

Essays on Strategy and the New Managerial Realities of Competitiveness

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ABSTRACT

Managing competitive advantage – and the related strategies through which firms create economic value in the longer term, often under shifting and unfavorable conditions – is among the most persistent challenges confronting society today, whether viewed from a company-, industry- or macro-level perspective. The competitive landscape is in constant flux: new dynamics have reinforced, eroded or superseded the strategic realities of prior decades, and understanding these new trends is central to designing the managerial approaches needed to create economic value in the longer term.

This dissertation investigates how structural adversity affects the competitive landscape at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, the responses of the economic actors involved, and the ways in which economic value is created. I build upon the insight that strategy cannot be reduced to refining existing courses of action or following proven templates from the past but instead demands the entrepreneurial recombination of resources and relationships under conditions of uncertainty. I devote particular attention to the meso-level, where firms, knowledge institutions, and governments interact within dense networks, and where structural adversity and governance complexity are omnipresent.

The dissertation includes four phenomenon-driven studies that originated in strategic advisory work. A qualitative, exploratory orientation runs throughout the thesis, with each essay based on a tailored research design, including, *inter alia*, case-study analysis, in-depth interviews, and mixed-methods surveys. Each essay starts from the vantage point of an external party that faced a real-world managerial problem: a professional industry association, two regional government agencies, and a group of Triple Helix Coordinators. Each of these real-world challenges is framed in conceptual terms from modern management theory to improve our understanding of the ensuing strategic responses.

The economic actors' responses to structural adversity in each instance diverge from what mainstream management theory would predict: under adversity, the actors who contribute to sustained economic value are those capable of navigating complexity through entrepreneurial co-creation of value. Three theoretical threads run through the dissertation. First, advantage is relational and response-dependent: it is actively constructed through the interplay among the collaborating actors involved. Second, a 'cross-level' perspective is important: the macro-level deterioration of conditions requires remediation through micro-level capability development and meso-level orchestration. Third, effective governance is a

precondition for creating economic value: such governance includes especially, efforts at achieving purposeful coordination and building external legitimacy.

The empirical results may be somewhat counterintuitive: legitimacy appears to be elusive; survival can be a managerial achievement in its own right; successful Triple-Helix coordination requires thoughtful sector-specific adaptation and cannot be achieved by following a preset recipe; and substantive accountability is contingent on the coherence of the underlying intervention logic rather than on measurement sophistication alone.

When considered in their entirety, these findings define the dissertation's dual contribution. Conceptually, the thesis repositions structural adversity from an exogenous boundary condition to an integral feature of strategy. Structural adversity drives the mechanisms through which economic actors continue to create value, even as the conditions for doing so deteriorate. These mechanisms include building relational advantage, responding to the deterioration of environmental conditions by building new internal strengths, and deploying effective governance as the necessary precondition for value creation. The dissertation suggests that the meso-level represents an analytical space in its own right, linking strategic management scholarship to work on ecosystems, clusters and Triple Helix arrangements, and it demonstrates the merit of phenomenon-based, engaged research for uncovering strategic behavior that mainstream theory does not anticipate.

For managerial practice, the dissertation offers a diagnostic rather than a template. Managers, association leaders, Triple Helix Coordinators and agency officials are well advised to identify where exactly adversity originates and to match their response to this locus; to treat coordination as a design task that demands sector-specific adaptation rather than the transfer of supposedly best practices; to cultivate external legitimacy as an ongoing challenge rather than viewing it as a target that once achieved is easy to maintain; and to recognize that, under sustained adversity, safeguarding the capacity to co-create value with others may itself be the most consequential contribution of good management.