

Making Strategy Work: An Integrative Framework Linking Operational Strategy, Capabilities, and Execution Outcomes

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Abstract

The persistent gap between strategic intent and realised organisational outcomes remains a central challenge in strategic and operations management. While organisations continue to invest in strategy formulation, execution failures are widespread, suggesting that the issue lies not in strategy design but in the absence of effective execution systems. This paper addresses this gap by advancing an integrative conceptual framework that links operational strategy, operational capabilities, and the successful accomplishment of business strategy. The framework positions operational strategy as an orchestration mechanism that aligns processes, resources, and organisational priorities with strategic intent. Operational capabilities are conceptualised as the execution layer that translates this alignment into measurable outcomes. Drawing on dynamic capabilities theory, the study proposes that operational capabilities mediate the relationship between operational strategy and strategy accomplishment, emphasising that even well-designed strategies fail without the capability to execute. The framework further incorporates key enablers, including innovation, demand-responsive planning, lean systems, quality management, supply chain integration, and organisational learning. Together, these elements form an interconnected execution system that supports alignment, adaptability, and sustained performance. This study contributes by shifting the focus from strategy formulation to execution effectiveness, offering a structured explanation of how strategy is made to work in practice. It provides conceptual clarity and practical direction for organisations seeking to close the gap between strategic intent and realised outcomes.

Keywords: Operational Strategy, Operational Capabilities, Strategy Execution, Strategic Alignment, Dynamic Capabilities, Business Strategy, Operational Excellence, Supply Chain Integration, Innovation

Introduction

The persistent gap between strategic intent and realised outcomes remains one of the most critical and enduring challenges in contemporary strategic and operations management. Despite extensive research, organisations continue to struggle to translate business strategy into tangible performance outcomes, highlighting a fundamental disconnect between strategy formulation and execution (Franken et al., 2009; Vivares et al., 2020; Mikalef et al., 2020). In this context, the successful accomplishment of business strategy refers to the extent to which intended strategic objectives are effectively translated into realised organisational outcomes. Increasingly, this accomplishment is recognised as being contingent upon the effective design and alignment of operational strategy and operational capabilities, which function as the primary mechanisms through which strategy is executed (Van Mieghem, 2018).

Operational strategy is central to translating strategic intent into actionable decisions related to processes, resources, and organisational priorities. At its core, operational strategy is structured around competitive priorities, including cost, quality, flexibility, and delivery, which guide organisations in aligning operational activities with strategic goals (Vermeulen & Pretorius, 2016). The effectiveness of operational strategy is further reinforced by its adaptability to environmental conditions, as firms must continuously recalibrate their operational approaches in response to changing market dynamics and competitive pressures (Yu & Ramanathan, 2013; Ivanov & Dolgui, 2020). However, the success of these efforts is contingent on the degree of alignment across organisational components, including processes, technologies, and managerial systems. Prior studies have shown that integrating operational and information strategies is essential to ensure coherence between strategic intent and execution, as misalignment can significantly constrain performance outcomes (Barnes et al., 2003; Wagner & Weitzel, 2006; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Complementing operational strategy, operational capabilities represent the execution layer through which strategic objectives are realised. Capabilities such as process integration, absorptive capacity, and managerial coordination have been shown to significantly influence operational and market performance (Prajogo et al., 2014; Swink & Hegarty, 2018). These findings suggest that organisational routines and capabilities play a central role in translating strategic intent into realised outcomes. Importantly, operational capabilities extend beyond supportive functions and serve as critical enablers that mediate the relationship between strategy and execution (Peng et al., 2008).

A key dimension in this relationship is strategic alignment, particularly the integration of operational systems with broader organisational strategies. Prior studies have emphasised that alignment between operational processes and information systems is essential for achieving firm success, as misalignment can significantly constrain performance outcomes (Barnes et al., 2003; Wagner & Weitzel, 2006; Warner & Wäger, 2019). From a dynamic perspective, firms must also continuously reconfigure their capabilities and processes to maintain alignment amid environmental uncertainty and technological change (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2018).

