

Markt- und Unternehmensentwicklung

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RESEARCH

Elena Krause-Söhner

Dynamics of Organizational Ambidexterity

Studies from a Processual
Constructivist Perspective



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Elena Krause-Söhner

Dynamics of Organizational Ambidexterity

Studies from a Processual
Constructivist Perspective



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Foreword

For many companies today environmental complexity, uncertainty and dynamics are increasing. To stay competitive these organizations must be ambidextrous, i.e. able to implement both incremental (exploitation) and revolutionary (exploration) change, balance the acts of refinement (efficiency) and renewal (innovation)—and manage the tensions between the conflicting requirements. Managing ambidexterity is both a theoretical and a practical challenge.

There is a growing body of scholarly work focusing on ambidexterity. However, conceptualizing organizational ambidexterity as a dynamic and multi-level construct, Dr. Elena Krause-Söhner enhances our understanding of the concept in an unprecedented way. Based on a thorough theoretical framework and through a dedicated behavioural and process-oriented perspective on organizational ambidexterity, she adopts a macro- but also a micro-practice perspective and generates exciting insights on the dynamics of organizational ambidexterity.

This novel approach enables a more differentiated and in-depth perspective on the strategic change of organizational ambidexterity configurations. Three longitudinal studies, two in the tertiary higher education sector (multi-campus university, Top20 in Germany), and one in the paper manufacturing industry (European market leader), constitute a strong empirical basis. An overarching management framework of organizational ambidexterity dynamics integrates the findings.

This dissertation provides the reader with insights into the following topics:

- A new conceptualization of organizational ambidexterity, innovative, theoretical sound and highly promising for effective strategic change efforts.
- Understanding that organizational ambidexterity change impulses work on multiple levels, with multi-level interrelations.

- Each organizational ambidexterity change process requires a context specific design of ambidexterity, tensions, dynamics and 2nd level monitoring.

With this book, Elena Krause-Söhner provides a new way of looking at organizational ambidexterity and of applying known concepts to practical questions of ambidextrous behaviour in organizations. As result, this book delivers a fresh perspective for researchers, but also a guideline of organizational ambidexterity for managers. It can be highly recommended equally to scholars and reflective managers facing the challenge of how to act, to develop and to innovate in terms of dynamically changing environmental requirements. We congratulate Elena to these inspiring, well founded and exciting results and wish her all the best for an ambidextrous and dynamic future.

Prof. Dr. Angela Roth
Prof. Dr. Christian Schaller
Prof. Dr. Kathrin M. Möslin

Preface

Duality and dynamic not only form the thematic core of this dissertation but also describe this phase of my life very well. I wrote this dissertation as part of the first cooperative doctorate between Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) and Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) while I was working part-time in an industry position. The interplay of being a researcher and a professional in industry was both challenging and helpful—sometimes it was even more dynamic than my research topic itself. Many people helped me undertake this dual journey and overcome its obstacles, so I would like to acknowledge them, as without the supporters from both paths I would not have been able to complete this research.

First and foremost, I owe gratitude to my doctoral supervisors, Prof. Dr. Angela Roth, Prof. Dr. Christian Schaller, and Prof. Dr. Kathrin Möslein, for their theoretical and methodological guidance, encouragement and advice. Your professional perspective and insightful feedback pushed me to sharpen my academic thinking and brought my work to a higher level. Thank you for all the freedom and trust you gave me to work on this topic.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues as well: on the one hand, my friends and colleagues in academia at the Chair of Information Systems, Innovation and Value Creation and my project team at DHBW in Stuttgart, with whom I had constructive exchanges and great times together—and on the other hand, my colleagues in industry at Mayer Group for their support in my business endeavours. I also would like to express my special thanks to the management of the Mayer Group and DHBW for trusting and believing in me with this project. I would further like to acknowledge the employees of both case organizations for their participation and engagement in the study. Without their trust and openness, this research project could not have been done.

This journey would not have been possible without the support of my wonderful family. I want to thank my parents, Renate and Michael, my brother Michael C. and my parents-in-law, Ingrid and Jürgen, for supporting and encouraging me. I thank my husband, Sebastian, for his enduring love, his patience and his endless support. More than one time he brought me important insights on my topic from the perspective of an engineer and from the experience of his own PhD journey. Thank you, Sebastian, for being such an important part of my journey, and for your willingness to spend hours and hours in constructive evening sessions while being my best friend and best motivator at the same time.

