

**TEMPORAL INTENTIONALITY: PROMPTING TIME-RELATED
DELIBERATIONS IN STRATEGIC ACTION**

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Abstract

Time has long been of interest to strategy scholars. Speed may be a source of competitive advantage, strategic planning structures action across time, and temporal norms open and close opportunities. Yet temporality has mostly remained only a backdrop for strategic action in strategy research. Thus, in this Guidepost we call attention to temporal intentionality. This includes focus on timing of action and non-action, but also accelerating, entraining, sustaining, and narrating action. We elaborate on these different aspects of temporality and propose new questions for exploratory, abductively-oriented research on temporal intentionality.

Keywords: temporal intentionality, temporality, timing, strategy process, strategy practice, strategic change, strategic action, narrative

Time can be a source of competitive advantage or a trigger for innovation (Kunisch, Bartunek, Mueller, & Huy, 2017). In the current geopolitical environment, it may also imply a strategic threat as in, “We will respond at a time of our choosing.” In strategic management, advanced technologies such as generative AI are accelerating action and even pre-empting decision making (Lindebaum, Vesa, & den Hond, 2020). Yet to date, we lack comprehensive understanding of how managers and other organizational actors make sense of time in their strategizing (Burgelman et al., 2018). In this Guidepost, we argue that time is more than an important context in structuring or driving action; it is something to be reflected upon as the defining aspect of strategy. This is why we call for a focus on *temporal intentionality*, that is, deliberate consideration of time and reflection on its opportunities for a strategy actor.

There is a lack of overall understanding of the different ways in which time affects strategy processes and practices (Burgelman et al., 2018), and affords strategic action (Jarvenpaa & Välikangas, 2021). Thus, the purpose of this Guidepost is to offer an overall framework for prompting opportunities for temporal intentionality. The timing of action and non-action is a key part of temporality, but it is also important to focus attention on accelerating, entraining, sustaining, and narrating action. These aspects not only represent different dimensions of temporality but together make up a framework of increasing intentionality with regard to

time. Each aspect deserves special attention in its own right but there are also issues and questions that cut across these domains, such as shaping the identity of a strategy actor and others' expectations of such action. We propose an agenda for exploratory, abductively-oriented future research that takes temporal intentionality seriously.

TIME-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS IN PRIOR RESEARCH

Time is often treated as a contextual or very basic background factor in strategy research (Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, & Tushman, 2001). Organizational activities and events are seen in relation to a chronological continuum from past to future. Outstanding corporations compete by practicing relentless change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997) or reinventing product development cycles (Stalk, 1988), with temporal features characterizing the outcomes of decision making and action (being first, changing fast), the broad nature of strategy change (evolutionary, cyclical, punctuated), or the properties of the organizational environment (high velocity, slow moving).

There are also studies that highlight the role of different temporal elements in strategic action. Ancona and Chong (1996) emphasize the entraining of strategic action to industry and environmental rhythms and tempos, zeitgebers, and technology or business model disruptions. Various 'timely' responses are identified, such as active waiting (Sull, 2005), shaping momentum (Jing & Van De Ven, 2014), or navigating high velocity environments (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). In this vein, dynamic capabilities require the mastery of multiple time frames (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008), as in the balancing of exploitation and exploration (March, 1991). Time-based pressures include the opening and closing of windows of opportunity for strategic action (e.g., Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016). Furthermore, temporal demands require capabilities to address seemingly opposing timeframes in dealing with multiple stakeholders (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015), the intertemporal tensions of sustainable

business (e.g., Slawinski & Bansal, 2015), or power asymmetries reinforced by time conceptions (Cuganesan, 2022). Time here is an external element to be harnessed, managed, or leveraged.

However, temporality as a truly inherent part of strategizing has received less attention, with a few exceptions (Kunisch et al., 2017). Huy (2001) proposed that temporal capabilities enable the management of the sequence, orientation, and pace of organizational change interventions. Such capabilities may reflect the capacity for “being aware of the human potential for reinforcing and altering temporal structures” (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002: 698). Others have suggested the use of time as a resource in strategy making (Blagoev, Hernes, Kunisch, & Schultz, 2023), as when decision makers use delays strategically in compliance responses (Raaijmakers, Vermeulen, Meeus, & Zietsma, 2015). In contrast, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) found that strategy dialogue reflecting past, present, and future is used to unlock and develop viable strategy options. Temporal features may also interweave corporate strategy and identity (Ravasi, Tripsas, & Langley, 2020; Schultz & Hernes, 2020).