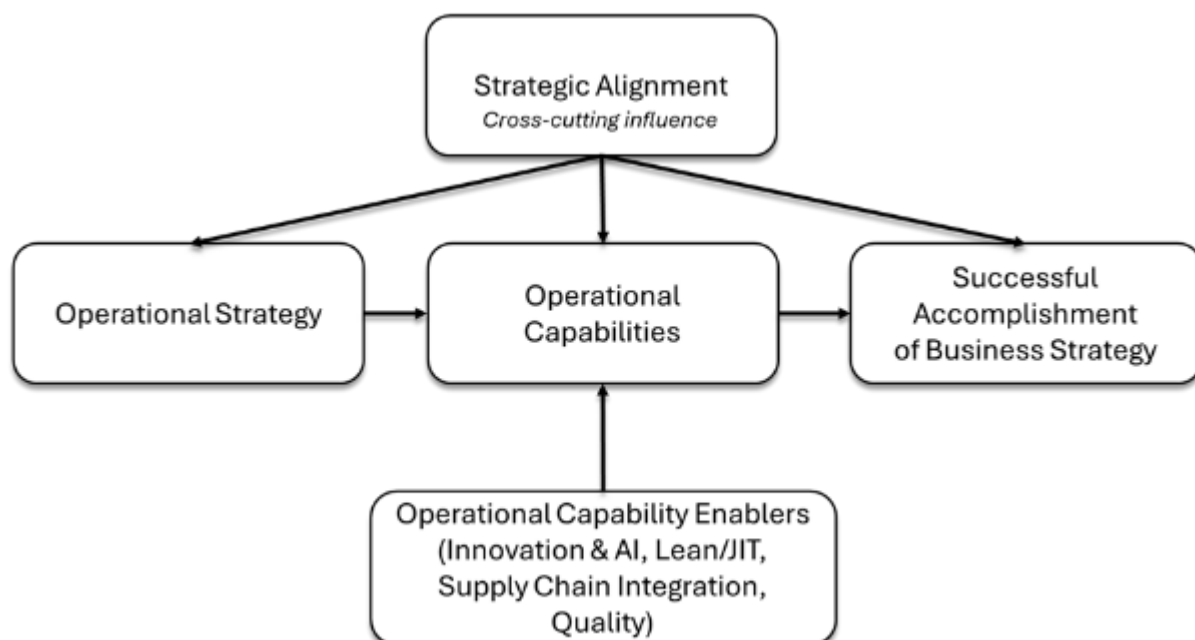
Despite these advancements, organisations continue to encounter significant challenges in aligning operational strategy and capabilities with business strategy. One of the primary

challenges lies in the complexity of execution, as implementing a strategy requires coordination across multiple organisational levels and functions (Franken et al., 2009). Additionally, the increasing complexity of the business environment demands greater agility and adaptability in operational systems (Prajogo et al., 2014; Vivares et al., 2020; Mikalef et al., 2020). These challenges are further compounded by the difficulty of aligning strategic objectives with operational realities, particularly in organisations with fragmented structures or misaligned capabilities.

Moreover, while prior studies have established the importance of operational capabilities and strategic alignment, the literature remains fragmented, with limited integration across these domains. Existing research has largely examined operational strategy, capabilities, and performance outcomes in isolation, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how these elements interact to enable the successful accomplishment of business strategy (Vivares et al., 2020). This gap underscores the need for a more integrative conceptual perspective that explicitly links operational strategy and capabilities to strategy execution outcomes.

In response to this gap, this conceptual paper advances an integrative framework that connects operational strategy, operational capabilities, and the successful accomplishment of business strategy. The framework positions operational strategy as an orchestration mechanism that aligns resources, processes, and priorities with strategic intent, while operational capabilities are conceptualised as the enablers of execution that translate this alignment into tangible outcomes. By focusing on the realisation of strategic objectives rather than on generalised performance outcomes, this study helps bridge the long-standing divide between strategy formulation and execution. (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking operational strategy, operational capabilities, and the successful accomplishment of business strategy.



The framework conceptualises operational strategy as an orchestration mechanism and operational capabilities as the execution layer that mediates the relationship between

strategy and realised outcomes. It further integrates key capability enablers that strengthen execution effectiveness under dynamic conditions.

Despite the growing body of literature on strategy execution and operational management, many organisations continue to experience persistent execution failures, particularly in translating strategic intent into measurable organisational outcomes. Existing studies often examine operational strategy, capabilities, or performance independently, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how these elements interact within a unified execution system. This study is motivated by the need to provide a more integrated explanation of how operational strategy can be operationalised through capabilities to achieve successful strategy accomplishment. The significance of this study lies in its contribution toward bridging the long-standing divide between strategy formulation and execution by offering a structured conceptual framework that integrates alignment, capabilities, adaptability, and execution effectiveness within a single operational system.