Elena Krause-Söhner

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to answer how the dynamics of organizational ambidexterity (OA) can be managed in complex organizations. This is a relevant question as today's organizations and the individuals within them face the challenge of focusing on short-term improvements while simultaneously targeting long-term innovation in a dynamic environment; thus, they seek to exploit and explore at the same time, leading to the scientific discourse of OA. The long-term success of any organization depends on its mastery to rework the exploitation–exploration configuration and find ideal combinations in dynamic environments. Researchers have expressed increasing interest in understanding these dynamic aspects of OA. This dissertation contributes to this discourse and thus builds on the assumption that organizations constantly change OA to identify ideal combinations of the exploitation–exploration configuration in constantly changing contexts.

This dissertation adopts a dynamic and multi-level view on OA and examines the dynamic aspects by which an organization makes changes to its exploration–exploitation configuration. It aims to understand how individuals within it respond on multiple levels and how OA changes can be managed. Drawing on a practice-based perspective and the view of organizations as socially constructed and constantly changing entities, organizational enacting and constructing change activities are investigated at multiple levels and sites in complex organizations. The dissertation focuses on a distributed organization in the German tertiary higher education sector undergoing strategic change. It also refers to a market leader undergoing a phase of profound change in the paper manufacturing sector. Both entities face the challenge of improving innovativeness and efficiency, which have required them to modify their exploration–exploitation configurations.

To understand how to manage OA change within a distributed organization on multiple levels, this dissertation adopts multiple methods to examine

the dynamics of OA. This dissertation is structured into four studies. The first study systematically reviews the published literature that explores OA from a process-oriented perspective. An organizing framework is derived from the current dynamic-oriented OA research to cluster research on “dynamic OA”. An agenda is proposed for future research and opportunities for further theorizing are highlighted. Based on an ethnographic approach, the second study explains how strategic OA change occurs in a distributed organization faced with the challenge of improving its focus on short-term improvements and long-term innovation from a macro-process perspective. To understand the dynamics involved in the strategic change process, a processual understanding of how organizations implicitly and explicitly change OA and the mechanisms enabling this development are presented. The results of this study show that strategic OA change is enabled by four crucial mechanisms: energizing, reflecting, framing, and reconfiguring. Conducted as longitudinal in-depth case analysis, the third and fourth studies adopt a micro-process perspective of OA to offer a more nuanced view and shed light on the processual aspects of OA occurring on multiple levels inside the organization. The findings suggest a model of OA change dynamics in distributed contexts and draw attention to different context-specific OA (re-)configuration impulses, specific OA change dynamics, and the role of ambiguity and discontinuity in processing these impulses and organizational responses on multiple levels. In summary, this dissertation offers an important insight into the dynamic aspects of OA and provides promising initial results for managers and researchers interested in understanding how OA can be managed in distributed organizations.

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Abbreviations

e.g.	exempli gratia (lat.); for example
et al.	et alii (lat.); and others
etc.	et cetera (lat.); and so forth
i.e.	id est (lat.); that is
OA	organizational ambidexterity
OI	organizational identity
p.	page
pp.	pages
qual.	qualitative
R&D	research and development
RC	research context
RQ	research question
SLR	systematic literature review
theor.	theoretical
THES	tertiary higher education sector
TMT	top management team
VHB	German Academic Association for Business Research

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Introduction—Objective of this Dissertation

1

1 Relevance of the Dynamics of Organizational Ambidexterity¹

“Only the best will survive the market consolidation and our goal is still to remain one of the leading companies in our industry, and to stand out from the market players through innovation and performance”.²

*CEO, EnvelGroup*³

“We started with innovation and should return to innovation. We started off as innovative and autonomous entities, but today’s organization has lost its innovative character not only through consolidation, but also because the associated synergies were not fully tapped into at the same time”.²

*President, MultiCorp*⁴

The above-mentioned quotes exemplify the important challenge that most organizations face today—the challenging situation increasingly focusing on short-term improvements while simultaneously driving long-term future-oriented initiatives. Short-term improvements involve the exploitation of old certainties, whereas long-term future-oriented initiatives are referred to as exploration of new possibilities

¹Part 1 of this dissertation follows previous publications of the author of this dissertation (see Annex A).

²This quote represents an excerpt of an interview conducted by the author of this dissertation.

³*EnvelGroup* is one of the leading European companies in the manufacture and sale of shipping and packaging solutions.

