

VISTAS OF STRATEGY-MAKING WITHIN NORTHERN IRELAND CONSTRUCTION FIRMS: HOW SME'S DIFFER FROM LARGE FIRMS

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The Northern Ireland (NI) construction sector endured a more austere deterioration from the 2007 economic recession, compared to the rest of Great Britain (GB). Indeed, the sector experienced a consistent downward trajectory in output from 2007 to 2013, with a moderate recovery ensuing during 2014 and 2015. Consequently, construction firms, both large and small, responded to this cacophony of environmental change; scrambling to capture market power and preserve competitive advantage. Extant empirical research has shown that the pressure on chances of survival in an industry is far greater for smaller firms than for larger ones, and furthermore, that start-up firms fail at a higher rate than their larger rivals. Within the general management domain, there is a serious paucity of research investigating episodes of strategy-making within small and large firms during a period of economic contraction and growth; hence the emergence of this topic. To address this research gap, two comparative case studies with different macro-level outcomes, were used to examine episodes of strategy-making within NI construction firms during the period 2007 - 2015. Resonating under the strategizing praxis theme, the results suggest that large and SMEs differ substantially in their responses to industry environments, and subsequently in their strategy-making philosophy and approach. The large firm's generic strategy-making philosophy was based on deliberate and purposeful activities, while the SMEs philosophy was founded on the emergence of strategies non-deliberately. Lastly, the findings will enable top managers to recognize and reflect on how 'strategy is actually made', and how this relates to macro strategic change over time.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, organizational turnaround, SME, strategy-making

INTRODUCTION

Across the extant literature, there is much debate regarding the effects of firm size on strategic response to environmental change. Indeed, the literature suggests that small and large firms possess fundamentally different resources and capabilities (Shama 1993). Despite the wealth of 'isolated' strategic management empirical work of both the 'large' and 'small' research streams, the body of 'comparative' research remains modest, particularly in the realm of construction management. Furthermore, within the general management domain, no comparative research (as far as we are aware) has

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been performed on episodes of strategy-making within small and large firms, particularly during a period of economic contraction and growth. In this study, we address this gap by exploring episodes of strategy-making within large and SME NI construction contractors during the period 2007 - 2015.

To put into context, economic activity in NI peaked in Q4 2006 and subsequently deteriorated until Q2 2013; representing an 11% decline (NISRA 2017). As such, this decline equates to an extremely severe recession, where the peak-to-trough decline in output exceeds 10%, and is subsequently known as a depression (Claessens *et al.*, 2009). In a similar vein, construction output peaked in 2007 at £3.4 billion and then contracted for six consecutive years, reaching a trough in 2013, valued at £2.1 billion (NISRA 2017); representing a 38% decline. Since 2013, a recovery in the construction sector ensued, with construction output figures for 2015 reaching £2.6 billion. On the basis of these changing economic conditions, the study draws on two exploratory case studies in order to explore their generic strategy-making philosophy, whilst also exploring episodes of strategy-making within the practices of internationalization, domestic reorientation, cost/asset retrenchment, and tendering/procurement.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Given the considerable overlaps and affinities between the strategy process (SP) perspective and the more recent strategy-as-practice (SAP) approach, a number of authors have recently tried to conceptually distinguish between both notions (see for example, Kouamé and Langley 2017, and Tsoukas 2016). Indeed, both approaches seek to answer the same conundrum: how do organizations make strategies? Also of concern in the SP and SAP domains is the lack of explicit connections with macro-level phenomena, such as strategy outcomes and performance outcomes (Johnson *et al.*, 2003; Seidl and Whittington 2014). On this basis, Kouamé and Langley (2017) suggested using cross-case comparative logic to bridge the link between micro-processes and macro-outcomes.

Strategy-Making

Similar to the blurred lines between SP and SAP, disorientation also seems to exist between 'strategy-making' and 'strategizing' (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, Tsoukas (2016) argues that a clear distinction should be made between 'strategy-making' and 'strategizing'. He further contends that strategy-making can occur in both deliberate and non-deliberate ways, while strategizing, which is an intentional and conscious activity, generally involves deliberate actions. Vaara and Whittington (2012) also make similar distinctions, describing strategy-making as a plethora of activities that lead to the creation of strategies, and strategizing as more or less deliberate strategy formulation (i.e. strategy work or the doing of strategy). On this basis, strategizing is situated under the higher-level term 'strategy-making' (Vaara and Whittington 2012; Tsoukas 2016). However, with regard to the strategizing conceptual framework developed by Jarzabkowski *et al.*, (2007), if praxis is based on the notion of emergence then the central concept of 'strategizing' does not really align with the descriptions depicted above. Indeed, at this juncture it becomes clear on how these two terms have become conflated in the extant literature.