This study aims to:

- Examine the role of operational strategy in supporting the successful accomplishment of business strategy.
- Explore how operational capabilities function as execution mechanisms within organisations.
- Develop an integrative conceptual framework linking operational strategy, operational capabilities, and execution outcomes.
- Identify key operational enablers that strengthen strategy execution under dynamic business conditions.
- Advance a capability-driven perspective of operational strategy that bridges strategy formulation and execution.

Discussion

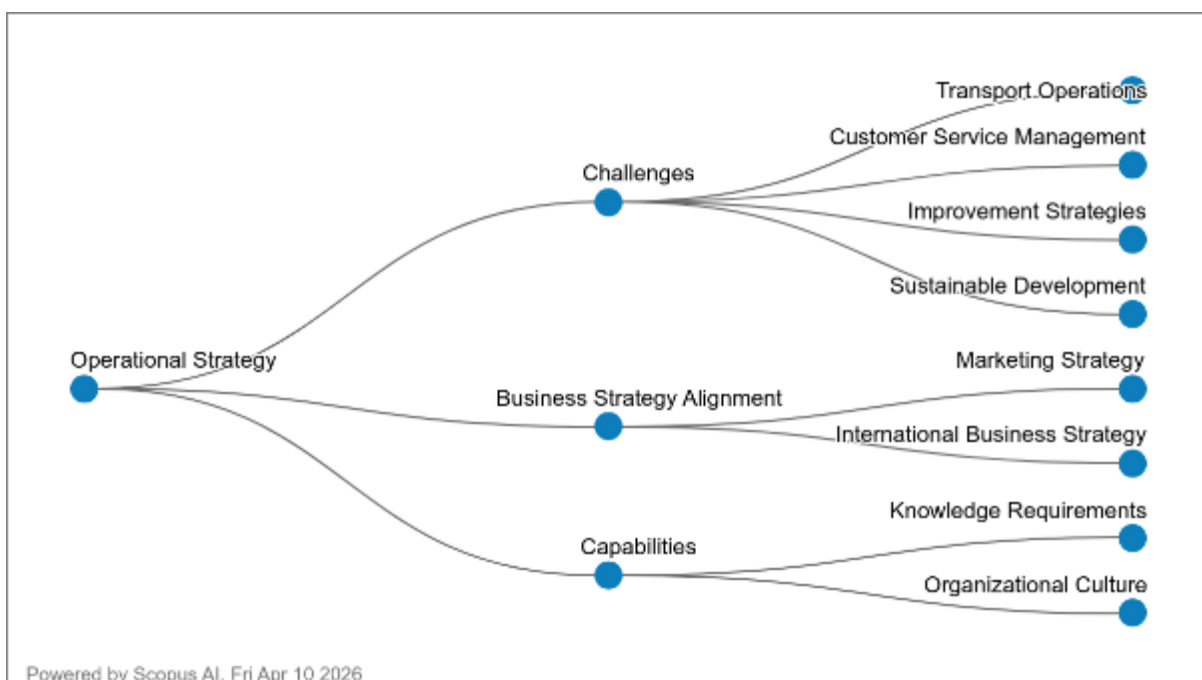


Figure 2. Literature-Based Thematic Mapping of Operational Strategy Research

These themes provide the conceptual foundation that informs the development of the proposed integrative framework. To support the conceptual development, a structured literature mapping using Scopus-indexed sources was conducted. As illustrated in Figure 2, operational strategy emerges as the central construct, interconnected with three dominant thematic domains: challenges, business strategy alignment, and organisational capabilities. These clusters reflect the breadth of operational strategy research, spanning service delivery, sustainability, strategic integration, and capability development. This mapping provides empirical grounding for the themes synthesised in the discussion and supports the development of the proposed conceptual framework.

This study advances a holistic perspective on how operational strategy and capabilities enable the successful accomplishment of business strategy. Synthesising the ten themes identified, the discussion highlights a coherent system in which alignment, capability development, and adaptive practices interact to translate strategic intent into realised outcomes.