⁴*MultiCorp* is one of the largest German multi-campus universities in the tertiary higher education sector.

(March, 1991). The challenge lies in the conflicting nature of exploration and exploitation, which was first emphasized by March (1991, p. 71): “Both exploration and exploitation are essential for organizations, but they compete for scarce resources. As a result, organizations make explicit and implicit choices between the two”. However, in light of the constantly changing contexts in which today’s organizations operate, the challenge today lies in the mastery of dynamically developing and changing the respective investments in both exploration and exploitation (i.e. the exploration–exploitation configuration) through the constant search for an ideal combination in their specific contexts (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013). More specifically, organizations and their members are forced “to continuously reconfigure their activities to meet changing demands in their internal and external environments” (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008, p. 401).

This research focuses on this challenge by investigating how organizations can manage changes to exploration and exploitation configurations on multiple levels over time. Investigating the existing research gaps related to this topic is relevant not only due to the more recent developments in the theoretical discourse but also for practitioners, as illustrated by the quotations of two top management leaders operating in different industries during a phase of strategic change. The capability to explore and exploit at the same time is called organizational ambidexterity (OA). OA has long been recognized as being crucial to the long-term sustainable success of organizations. Thus, the OA literature is rich in studies that link OA and success; consider for instance the seminal work of Duncan (1976) to the more recent research conducted by Kostopoulos, Bozionelos, and Syrigos (2015). If organizations, and thus the actors in the organization, successfully invest in both exploration and exploitation, they are called ambidextrous (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996). A closer look to the literature on OA, however, reveals a number of gaps and shortcomings.

First, previous studies have tended to ignore the necessity of changing and developing organizations’ exploration–exploitation configurations over time. As a result, today’s field of knowledge lacks a rich understanding of the dynamic aspects of OA (Luger, Raisch, & Schimmer, 2018). A significant body of empirical research has analyzed OA from a static point of view, for instance the organization’s chosen approach to address the exploration–exploitation tensions (i.e. structural, contextual, and sequential OA) and the moderators, outcomes, and effects (see Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008 for an overview). Thus, OA remains “an explicitly organizational construct, which partly explains the lack of attention to the practical doing of ambidexterity by managers” (Jarzabkowski, Smets, Bednarek, Burke, & Spee, 2013, p. 8). Recent developments in the OA discourse have started to emphasize the dynamic nature of OA. For instance, Luger et al.

(2018, p. 450) reconceptualized OA as “the ability to dynamically balance exploration and exploitation”. More recently, Raisch, Hargrave, and Van de Ven (2018, p. 1512) clarified that organizations “constantly move between exploration and exploitation to balance the two processes and benefit from their mutually enabling qualities”. However, although these pioneering studies on the dynamics of OA have produced important and significant results (e.g. Luger et al., 2018; Zimmermann, Raisch, & Birkinshaw, 2015; Zimmermann, Raisch, & Cardinal, 2017), far less is known about the dynamic processes underlying the change and development of OA, the organization’s ability to handle the tensions over time, and the core processes of the enactment of OA (Kassotaki, Paroutis, & Morrell, 2019; Luger et al., 2018).

Second, previous research has also tended to ignore the fact that OA is a multi-level construct that occurs through an “individual’s capacity to be equally skillful with both hands” (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013, p. 287). Thus, OA is rooted in social theories on behaviour and learning (Wilden, Hohberger, Devinney, & Lavie, 2018). However, studies have most often evolved around the organizational level in terms of analysis (Wilden et al., 2018). Some works have focused on multiple levels of analysis (Kassotaki et al., 2019). Rarely have studies been dedicated to connecting the multiple levels of analysis (organizational, business unit, team, and individual). However, if OA is a multi-level construct, it is necessary to conduct a multi-level analysis to determine how lower-level processes are linked to meso- and macro-level aspects of exploration and exploitation, and vice versa (Wilden et al., 2018). Knowledge in this area is lacking. This is surprising, given that it is already known that “choices about how to resolve the tension at one level of analysis are often resolved at the next level down” (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008, p. 396). This aspect is inconsistent with the basic assumptions of March (1991), who calls for thorough research that bridges levels (Wilden et al., 2018). Thus, overall, there has been little discussion on OA as a dynamic and multi-level construct.