The SAP field is underpinned by the 'what', 'who', and the 'how' - known as 'practices', 'practitioners', and 'praxis', respectively (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2016). According to Vaara and Whittington (2012, p.290) 'praxis refers to the activity involved in strategy-

making'. Indeed, strategy-making has also been described as a dichotomy of strategy activities, entailing inductive and deductive approaches (Regnér 2003), while more recently this has extended to a trichotomy, involving inductive, deductive and abductive approaches (Tansey *et al.*, 2018). It is this inductive or non-deliberate element of strategy-making (i.e. strategy without design) that aligns particularly well with the Heideggerian views of Chia and Holt (2006, 2009). The authors depict two modes of strategy-making - the conventional and dominant 'building mode' based on purposeful strategic activities, and the basic 'dwelling mode' that is based on the emergence of strategies non-deliberately throughout everyday practical coping (De La Ville and Mounoud 2016). Chia and Rasche (2016) have further developed this view, indicating that practical coping requires forms of tacit knowing; phronesis (prudent practical wisdom) and metis (practical intelligence for escaping puzzling situations); which are acquired through experience and the immersion of embedded social practices.

Firm Size and Strategic Response

Empirical research has shown that the pressure on chances of survival in an industry is far greater for smaller firms than for larger ones (MacMillan 1980). Indeed, across the extant literature, there is much debate regarding the effects of firm size on strategic response to environmental change. Some scholars argue that firm size dictates competitive advantage, which is a derivative of economies of scale, scope and learning effects (Bain 1956; Porter 1980). Scholars have even argued that smaller firms many exhibit increased flexibility, resilience, and adaptability in terms of organizational structure and processes when responding to reduced environmental munificence (Chen and Hambrick 1995; Carr *et al.*, 2004).

Both large and small firms face different economic environments depending on their market power and target markets. In fact, the literature further suggests that firms' responses are generally dictated by the competitive advantages available to them (Latham 2009), given that small and large firms possess fundamentally different resources and capabilities (Shama 1993). For instance, large size firms have been seen as garnering competitive advantages such as; economies of scale and scope, and learning effects (Ghemawat 1986). On the other hand, small firms are limited in their product and geographical scope and may have limited learning effect advantages (Latham 2009), however, they possess a number of competitive advantages such as; increased sensitivity to both customers and the market (Dean *et al.*, 1998), and increased flexibility in production (Fiegenbaum and Karnani 1991). In terms of market power, larger firms usually have higher proportions which helps them during times of economic decline. Smaller firms, on the one hand can have a protected market niche which helps them during recessionary periods, while other small firms who are unable to attain finance, can sometimes be forced out of business (Shama 1993). Regarding resources, larger firms are often associated with abundant slack resources (Singh 1990), which may give the firm an increased ability to attack competitors (Chen and Hambrick 1995). Conversely, smaller firms with less resources, potentially possess more sensitivity to changing market needs than their larger counterparts (Latham 2009).

RESEARCH METHOD

Based on methodological recommendations of Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), two cases with different macro-level outcomes (turnaround vs non-turnaround) and at two different extremes (large vs SME) were deliberately chosen for cross-case

comparison. On this basis, the research method adopted consisted of two exploratory case studies of NI construction contractors. Given that the collection of information concerning strategy-making is very sensitive (Regnér 2003), and also that the approach involved an in-depth exploration concerning 'how' type research questions (Yin 2014), a case study approach was deemed appropriate. Indeed, several proponents of the SAP perspective have favoured qualitative methods in their research (e.g. Balogun *et al.*, 2003; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). More specifically, given that theorizing in the SAP field is at a relatively 'early stage' (Kouamé and Langley 2017), exploration of the respective phenomena are particularly relevant for in-depth qualitative inquiry (Graebner *et al.*, 2012). On the premise of the foregoing theoretical background, the central research question formed for empirical work was thus: How did vistas of strategy-making differ between large and SME NI construction contractors during the period 2007 - 2015?

