

• *Research Article* •

Strategic Implementation Studies: Rebalancing Strategy Research Toward Strategy Realization

Haijiang Yin*, Yifan Sun

Shenzhen Haijiang Private Dong Technology Co., Ltd., Shenzhen 518052, China.

***Corresponding Author:** Haijiang Yin **Affiliation:** Shenzhen Haijiang Private Dong Technology Co., Ltd., Shenzhen 518052, China

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Abstract: Despite decades of progress in strategy formulation research, organizations continue to struggle with translating strategic intent into realized outcomes. This persistent execution gap suggests that strategic failure is often less a problem of choosing the wrong strategy than of being unable to make chosen strategies work. Although strategy implementation has attracted increasing scholarly attention, existing research remains fragmented across disciplines, weakly theorized, and marginal within the strategic management canon. This article advances Strategic Implementation Studies (SIS) as a distinct and necessary domain of strategic management scholarship. Drawing on a selective synthesis of canonical and contemporary literature, we conceptualize strategy implementation as a multi-level, dynamic, and socially embedded process through which strategies are realized in practice. We clarify the conceptual boundaries of SIS, articulate its core assumptions and theoretical foundations, and propose an integrative framework centered on actors, actions, structures, and dynamics. We further outline a forward-looking research agenda and discuss implications for scholarship, practice, and management education. By rebalancing strategy research toward strategy realization, this article seeks to reposition implementation from a peripheral concern to a central theoretical problem in strategic management.

Keywords: Strategy implementation; Strategy realization; Strategic management; Implementation gap

1 Introduction

Strategic management research has made remarkable progress in explaining how organizations choose strategies. Yet it has been far less successful in explaining how those strategies

are actually realized. Across industries and geographies, empirical evidence and managerial experience converge on a persistent pattern: organizations rarely fail because they choose the wrong strategy; they fail because they are unable

to make chosen strategies work.

This discrepancy reveals a fundamental imbalance in the strategy literature. Strategy formulation—concerned with positioning, resources, and competitive choice—has been extensively theorized. Strategy implementation, by contrast, has often been treated as a secondary or downstream activity, delegated to execution, operations, or managerial practice. As a result, the mechanisms through which strategic intent is translated into coordinated organizational action remain weakly specified.

We argue that this imbalance limits both the explanatory power and the practical relevance of strategic management research. Without a robust understanding of strategy realization, theories of competitive advantage risk becoming detached from the processes that actually generate outcomes. To address this limitation, we advance Strategic Implementation Studies (SIS) as a distinct and integrative domain of strategic management scholarship.

SIS shifts analytical attention from strategic choice to strategic realization. Rather than asking which strategies organizations should pursue, SIS asks how strategies are enacted, adapted, and sustained in practice over time. By synthesizing fragmented research streams and articulating a shared conceptual foundation, this article seeks to reposition strategy implementation from a peripheral concern to a central theoretical problem in the field.

2 The Execution Gap in Strategy Research

A recurring finding in both academic studies and managerial reports is that strategic failure is more commonly attributed to poor execution than to poor planning. Organizations often possess clear strategic intent, substantial analytical capability, and adequate resources, yet still fail to achieve intended outcomes. This pattern suggests that the challenge lies not only in strategic choice but in strategic realization.

Despite this empirical reality, much of strategy research implicitly assumes that once a strategy is selected, implementation will follow. In many dominant models, implementation is treated as a downstream activity, left unexplained or delegated to adjacent disciplines such as operations or organizational behavior. As a result, the mechanisms linking strategic intent to realized performance remain under-specified.

We contend that this “execution gap” reflects a deeper theoretical omission. Without a coherent theory of implementation, strategy research offers limited insight into how competitive advantages are actually produced, sustained, or lost in practice.

3 Defining Strategic Implementation Studies (SIS)

3.1 Domain and Scope

Strategic Implementation Studies (SIS) examines the processes through which formulated strategies are translated into coordinated organizational action and realized outcomes over time. Its primary

concern is not whether strategies are analytically sound, but whether and how they become operationally and socially effective in practice.

SIS focuses on multi-level interactions among actors, actions, structures, and temporal dynamics. It explicitly recognizes that strategy implementation is neither a purely top-down execution task nor a simple extension of operational efficiency. Instead, implementation is understood as an ongoing process of interpretation, coordination, and adaptation across organizational levels.

To clarify its theoretical jurisdiction, it is important to specify what SIS is not. SIS is not a substitute for strategy formulation research, nor does it seek to explain why certain strategies are chosen over others. It is also not reducible to operations management or project execution, as its central unit of analysis is the realization of strategic intent rather than task completion or process optimization. Finally, while SIS draws insights from strategy-as-practice research, it differs in its emphasis on organizational outcomes and longitudinal realization rather than localized practices alone.