Against this backdrop the overall goal of this dissertation is to enhance the understanding of the dynamics of OA as a dynamic and multi-level construct in organizations in order to promote an emerging theory of OA (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008) and derive relevant managerial recommendations. This dissertation aims to extend previous empirical findings with empirically grounded mixed methods and multi-level analyses that reveal how the dynamics of OA can be managed. More specifically, this dissertation uses a constructivist–processual perspective to explore how organizations with distributed contexts, namely a multi-campus university and a market leader in the paper manufacturing industry,

change their exploration–exploitation configurations (i.e. OA dynamics) to understand how these dynamics can be managed and strategically changed. Through the empirical context of distributed organizations in the service and industrial sectors, this dissertation sheds light on a topic of high relevance in today’s ever-changing environment, in which increasingly distributed forms of organizations can be found, which are subject to special challenges due to a commonly geographically dispersed structure (Choudhury, 2017; Orlikowski, 2002). As the work presented in this dissertation is of an interpretative nature, recent calls to include other perspectives in the discussion on OA are addressed (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Thus, this work reconnects to the behavioural roots of March (1991). The following chapter addresses the goal and research questions (RQs) of each study in this dissertation in detail.

2 Research Goal and Research Questions

Based on the aforementioned considerations and to address the gaps stated in the introduction, this dissertation has formulated the following overarching RQ and aims to make three significant contributions:

RQ: How can the dynamics of OA be managed in distributed organizations?

First, the dissertation at hand adopts a processual view and longitudinal approach for this empirical analysis. This dissertation thereby responds to calls for longitudinal research (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). All studies that are part of this dissertation offer a more nuanced view and a dynamic understanding of OA and contribute to the emerging discourse on OA as a dynamic construct (Luger et al., 2018; Zimmermann et al., 2017). In doing so, Study 1 contributes to the discourse by encouraging conceptual clarity through a categorization of existing OA process research, and thus, its results add to the emerging theory of OA. Studies 2–4 each contribute to the dynamic OA discourse through the longitudinal analysis of two different contexts (i.e. the service and industrial sectors) and the in-depth development of specific OA change models.

Second, the dissertation at hand contributes to the discourse of OA as a multi-level construct (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013) by studying various levels and sites. Whereas previous studies have focused mostly on positivist perspectives and approaches, in this dissertation, OA is analyzed from a social constructivist–processual perspective. Through a combination of real-time and historical data, this dissertation gives in-depth insights into the dynamics and interrelations that occur across multiple levels and sites. This dissertation thereby responds to calls for

research crossing levels (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). Therefore, previous knowledge is extended, promoting an upcoming theory of OA with new insights. While the ongoing discourse on OA shows that the exploration–exploitation framework is moving steadily away from its origins in social and behavioural underpinnings (Wilden et al., 2018), this dissertation focuses on the organizations’ actors common change activities and learning. It thus reconnects to the behavioural roots of March (1991) and addresses recent calls to include other perspectives in the discussion on OA (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010).

Third, as it is the aim of this dissertation to capture the reality as it stands (Pettingrew, 1990), it provides insights on the OA changes in two organizations, both of which are confronted with the challenge of improving innovativeness and efficiency and thus changing their existing exploration–exploitation. Besides the need for the change and challenging environment, both organizations offer the opportunity to observe OA changes in a distributed context. The first context, namely the multi-campus university, seems to be a suitable entity for this research, because universities—especially multi-campus systems (Creswell et al., 1985) with partially severed, operationally independent, or semi-independent campuses—offer some unique characteristics (e.g. in structure and leadership) and differ in many ways (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 25). The second context, namely a market leader in the paper manufacturing industry, also seems to be a suitable research subject; this is a practically relevant case as this sector is confronted with considerable market decline and changes due to digitization. To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first research project analyzing OA- change in distributed contexts. Figure 1 gives an overview of the research gaps addressed in this dissertation.

In order to meet the complexity of the research field and gain a higher level of knowledge, a mixed methods approach is planned. This dissertation consists of four studies, one conceptual and three empirical, each of which stresses upon the dynamic aspects of OA from a process-oriented perspective. The first study involves a conceptual piece of work, namely a systematic literature review (Study 1). Study 2 is the first of three empirical studies. It adopts an ethnographic approach and is intended to inform the second qualitative study. Studies 3 and 4 are both designed as longitudinal qualitative in-depth case studies in the above-stated two different research contexts. Studies 3 and 4 are associated with a distributed organization in the service sector and a distributed organization in the industrial sector, respectively. Figure 2 provides an overview of the studies included in this dissertation. Chapter 3 outlines the objectives and RQs for each study in more detail. In