Selection of both case firms was broadly based on a criterion sampling strategy related to annual turnover that aligns with the requirements set out by the European Commission (2005). Considering this, the 'large' firm had an annual turnover greater than €50 million in 2007, while the 'SME' had an annual turnover of less than €50 million. With regard to firm types, both cases were predominately civil engineering / building companies. In relation to the empirical inquiry, field data was drawn from semi-structured interviews (with senior management), and was supplemented with company documents and archival data. Semi-structured interviews fill the spectrum between the two extremes of unstructured and structured interviews (Fellows and Liu 2008) and allow an in-depth investigation of the phenomena. A semi-structured interview instrument was thus utilized to assess two main areas - general company information and turnaround strategizing practices (episodes of strategy-making) during the period 2007 - 2015. The second stage of the interview initially utilised strategic themes (emanated from a review of key empirical strategic management studies) for broader level questioning. Subsequently, more focused questions were used to drill down at the micro-level, thereby generating episodes of strategy-making.

Interviews were conducted on-site at the firm's headquarters, and lasted between 90 and 130 minutes. Each interview was subsequently recorded (with the respondent's permission) and transcribed verbatim. To confirm accuracy and to ensure construct validity, transcripts were verified by the participant's (Yin 2014). A three stage qualitative coding process as recommended by Saldana (2013) was adopted for the research and consisted of: first-cycle coding, second-cycle coding, and lastly the post-coding and pre-writing stage.

DISCUSSION

A total of 16 categories emerged from the qualitative data analysis, however due to space restrictions, the scope of the discussion will be focused on episodes of strategy-making within the practices of internationalization, domestic reorientation, cost/asset retrenchment, and tendering/procurement. Before exploring vistas of strategy-making, the firms' generic strategy-making philosophy is firstly examined.

Firms' Generic Strategy-Making Philosophy

The large firm's strategy-making philosophy was based on a deliberate approach, while the SMEs course tended to be non-deliberate and emergent in nature. Indeed, the case data confirmed that the large firm develops three-year strategic plans which are reviewed and updated on an annual basis. Additionally, the firm utilises an

external facilitator for their strategic review days with the board of directors, and also for the preparation of the strategic documentation. Each year the updated (or new) strategic plan is presented to the whole business at their strategy forum, where the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) outlines their strategic objectives (corporate and business unit), work types, geographical areas of work and respective value sizes. Considering this, strategizing is thus an intentional and conscious activity, involving deliberate strategy formulation (cf. Tsoukas 2016; Vaara and Whittington 2012). This also tends to resonate with Chia and Holt's (2006, 2009) 'building mode', which is based on purposeful strategic activities.

In contrast, the case data illustrated that the SME didn't intentionally strategically plan, yet they non-deliberately created strategies in order to deal with the banks and to ensure their survival. Interestingly, in late 2007 the SME decided to use an external solicitor that they knew, as a sort of business consultant; to help them deal with pressing banking issues. Moreover, both directors of the firm met with the solicitor every Friday afternoon and went through critical actions that needed addressing. As such, they proactively created short-medium term strategic plans for the bank and therefore dealt with the immediate pressing problem of sustaining their business and servicing their loans. The SME acknowledged that at the time of negotiating with the bank and creating solutions, they didn't realise that they were inadvertently creating a strategic plan to survive. These findings thus concur with Bruton *et al.*, (2003) who established that financial institutions very often apply extensive pressure on firms in decline to take decisive actions. Strategy-making in this case aligns with Chia and Holt's (2006, 2009) 'dwelling mode', which is based on the emergence of strategies non-deliberately throughout everyday practical coping (De La Ville and Mounoud 2016).

Episodes of Strategy-Making

A number of practices will now be examined, with particular emphasis on praxis i.e. the activity involved in episodes of strategy-making.

Practice of internationalization - Resonating under the strategizing praxis theme, the results show that the large firm who already had extensive international experience, actually reduced its international expansion intensity, and undertook a more cautious approach during the period. In contrast, the SME tended to diversify into mainland GB markets, such as England and Scotland. Indeed, for the large firm, its level of resources (including knowledge structures) and path dependency triggered its entry into the US market. More specifically, given the high mobility of their prevailing human resources and the firm's path dependency of similar work in South America, the firm were in a position to tender for and subsequently win work in the US. On this basis, internationalization was abductive in nature and was partly achieved through the exploration of new markets (inductive strategy making), but more through the exploitation of established resources and knowledge structures (deductive strategy making) (cf. Regnér 2003).

