



## Site-shifting as the source of ambidexterity: Empirical insights from the field of ticketing



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 15 February 2014

#### Keywords:

Ambidexterity

Strategy-as-practice

Site

Information systems strategy

Case study

### ABSTRACT

Ambidexterity, defined as the capability to simultaneously explore knowledge to identify new market opportunities and exploit knowledge to capitalise on a firm's existing niches, is considered to be crucial in today's competitive marketplace. However, there is relatively limited research on how such a capability can be developed, and even less on the role of IT-enabled practices in promoting this. Drawing on the strategy-as-practice perspective, we investigate how interrelationships amongst practitioners, IT-enabled practices and praxis create a particular site of practice. More importantly, we consider how a site gets shifted over time through the emergence of changes in the interrelationships between IT-enabled practices and practitioners, stimulated by on-going praxis. Building on the findings derived from a case study of DaM,<sup>1</sup> the leading ticketing company in China, we explain how the phenomenon of site-shifting can provide a useful conceptual lens for explaining ambidexterity. In doing this, we bring to the fore the importance of IT in achieving an ambidexterity capability.

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## 1. Introduction

A firm's capabilities related to exploring knowledge to identify new opportunities whilst simultaneously exploiting knowledge to improve efficiencies in existing niches (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Galliers, 2011; He and Wong, 2004; Kang and Snell, 2009; Leidner et al., 2011; March, 1991; Ramesh et al., 2012; Tarafdar and Gordon, 2007) is key to competitiveness in a fast changing environment. This is referred to as 'being ambidextrous' (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). Ambidexterity, then, relates to creating and using knowledge and there is considerable theory and research that addresses strategies that can foster simultaneous exploration and exploitation. Some of this literature focuses on contextual factors that allow adaptability within organisational units that can then both explore and exploit knowledge as needed (e.g., Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1994; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004); other literature focuses on structural arrangements which foster ambidexterity, encouraging some parts of the organisation to focus on knowledge exploration for fostering innovation while other parts focus on knowledge exploitation for improving efficiency (e.g., Adler et al., 1999; Duncan, 1976).

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<sup>1</sup> We have disguised the name based on the request of the case organisation.

In the IS literature, there has been some focus on contextual factors that support ambidexterity (e.g., Ramesh et al., 2012), but the main focus has been about the need for different IS strategies (so in essence a structural solution) in relation to knowledge exploration versus exploitation. For example, Galliers (2011) argues that a repository strategy (a deliberate codification and standardisation strategy) is more important for facilitating knowledge exploitation while a network strategy (encouraging emergence through supporting communities of practice and organisational learning) is more important for facilitating knowledge exploration; with both needed to foster ambidexterity (Durcikova et al., 2011). Despite these useful insights, however, few studies have explained what people actually do to accomplish ambidexterity.

In this paper, we draw on the strategy-as-practice perspective, thus, putting people, who perform and engage in strategy practices, back to the centre of focus (Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2005; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Whittington, 1996). The strategy-as-practice view contrasts with the dominant paradigm of perceiving a strategy as a grand vision which is formally planned and executed to guide an organisation's collective action in a top-down manner (e.g. Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Instead strategy-as-practice emphasises the day-to-day activities of practitioners who shape, refine and actualise strategy through what they do (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 1996).

Based on this strategy-as-practice perspective, a strategy (or better strategizing) is an emergent set of practices, which are constantly in the making (Jarzabkowski, 2004) and Whittington (2006) outlines the need to examine three conceptual elements and their interactions, namely strategy 'practitioners', 'practices' and 'praxis'. Importantly, in terms of practices, we here focus on IT-enabled practices, which can be defined as the 'regular ways of acting' (Nicolini, 2012) afforded by the day-to-day enactment of IT (Galliers, 2011). Given the ubiquity of the strategic potential of IT generally (Nolan, 2012; Peppard and Ward, 2004; Ward, 2012) and the role of IS/IT specifically in fostering knowledge exploration and exploitation (Durcikova et al., 2011; Galliers, 2011; Hansen et al., 1999; Leidner et al., 2011), the need to examine IT-enabled practices in the context of ambidexterity is clear. Indeed, we were surprised in our review of the management literature on ambidexterity that very little of this considered the role of IT in fostering ambidexterity.

To extend the perspective of strategy-as-practice, we incorporate the notion of 'site' (Nicolini, 2011; Schatzki, 2001) to serve as the ontological boundary for theorising the interrelationships amongst practitioners, practices and praxis. Nicolini (2012) suggests that a site can be understood as a theatrical stage where actors/actresses (practitioners) have different parts in a particular play (practices), which they perform (praxis) on different occasions. Each time the play is acted, the performance will be slightly changed, for example because an actor fumbles his lines. Praxis (the performance) is, then, always emergent (unlike in a film where, once created, the performance is identical each time it is shown) because of the specific interrelationships between practitioners (actors) and their practices (the role that they are playing). Building on the accounts of Whittington (2006) and Nicolini (2011), the research question that we aim to address is: how do shifts in an IT-enabled site of practice relate to ambidexterity?

To provide the empirical insights to support, elaborate and enrich our conceptualisation, case study research of the leading ticketing company in the live performance segment of China's cultural industry was undertaken. By examining how the practitioners, IT-enabled practices and praxis of ticketing interrelate, we are able to see how the site of ticketing practices shifts over time. Our findings reveal that while the capability to explore, facilitated by IT-enabled networking practices, might be the driving force to create a shift in the site, the capability to exploit areas of improvement within the existing site, is crucial to strengthen the knowledge base about the site, and can help to generate the momentum for further exploration to emerge. Also, our findings showcase that the role played by IT is not merely to enable exploration or exploitation. Rather, IT can afford the simultaneous development of knowledge exploration and exploitation by providing a multifaceted platform where different types of innovation can be added on and then integrated with existing practices and exploited to improve efficiency. Our findings echo the recent view that to compete effectively in an increasingly digitalized landscape an organisation needs to create a seamless fusion between business and IT strategy (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). Through our strategy-as-practice lens, we are able to capture how this can be achieved over time.

The structure of this paper is as follows. We first introduce the intellectual traditions that form the basis of our conceptualisation of how site-shifting can become a source of ambidexterity. Second, we outline the methodological details and rationale that underlie the selection of our research context, data collection methods and data analysis processes. Third, to elaborate our case findings, we develop a storyline consisting of three distinct phases of ticketing practice. Fourth, in the discussion section, we illustrate how the bundling of IT-enabled practices and practitioners (i.e., a site of practice) is shifted through on-going praxis, and how this is related to ambidexterity. We conclude by identifying theoretical implications of our findings and areas where future research will be required.

## 2. Intellectual traditions

The main objective of this paper is to explore how shifts over time in the interrelationships amongst practitioners, IT-enabled practices and praxis relate to ambidexterity. To illustrate and reflect prior studies that influence and shape our conceptual foundation, we discuss the concept of ambidexterity, the perspective of strategy-as-practice and the notion of site, in turn. Areas where further research effort is required are also identified.

### 2.1. Three foci of ambidexterity Literature

The capacity to explore and create new knowledge is a very different to the capacity to exploit and reuse knowledge, reflecting the tension between efficiency and flexibility (Thompson, 1967), hence exploration and exploitation were

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