To place time front and center, we need to understand how actors “create their own sense of time” (Hernes, 2022: 2) and explore the opportunities time offers for becoming intentional about strategic action. For action to be strategic, it is often assumed to carry a strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Hitt, Tyler, Hardee, & Park, 1995; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000), but how might such an intent benefit from temporal considerations? One way of bringing temporality to the fore in strategic action is to consider time an intentional element of strategy rather than mere—albeit important—structure or context.

FUTURE RESEARCH: PROMPTING TEMPORAL INTENTIONALITY IN STRATEGIC ACTION

How to strategize with time? We refer to *temporal intentionality* as a strategy actor's explicit deliberation of the role that time plays in strategy. The framework in Table 1 invites engagement with time as an intentional element of strategy, a much-needed lens adding to our understanding of the potential in strategic action.

Insert Table 1 about here

We identify and elaborate five largely unexplored domains of temporal intentionality. In so doing, we raise concrete empirical topics and questions for future research.

Timing of action and non-action in clock time. In strategy literature, there is a strong bias favoring action (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004): action—as the clock is ticking—is valued over inaction (McElroy & Dowd, 2007). We suggest that a key consideration is whether to postpone or avoid direct action in the interest of inviting broader solution ideas, avoiding confrontation, building leverage, or letting time do the job. A future research question would be how strategy actors become intentional about action versus non-action, beyond possible inertia, in a way that builds potential leverage or avoids too-early signaling of an action course. Furthermore, as action is constitutive of a strategy actor, how do such strategic choices define the identity of a strategy actor and build future expectations of strategic action, including credibility?

Entraining action to zeitgebers. Different kinds of change require different internal temporal capabilities (Huy, 2001). Strategy actors are, thus, called to reflect on how time is defined collectively and to develop and steward temporal commons, as shared intangible

resources, within and across organizations (Bluedorn & Waller, 2006). New entrainers, or external pacers – also ‘zeitgebers’ (Bluedorn, 2002), are emerging from the increasing role that technologies play, from factories to offices to cyberspace. How may strategy actors become intentional about choosing the entrainers in the strategy-making environment that drive desired outcomes? In organizational life, there are a number of structural or annual routines—whether strategic planning cycles, changes in executive leadership, or gradual shifts to digital platforms—that provide potential for a temporal driver of particular rhythm. How do strategy actors exploit such temporal structures to reach particular outcomes? Future research should also address how advanced technologies such as AI entrain strategy work and either support or pre-empt its temporal intentionality.

Accelerating/slowing down the tempo. One aspect of strategic action is to consider whether the current or intended pace is appropriate—does action need to be accelerated or slowed down? Wajcman (2019) suggests a lack of reflexivity in what she calls ‘fast is better,’ which dominates in places like Silicon Valley. Concurrently, slowing down is increasingly discussed as a qualitative move (Ulmer, 2017). Managing intended tempo deliberately involves more than fast-paced moves. It is presumably better to be ‘agile’ by combining tempos (Doz & Kosonen, 2008), or ‘time aggressive’ in saving a declining firm from failure (Barbero, Martínez, & Moreno, 2020). Temporal intentionality may require a perspective that allows strategy actors to deliberately change the tempo of work—accelerating when needed in exploitation, and slowing down when necessary for further exploration (March, 1991). Exploratory, abductive future research could focus on how strategy actors combine such multiple speeds in order to be agile in failing fast but thoughtful in learning slowly.

Sustaining action in subjective time. When and how should a strategic quest be called a success or failure? There are drivers for continuation and inertia (Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000),

including the escalation of commitment (Brockner, 1992), that may provide challenges for a reflexive strategy actor in acknowledging failure and ceasing action. Temporal lock-ins (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019), structures (in terms of external rhythms requiring conformity, e.g., Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), and pressures (such as the bias for action, Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004) complicate temporal intentionality. Once such automating influences have been weighted and resisted, action may become strategic in its temporal intentionality, including interrupting a strategic commitment or pivoting to a new direction. Future research should consider how strategy actors define subjective time (Shipp & Jansen, 2021). What are the implications of calling a quest to a stop when it is failing or succeeding? How long do strategy actors continue a successful campaign and what are the implications for future strategy actions? What are strategy actors' capabilities in governing action, in particular by using multiple temporal framings?

