad-based support and participation by organizational constituents (Welsh *et al*, 2006); hence, presenting the necessary training and education to managers about strategic planning is vital. Hereby they will be able to strengthen strategic insight and thinking in the organization, therefore they do not remain in the present time and pay attention to distant horizons too.

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