Practice of domestic reorientation - With regard to new GB markets, the large firm increased its emphasis on English and Scottish markets in 2008, while the SME waited until 2014 to increase its emphasis. The SME perceived that they could maintain themselves in NI, and therefore put all their resources and effort into attaining work locally. During 2014 and 2015, the SME acknowledged that they were forced to evolve and to seek other markets, particularly given the increased competition and various supply-chain issues encountered in NI. Moreover, the firm

reported that there was a serious lack of quality subcontractors left in NI; with most of them leaving for London and Dublin.

The case data for both firms provides some thought-provoking episodes of strategy making within the practice of domestic reorientation. For instance, the SME utilised its stakeholder relationships to augment diversification into the London market. More specifically, the commercial director contacted architects and engineers in NI whom they had long-term relationships with, and who were already operating in the GB environment. Regarding one particular architectural firm from NI, the SME got the opportunity to tender for a private building project in London, and also another one in the north of England. Interestingly, they resourced all the GB projects with their own core management teams from NI, whilst also relying on some NI subcontractors. This resourcing decision was triggered by their relational assets, in that, a Republic of Ireland (ROI) contractor who they joint ventured with in NI, and whom had successfully established themselves in the GB market during the recession, advised them on how to resource such endeavours. In contrast, the large firm was able to enter more sophisticated sectors like the private 'energy from waste' sector; mainly because of its strong balance sheet and ability to procure performance bonds. However, given that the firm was relatively unknown in England, it took them four years to get established in this particular market. This entailed the firm having to employ a business development executive to find opportunities and build new relationships, and also a marketing person to start profiling the business. With these resources (human and financial) embedded, the firm started a marketing campaign in GB in 2012, and as such, started entering awards like, company of the year, investors in people, and various health and safety awards; just to try and build their profile.

Within the practice of domestic reorientation, strategy making for the SME tended to be deductive, while for the large firm, strategy making was more inductive in nature. More specifically, for the SME, strategy making was characterised by the exploitation of prevailing resources and industry networks, while for the large firm, strategy making was achieved through the exploration of new markets and the establishment of new knowledge structures (cf. Brown and Duguid 2001).

Practice of cost / asset retrenchment - Regarding cost retrenchment, the large firm tended to freeze salaries and reduce employee numbers over a short period of time, while on the other hand, the SME froze salaries and reduced employee numbers for longer periods. Indeed, the case data confirmed that the large firm froze salaries during a two year period (2011 - 2012), while the SME froze salaries over a 5 year period (2008 - 2012). Moreover, the large firm reduced its employee numbers by 33% during the period 2010 - 2012, while the SME had to dramatically scale down its workforce by 49% over the period 2008 - 2014. In relation to the notification of imminent cuts across both case firms, different mechanisms were utilised by management. Exploring the episode of strategy making within the large firm, praxis entailed the company CEO briefing the whole business by visiting each of its three main regions (Northern Ireland, England, and Scotland) over one week. Depending on numbers in each region, a hotel or main office was used as the location for each of the briefing sessions. Deciding to be honest and upfront with staff, the CEO conveyed that there was going to be redundancies, a removal of bonuses, and a freeze in salaries. The firm was very insistent that these retrenchment actions were to be implemented within a six month period - before its end of year strategic review. In contrast to this, the SME conveyed such measures through unplanned informal encounters (e.g. verbally told each individual) - form of sensegiving (cf. Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

In relation to asset retrenchment, the SME had to sell off a significant portion of its land portfolio given its 'high severity' situation. Indeed, this decision formed part of the overall strategy that was agreed with the banks. On this basis, the bank exerted high influence over the contracting firm through network based power (cf. Pajunen 2006). This is also consistent with Robbins and Pearce (1992) who found that the only way to achieve improvements in performance for firms in severe turnaround situations, was to supplement cost retrenchment with asset reductions. In contrast, the large firm didn't have to initiate any asset reductions mainly due to its robust and healthier financial position. For both firms, the strategy making episode was deductive, in that, deliberate cost-cutting measures were implemented in order to stem the pressing problem of organisational decline (also found by Tansey *et al.*, 2018).