Narrating time in strategic change. Temporality structures our thinking and action through the narratives that we create and live by (Dailey & Browning, 2014; Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). Strategy scholars have recognized the important ways in which narratives structure strategy work in terms of offering the means to make sense of an organization's future goals or objectives (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Fenton & Langley, 2011). The key issue in temporal intentionality is to relate one's own role as a strategy actor to such a personal and organizational narrative and its temporal dimensions. How is strategic action narrated in a larger context? This idea resonates with Ricœur's (1984, 2004) insights about the need for people to construct narratives that make sense in terms of what they are doing, how, why, and when—including an ethical perspective. Future research should address how strategy actors not only narrate strategic change but also insert themselves into the story as leaders. How is time narrated for strategic action? What is the narrative that strategists construct for themselves when striving to have impact?

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

We call for research on temporal intentionality in all its rich manifestations. We believe including time as an explicit articulation will not only benefit further theoretical and empirical work in strategy (Kunisch et al., 2017), but also offer an important bridge between research and practice. Time is often the avenue used when practitioners relate to research (e.g., Stalk, 1988). For example, Elon Musk, a formidable if contested strategy actor, is said “to do in one year, what it would take the average human to do in nearly eight years. No wonder the busiest man in tech gets so much done” (Wired, 2017). While Musk may not be known for reflexivity, he has driven radical action not only in electric vehicle markets but also in the space industry and in artificial intelligence. Musk has created his own, if rather idiosyncratic, temporal intentionality, and his particular brand of a strategy actor.

Beyond temporalizing super-actors, the serious intent here is to invite strategic management research to embrace time as the defining element of strategic action. In the spirit of Miller (2024), we call for abductive research that embraces real-world manifestations of temporal intentionality as far as time is concerned. In this Guidepost we have practiced “exploratory abduction” (Bamberger, 2018: 4). We have sought to identify new theoretical and empirical research avenues to gaining a better understand the role of temporality in strategy. We also see a need for future research that would highlight the differences across organizations and cultural and institutional contexts.

Such analysis would also yield new insights, adding to the ongoing discussion about temporality in organization and management research (Hernes, 2022; Reinecke, Suddaby, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2020). Our framework is meant to prompt and provoke new research, whether in contestation or advancement of the starting points we have identified. And we

welcome other considerations of time-defining strategic action that we may have missed. May time be the wisest counselor of all!

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Table 1. Temporal Intentionality in Strategic Action

| Action Domains | Anchoring to Time | Anchoring to Action | Strategic Potential of Time | Prompting Temporal Intentionality |
|----------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Timing</i> | Clock time | Deciding to act or not, now or later | Assessing leverage at a particular point in time | How does a strategy actor construct identity and build leverage to accomplish goals in relation to timing of action? How do strategy actors signal strategic intent with their timing of action/inaction? |
| <i>Entraining</i> | Zeitgeber (or temporal structuring); a pacer | Rhythm to which the unfolding of the outcome is linked (or not); Riding a particular temporal structure | Choosing the external pacer for strategic action | How does a strategy actor harness structural entrainers beneficial to a particular strategy (or overcome constraints)? How does strategic action seek to link with and benefit from the temporal structures in the environment that provide rhythms, deadlines, expectations of how long, how fast, or when? How are available rhythms mobilized to reach the goals pursued with change? |
| <i>Accelerating</i> | Tempo | Getting to the outcome faster or slower | Managing the speed of strategic action | How does a strategy actor manage the tempo in pursuing a particular outcome? How does the tempo define the identity of a strategy actor, including credibility? How does strategic action accelerate towards goals while slowing down to allow time for learning about the change process and the desirability of the outcome? |
| <i>Sustaining</i> | Subjective time | Interrupting and/or evaluating | Deciding when to acknowledge success or failure | When and why do strategy actors call for a success or failure at a particular time? |

| Action Domains | Anchoring to Time | Anchoring to Action | Strategic Potential of Time | Prompting Temporal Intentionality |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|
| | | outcomes; Pivoting | | <p>How does such a call define a strategy actor's identity for future action potential?</p> <p>How do strategy actors decide to sustain a course in acknowledging failure or success at a particular time?</p> <p>How are strategy actors able to pivot or change course at a particular time?</p> |
| <i>Narrating</i> | Narrative time | Narrating time in strategic action | Positioning oneself as part of a narrative of change (past, present, future) | <p>How do strategy actors evoke time in narrating action?</p> <p>How do they make sense of their own role and identity when striving to have impact?</p> <p>How do strategy actors narrate time—successes and failures—whilst positioning themselves as leaders (or followers)?</p> |

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