At the core of this system is strategic alignment between operations and business goals. Operational strategy serves as the mechanism connecting high-level objectives to day-to-day activities, ensuring that resources, processes, and priorities are aligned to support strategic intent (Van Mieghem, 2018; Barnes et al., 2003). Without such alignment, even well-formulated strategies risk failing during execution. Alignment is not static; it requires continuous recalibration as organisational priorities evolve and external conditions change. This dynamic nature of alignment sets the foundation upon which all other themes operate. Building on alignment, operational capabilities serve as the foundation of competitiveness. Capabilities such as efficiency, flexibility, integration, and responsiveness determine the organisation's ability to execute its strategy effectively. These capabilities are not isolated attributes but are developed through structured processes and managerial practices. In this regard, operational capabilities act as the primary conduit through which strategic alignment is transformed into tangible outcomes (Peng et al., 2008; Prajogo et al., 2014; Ketokivi & Schroeder, 2004). Strong capabilities enable organisations to respond to market demands, manage complexity, and sustain competitive advantage.

The role of innovation and artificial intelligence (AI) as transformative forces further enhances this capability base. Innovation introduces new methods, technologies, and processes that improve operational performance, while AI enables data-driven decision-making, predictive analytics, and automation. Together, they shift operational strategy from a reactive to a proactive function. Importantly, innovation and AI amplify existing capabilities, allowing organisations to sense changes, adapt quickly, and optimise performance in increasingly complex environments.

Closely related to this transformation is demand-responsive planning, which emphasises aligning operations with real-time market signals. Rather than relying on static forecasts, organisations must develop the ability to adjust production, service delivery, and resource allocation dynamically. This responsiveness strengthens the link between strategy and execution by ensuring that operational decisions are continuously aligned with customer needs and market conditions.

Complementing responsiveness, lean and just-in-time (JIT) systems provide the structural discipline necessary for efficient execution. These systems focus on waste reduction, process optimisation, and flow efficiency, enabling organisations to operate with minimal redundancy while maintaining high levels of performance. Lean and JIT principles reinforce operational capabilities by enhancing efficiency and consistency, thereby supporting the reliable execution of strategic objectives.

The pursuit of operational excellence is further reinforced by quality management and managerial excellence. High-quality processes and effective managerial practices ensure that operational activities are executed consistently and aligned with strategic goals. Managerial excellence ensures that organisational systems are coordinated, monitored, and continuously improved, thereby strengthening the firm's overall execution capability.

In service-oriented contexts, service management and customer experience become critical dimensions of operational strategy. The ability to deliver consistent, high-quality service experiences directly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty, which are key drivers of strategic success. Operational capabilities must therefore extend beyond internal efficiency to encompass customer-facing processes.

Expanding beyond organisational boundaries, supply chain integration and resilience play a crucial role in supporting strategy execution. Modern operations are embedded within complex networks of suppliers, partners, and stakeholders, making coordination and integration essential. Effective supply chain integration enhances information flow, reduces inefficiencies, and improves responsiveness (Yu & Ramanathan, 2013). Together, these elements extend the scope of operational strategy from internal processes to the broader ecosystem in which the organisation operates.

Underlying these themes is the concept of dynamic capabilities and organisational learning, which enable organisations to adapt and evolve. Dynamic capabilities reflect the organisation's ability to reconfigure its resources and processes in response to changing conditions (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2018). At the same time, organisational learning ensures that knowledge is continuously developed and embedded within the firm. These mechanisms are essential for sustaining alignment and capability development, particularly in environments characterised by uncertainty and rapid change.

Collectively, these interconnected themes converge into a holistic operational strategy, which serves as the pathway to profitability and sustainability. Rather than treating operational elements in isolation, this perspective emphasises integrating alignment, capabilities, innovation, responsiveness, efficiency, quality, customer focus, and supply chain coordination. The successful accomplishment of a business strategy emerges not from any single element but from the synergistic interaction of these components.

Propositions

Building on the integrative framework developed in this study, the following propositions articulate the relationships between operational strategy, operational capabilities, and the successful accomplishment of business strategy. Each proposition is supported by conceptual reasoning derived from the preceding discussion.

Strategic Alignment

Strategic alignment between operational strategy and business goals positively influences the successful accomplishment of business strategy. Strategic alignment ensures that operational priorities, resource allocation, and process design are directly linked to organisational objectives. When alignment is achieved, operational activities reinforce strategic intent rather than diverge from it, reducing execution gaps. Conversely, misalignment leads to fragmented efforts in which operational outputs fail to support intended outcomes. Therefore, alignment acts as the foundational condition for effective strategy execution (*Van Mieghem, 2018; Barnes et al., 2003*).

