

PIKKA-MAARIA LAINE • LAPIN YLIOPISTO

## Work practices as strategy – an alternative to strategy as practice research

Within the strategy-as-practice field an activity may be viewed as ‘strategic’ “to the extent that it is consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the firm, even where these consequences are not part of an intended and formally articulated strategy” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl 2007, 8). I argue, however, that the classical definitions of strategy as a plan to use resources or to position the company in the competitive environment still dominate within the strategy-as-practice research. Thus the dominant strategy as practice research tends to focus either on top and middle managers’ actions or on explicit strategy practices like strategy meetings and workshops.

In this study I offer a new perspective on strategy that allows one also to consider employers’ work practices as a key part of an organization’s emergent strategy. In conceptualizing work practices as strategy I draw from the post-structuralist approaches to practice theory, as well as from Mintzbergian ideas of strategy as a consistent pattern of behavior that has consequences for the survival of the organization in its competitive environment and which emerges

in the day-to-day activities of the organization. Drawing on the post-structuralist practice based approach, I argue that the immanent logic of practices can be seen to produce organizationally relevant strategic actions. Practices are not just what people do. They are rather socio-historically constructed, embodied and habituated tendencies that produce actions to be purposeful, consistent and adaptable to constantly changing situations.

The research site of this study is a multinational consulting and engineering company, which has a long tradition and good reputation in providing extensive engineering projects for a specific industry. The **empirical material** consists of (1) participant observation in the context of a number of strategic and organizational development programs over a period of ten years, (2) in-depth narrative interviews of 14 project engineers in one of the business units of the corporation as well as 9 other interviews within the company, and (3) numerous company documents. In analyzing the material I used critical discourse analysis as well as semiotic analysis to identify what the project engineers considered important, appropriate and desirable as well as how they constructed their identities as key organizational actors.

Based on the empirical analysis I distinguished the following work practices: Pushing for Technical Solutions, Caring for Details, Pursuing Intimacy in Customer Relations, and Surviving Alone. I argue that the inherent logic of these work practices produces actions that are consistent with the changing customer needs and which result in continuous business development in the project work context. Through these practices customer needs are defined and fulfilled successfully, in a way that enables the company to survive in its competitive environ-

ment. These work practices thus produce emergent strategy and provide project engineers with particular expertise in business development.

This study makes two contributions to the strategy-as-practice field. First, it extends the concept of strategy practices by drawing from

post-structuralist practice theory. Second, it focuses the attention of managers as well as other organizational members on trans-subjective practices that guide action partly pre-reflexively and which should therefore be taken seriously when planning the future. ■