3.2 Core Assumptions

SIS is grounded in four core assumptions. First, strategy implementation is inherently dynamic, unfolding through iterative cycles of action, feedback, and adjustment rather than linear execution. Second, it is multi-level, emerging from interactions among individuals, teams, organizational structures, and external environments. Third, implementation is socially embedded, shaped by

sensemaking, power relations, and institutional contexts. Fourth, implementation is capability-based: organizations differ systematically in their ability to realize strategic intent, and these differences are theoretically consequential.

Together, these assumptions position SIS as a distinct analytical lens within strategic management, focused on strategy realization as a central explanatory problem.

4 Theoretical Foundations of SIS

Strategic Implementation Studies integrates and extends multiple theoretical traditions. From the resource-based view and dynamic capabilities perspective, implementation is understood as the orchestration and reconfiguration of resources in line with strategic intent. Strategic choice and upper echelons theories emphasize managerial discretion and leadership actions as critical micro-foundations of implementation. Strategy-as-practice research contributes a focus on situated action, highlighting the practices and interactions through which strategy is enacted. Organizational design and control perspectives underscore the role of structures, incentives, and performance systems as execution infrastructure.

Rather than privileging a single perspective, SIS treats these traditions as complementary lenses unified by a shared concern with strategy realization.

5 An Integrative Framework for Strategy Implementation

Synthesizing prior research, we propose an

integrative framework organized around four core elements: actors, actions, structures, and dynamics (Figure 1). Actors refer to the individuals and groups involved in implementation. Actions encompass managerial and organizational behaviors that translate strategic intent into practice, such as sensegiving, coordination, and adaptation. Structures include formal and informal arrangements—organizational design, incentives, control systems, and digital infrastructure—that enable or constrain execution. Dynamics capture the temporal evolution of implementation as strategies are adjusted through feedback, learning, and path dependence.

The framework emphasizes that implementation outcomes do not result from isolated factors but from ongoing interactions among these elements within specific contextual conditions. Strategy realization, from this perspective, is an emergent trajectory rather than a discrete outcome.

6 Toward a Research Agenda for Strategic Implementation Studies

Repositioning strategy implementation as a central theoretical concern calls for a more programmatic research agenda. Rather than cataloging isolated factors, SIS invites scholars to investigate how implementation unfolds as a process and how its constituent elements interact over time.

First, future research should develop process theories of strategy realization. Longitudinal and qualitative methods can illuminate how strategies evolve through cycles of interpretation, enactment, and revision. Such work can move the

field beyond static representations toward a richer understanding of implementation trajectories.

Second, SIS encourages greater attention to micro-foundations. Studies examining managerial cognition, sensegiving, and coordination can clarify how individual-level actions aggregate into collective implementation outcomes. This line of inquiry connects SIS to broader debates on micro-macro linkages in strategic management.

Third, organizational structures and control systems warrant renewed theoretical attention. Rather than treating structure as background, SIS frames organizational design, incentives, and digital infrastructure as active components of strategy realization. Comparative and configurational approaches may be particularly valuable in this domain.

Fourth, temporal dynamics represent a promising frontier for SIS research. Scholars can explore feedback loops, learning processes, and path dependence to understand why some strategies stabilize while others continually adapt or unravel. Time-sensitive methodologies, including sequence analysis and process tracing, are well suited to this purpose.

Finally, SIS offers opportunities for cross-contextual and interdisciplinary research. Comparative studies across industries, institutional environments, and cultural contexts can help identify boundary conditions of implementation theories. Engagement with digitalization and artificial intelligence further extends SIS into emerging strategic domains.

Collectively, these directions define SIS not

as a loose collection of topics, but as a coherent research program centered on the realization of strategy in practice.

7 Implications for Practice and Education

For practitioners, SIS shifts attention from planning excellence to execution capability, highlighting the importance of alignment, coordination, and adaptive learning. For management education, it suggests the need to teach strategy not only as a design problem but as a realization process that unfolds through action over time.

8 Conclusion

Strategic management research cannot be complete without a rigorous understanding of how strategies are realized in practice. By advancing Strategic Implementation Studies as a distinct scholarly domain, this article seeks to rebalance the field toward strategy realization. We invite scholars to engage with SIS as a platform for theory development, empirical inquiry, and dialogue between strategy research and managerial practice.

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Author Contributions

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Availability of Data and Materials

The authors confirm that all data generated or analyzed during this study are either collected by the authors themselves or derived from the published articles cited in the references.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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