Practice of tendering / procurement - In relation to below cost tendering, the large firm made a conscious decision during the period of not going below cost in order to chase turnover, or to keep experience for future pre-qualifications. On the other hand, for the SME, the only way of securing work was by tendering below cost. Indeed, the SME started tendering below cost in 2008, however by the end of 2015 the firm made a conscious decision that they were no longer going to buy work. Interestingly, the SME revealed instances of aggressive below cost tendering in certain sectors of the NI construction industry. For instance, on one particular public works framework contract, firms had to make their adjustment to the schedule of rates. The SME went in at -5%, however, a contractor with rates of -45% won the contract. Soon after starting the contract, this firm went bankrupt, thereby leaving the next contractor in line (at -30%) to start. In a similar vein, they also went bankrupt, with the project now being constructed by a contractor at -15% rates. These findings thus align with those of Hillebrandt *et al.*, (1995), who found that firms will often have to bid below cost or at cost in order to secure work during recessionary periods.

In comparison to the SME, the large firm tended to formalize most of its tendering/procurement practices during the period 2007 - 2015. For instance, the large firm actually reduced the volume of projects that they tendered for, and started to be more selective. In the past, the firm would generally tender for most projects, and would often get half way through a tender before realising that the project was not suitable for them. On this basis, the firm ceased its 'scatter-gun' approach and spent more time focusing on projects that they actually wanted and that were strategic for the firm. To aid this new approach, the firm brought in a formalized 'stop-go' methodology for its tendering practice in 2012. This 'praxis' entailed the new business development executive devising a weekly opportunities report for the board. Every Tuesday the senior management team (head office and operations) would meet and make a 'stop or go' decision on each opportunity using a rational assessment framework.

Subsequently, if the firm prequalified, they would adopt the same methodology with regard to proceedings to tender. To further strengthen this new practice, the large firm substantially increased personnel in its tendering/procurement departments. In contrast, the SME decided to reduce personnel in their tendering department as part of its cost-cutting measures. Not surprisingly, the SME acknowledged that they made a huge mistake by not replacing their bid writer who left during the turbulent period. With regard to changes in procurement methodologies, a stark difference was also apparent between both cases. More specifically, the large firm started to consult more with its supply chain at pre-tender stage, thereby securing better prices and pre-deals. This ensured that the submitted tender price was robust and that all the risk was closed

off at an early stage. In contrast, the SME tended to focus on supply-chain cost reductions at a latter, post-tender stage. Once the firm acquired a project (usually below cost/at cost), they would only then start splitting up supplier packages in order to try and achieve cost reductions.

Within the practice of tendering/procurement, strategy making for the SME tended to be deductive and was solely based on cost minimizations and efficiencies. For the large firm, strategy making was more inductive in nature, and was based on the addition of new resources and the 'trying out' of new knowledge structures.

Performance Outcomes

Based on the suggestions of Kouamé and Langley (2017), the SAP micro-processes discussed above were bridged with turnaround macro-outcomes. On this basis, the large firm achieved 'turnaround success', while the SME attained only 'partial turnaround success' during the period 2007 - 2015. More specifically, for the large firm, profit and turnover levels recorded for 2015 exceeded pre-downturn (2007) levels of performance, while for the SME, profit and turnover levels were significantly less.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored episodes of strategy-making within large and SME NI construction contractors during the period 2007 - 2015. This responds to recent calls by Kouamé and Langley (2017) to use cross-case comparative logic to bridge the link between micro-processes and macro-outcomes in qualitative strategy process and practice research.

The results suggest that large and SMEs differ substantially in their responses to industry environments, and subsequently in their strategy-making philosophy and approaches. The large firm's generic strategy-making philosophy was based on deliberate and purposeful activities, while the SMEs course tended to be founded on the emergence of strategies non-deliberately. Across the practices depicted, episodes of strategy-making for the large firm were realized mostly through an inductive approach, while for the SME, it was typically through a deductive path. More specifically, for the large firm, inductive strategy-making was mainly achieved through the exploration of new markets, addition of new human resources, and the establishment of new structures. In contrast, for the SME, deductive strategy-making was primarily realized through cost minimizations, and the exploitation of prevailing resources and industry networks.

Given the restriction of the empirical data to two cases, caution is therefore required in making generalizations. Despite this limitation, the findings will potentially enable top managers to recognize and reflect on how 'strategy is actually made', and how this relates to macro strategic change over time. Additionally, the findings provide a platform for further qualitative strategy process and practice research.

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