Operational Strategy

Operational strategy positively influences the development and effectiveness of operational capabilities. Operational strategy provides the structural and directional framework through which capabilities are developed and deployed. It determines how resources are configured, which processes are prioritised, and how systems are designed. Without a clearly defined operational strategy, capability development becomes reactive and fragmented. As such, operational strategy serves as the primary mechanism for shaping and strengthening operational capabilities (*Van Mieghem, 2018; Vermeulen & Pretorius, 2016*).

Operational Capabilities

Operational capabilities positively influence the successful accomplishment of business strategy. Operational capabilities represent the execution layer that translates strategic intent into realised outcomes. Capabilities such as efficiency, flexibility, integration, and responsiveness determine how effectively an organisation can implement its strategy. Strong capabilities enable consistent performance and adaptability, while weak capabilities constrain execution. Thus, the effectiveness of strategy accomplishment is directly dependent on the strength of operational capabilities (*Peng et al., 2008; Prajogo et al., 2014*).

Mediating Role of Operational Capabilities

Operational capabilities mediate the relationship between operational strategy and the successful accomplishment of business strategy. While operational strategy defines direction, it does not directly produce outcomes. Its impact is realised through the capabilities that execute it. This implies that even well-designed strategies will fail if operational capabilities are insufficient or misaligned. Therefore, operational capabilities serve as the critical transmission mechanism by which strategic intent is translated into tangible results, mediating the relationship between strategy and execution (*Peng et al., 2008; Prajogo et al., 2014*).

Innovation and AI

Innovation and AI-enabled systems positively enhance operational capabilities. Innovation and AI introduce new ways to process information, optimise workflows, and improve the speed and accuracy of decision-making. These technologies enhance capabilities such as responsiveness, efficiency, and predictive planning. By embedding AI and innovative practices into operational systems, organisations can strengthen their ability to adapt and perform under complexity. Consequently, innovation acts as a capability multiplier within the operational system (*Sung et al., 2020*).

Demand-Responsive Planning

Demand-responsive planning positively influences the successful accomplishment of business strategy. Demand-responsive planning aligns operational decisions with real-time market signals, ensuring that production and service delivery reflect current customer needs. This reduces mismatches between supply and demand, improving both efficiency and customer satisfaction. By maintaining alignment with external conditions, organisations can ensure that execution remains relevant to strategic objectives. As a result, demand responsiveness strengthens the link between strategy and realised outcomes (Yu & Ramanathan, 2013).

Lean and JIT Systems

The implementation of lean and just-in-time (JIT) systems enhances efficiency-related operational capabilities. Lean and JIT systems improve operational discipline by reducing waste, optimising process flow, and enhancing coordination. These practices strengthen efficiency and reliability, which are critical dimensions of operational capability. However, their effectiveness depends on careful implementation that balances efficiency with flexibility. When properly applied, lean and JIT systems reinforce the capability base required for consistent execution (Vermeulen & Pretorius, 2016).

Quality and Managerial Excellence

Quality management and managerial excellence positively influence the successful accomplishment of business strategy. Quality management ensures that operational outputs meet defined standards, while managerial excellence ensures that processes are effectively coordinated and continuously improved. Together, they create a disciplined execution environment in which strategic objectives can be reliably achieved. Poor quality or weak management undermines the consistency of execution, leading to deviations from strategic intent. Therefore, both quality and managerial discipline are essential for achieving intended outcomes (Prajogo et al., 2014).

Supply Chain Integration

Supply chain integration positively strengthens operational capabilities. Operational performance increasingly depends on coordination across organisational boundaries. Supply chain integration enhances visibility, information flow, and synchronisation among partners, thereby improving responsiveness and efficiency. Integrated supply chains reduce bottlenecks and enable smoother execution of operational activities. As a result, integration extends and strengthens the organisation's operational capabilities (Yu & Ramanathan, 2013).

Dynamic Capabilities

Dynamic capabilities and organisational learning positively influence the sustained accomplishment of business strategy. In dynamic environments, the ability to sustain strategy execution depends on continuous adaptation. Dynamic capabilities enable organisations to reconfigure resources, processes, and systems in response to change, while organisational learning ensures that knowledge is accumulated and applied over time. These mechanisms allow organisations to maintain alignment and capability effectiveness despite evolving conditions. Therefore, dynamic capabilities are essential for sustaining long-term strategic success (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2018).

Recommendations

This study yields several practice-oriented recommendations that translate the proposed conceptual relationships into concrete managerial actions. Rather than generic prescriptions, the recommendations specify what organisations should implement, how to implement it, and where to embed it within the operating model.

First, organisations should institutionalise a formal mechanism for translating strategy into operations. This requires establishing a structured cascade in which corporate strategic objectives are decomposed into unit-level operational targets and process-level performance indicators. In practice, firms should implement a strategy deployment system (e.g., Hoshin Kanri or equivalent) that links annual strategic priorities to weekly operational metrics. Each operational unit should be assigned 3–5 measurable targets directly tied to strategic outcomes, with clear managerial-level ownership. Without this structured cascade, alignment remains rhetorical rather than executable.

Second, organisations should design and manage operational capabilities as a structured portfolio rather than as emergent outcomes. This involves conducting capability gap assessments across core domains—process efficiency, responsiveness, integration, and decision analytics—using quantifiable benchmarks such as cycle time, service levels, and forecast accuracy. Based on this assessment, firms should allocate targeted investments in technology, skills, and process redesign to address critical gaps. Capability development must be directly linked to strategic priorities, rather than pursued as a general improvement initiative.

Third, firms should embed data-driven decision-making into operational workflows. This requires integrating analytics tools into daily routines, including real-time dashboards for production, service delivery, and supply chain coordination, updated at operational cadence. Decision rights should be clearly defined, enabling front-line managers to act within predefined thresholds. This reduces escalation delays and enhances responsiveness at the execution level.

Fourth, organisations should reconfigure planning systems towards demand-responsive operations. Instead of relying on static forecasts, firms should implement rolling planning cycles supported by real-time demand signals. Operational capacity should be segmented into fixed and flexible components, with approximately 15–25% reserved for demand variability. This structural flexibility allows organisations to respond to shifts in demand without destabilising core operations.

Fifth, firms should apply lean and just-in-time (JIT) principles selectively rather than universally. While lean systems improve efficiency, excessive reliance on JIT can reduce resilience. Organisations should identify critical processes where flow efficiency is essential and apply lean tools accordingly, while maintaining strategic buffers—such as inventory, capacity, or alternative suppliers—in high-risk areas. This balanced approach ensures that efficiency gains do not compromise operational continuity.

Sixth, organisations should integrate quality management into strategic performance systems. Quality metrics, including defect rates, service errors, and customer complaints,

should be directly linked to strategic KPIs and executive dashboards. Managers must be held accountable not only for output and cost but also for process reliability and customer outcomes. This ensures that quality is embedded as a strategic, rather than operational, priority.

Seventh, organisations operating in service-intensive environments should explicitly design operations around customer experience metrics. This involves mapping end-to-end customer journeys and identifying operational touchpoints that influence satisfaction. Service-level agreements (SLAs) should be defined based on customer outcomes, including response time, resolution rate, and consistency. Operational processes should then be aligned to meet these service expectations.

Eighth, organisations should treat supply chain integration as a strategic capability. This requires establishing shared data platforms with key suppliers and partners to enable real-time visibility into demand, inventory, and capacity. Firms should also adopt dual sourcing or regional diversification strategies for critical inputs to enhance resilience. Integration efforts should be prioritised for nodes that have the greatest impact on strategic performance.

Ninth, organisations should institutionalise continuous learning within operations. This can be achieved through structured post-implementation reviews, systematic capture of lessons learned, and integration of insights into standard operating procedures. Cross-functional learning forums should be established to scale improvements across the organisation, ensuring that knowledge is embedded rather than isolated.

Finally, organisations should adopt a system-level approach to operational strategy, ensuring that alignment, capabilities, technology, and culture are managed as an integrated whole. This requires establishing a central governance mechanism—such as an operations strategy committee—to oversee cross-functional alignment, monitor capability development, and ensure consistency with strategic objectives. All operational initiatives should be evaluated based on their contribution to the successful accomplishment of the business strategy.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the successful accomplishment of business strategy depends not on formulation alone, but on the effective alignment of operational strategy and the strength of operational capabilities. While strategy defines direction, execution is realised through a coordinated system of capabilities that translate intent into measurable outcomes. By advancing an integrative framework, this study positions operational strategy as the orchestration mechanism and operational capabilities as the execution engine, thereby bridging the gap between intention and performance. The findings reinforce the need for organisations to move beyond isolated improvements and adopt a capability-driven, system-level approach to execution.

In practice, achieving strategic success requires disciplined alignment, embedded operational capabilities, and continuous adaptation in response to changing conditions. Ultimately, making strategy work is less about designing better plans and more about building the operational systems that ensure their execution.

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