Successful Strategic Planning: Creating Clarity

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ABSTRACT

Most healthcare organizations have a strategic plan of some kind. Many of these organizations also have difficulty translating their strategic plan into specific actions that result in successful performance. In the worst cases, this can jeopardize the viability of the organization. The trouble lies in a lack of clarity in what a strategic plan is and what it should do for the organization. This article will answer key questions such as: What is strategy and how does it fit with other commonly used constructs such as mission, vision, and goals? What criteria can be used to determine if something is truly strategic to the organization? What are the phases of the strategy lifecycle? How do approaches for dealing with uncertainty, such as scenario planning, fit with organizational strategic planning? How can a meaningful IT strategy be developed if the organization strategy is lacking? What principles should guide a good IT planning process?

KEYWORDS

- Business strategy
- IT strategy
- Organizational strategy
- Scenario planning
- Strategic planning
- Strategy life cycle
- IT strategic planning

Strategic planning and the resulting plan can be valuable management tools that help create clarity of purpose, and focus and align an organization’s resources. Even though formal strategic planning has been practiced for more than 30 years and many books have been written on the subject, it is still not easy to do, and it is frequently misunderstood.

The healthcare industry has lagged behind many other industries in adopting formal strategic planning techniques. More than 30 years ago, healthcare was a more stable industry with widespread cost-plus reimbursement. This environment did not require the type or level of strategic planning that is necessary today.

Comments by hospital CEOs underscore today’s new landscape. “During that time, the CEOs’ primary goals were to have an attractive facility and to keep the physicians happy,” one recently said. While those goals are still important, the environment in the era of managed care that followed—with a major emphasis on managing costs—became more complicated. Strategy became more significant as hospitals merged, acquired, and partnered with other hospitals and physician practices to form integrated delivery networks, launch the development of at-risk health plans, and more.

However, many of these strategic moves turned out to be flawed, partly because they frequently were “me too” strategies. A healthcare organization would act based on industry trends, such as ones that suggested hospitals were acquiring physician practices, rather than on the result of a rigorous strategic planning process based on true industry drivers. In addition, these strategies were difficult and expensive to implement, particularly at a time of constrained reimbursement resulting from the focus on managing costs. During this period, much of a healthcare organization’s time and energy was focused on matching the moves of competitors,
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Managing tight budgets, and addressing operational issues rather than on following a rigorous strategic planning process.

The healthcare industry now is facing a time of potential great change. Even though the U.S. can provide some of the best care in the world, the healthcare system is widely regarded as “broken.” There are well-documented problems of costs, quality, and access—an unsustainable rate of cost increases without commensurate increases in documented quality, too many preventable medical errors, a lack of ability to document and improve clinical quality, and too many people who are underinsured or uninsured.

As a result, healthcare organizations now face challenges on multiple fronts, including the increasing focus from business and government to drive or encourage change through mandates, guidelines, or recommendations; changing expectations from consumers and patients; and changing relationships with physicians, including competing with them. The challenges created by this level of potential change are better addressed by strategic thinking than by reactive or “me too” measures.

Common Challenges

Virtually all healthcare organizations have developed some kind of strategic plan as a result of the changing healthcare environment. But frequently, these plans exhibit problems that limit their usefulness and hinder development of an aligned IT strategy for the organization.

The first problem is that the plan may not be detailed enough. Many healthcare organizations define a framework for strategy by using a broad concept such as “pillars of excellence,” incorporating areas such as patient safety, clinical quality, financial results, employee satisfaction, physician satisfaction, patient satisfaction, and community citizenship. Each of these pillars is generally supported by a set of high-level statements. The document containing these pillars and high-level statements is sometimes called the organization’s strategic plan. However, the information contained in the document is not detailed enough to help shape plans, activities, and behaviors—including IT strategies—across the organization. It is not enough to just develop some platitudes about improving quality because clinical quality can be improved in a variety of ways and probably will be if there are multiple entities in the IDN or health system.

The second problem is out-of-date organizational strategies. In cases where a more detailed organizational strategic plan has been developed, it is not unusual for it to be more than two-years-old. Frequently, the plan has not been updated even though much has changed in the external or internal environment, making the plan less relevant. In short, the organizational plan has become “shelfware” and is not guiding the organization.

The third problem is that the organization may not have adequately considered external events that could affect the organization’s strategy. For example, what are likely actions by competitors? How are consumer expectations changing? More specifically, if more of the cost burden continues to shift to consumers, what impact will this have on organizational strategy? Plans that have not considered the effects of external factors cannot be considered to be truly strategic.

Fourth, the organization may not have considered alternative scenarios for the future. This takes on more importance as the level of uncertainty of the effects of external factors increases. One technique used to deal with high levels of uncertainty is called scenario planning and is described in several books including The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World, by Peter Schwartz; and Scenario Planning: Managing for the Future, by Gill Ringland.

The scenario planning process identifies focal issues that represent a critical threat or opportunity to the organization and then identifies key operating environment drivers and inhibitors in areas such as competitors, suppliers, or client expectations. Next, forces for change in the macro environment are identified, frequently in the areas of social, technological, environmental, economic, or political (sometimes called STEEP) drivers. These forces are then classified as predetermined elements (such as the number of aging baby boomers) or critical uncertainties (such as how will the needs and demands of the aging baby boomers change over the next 10 years?). The uncertainties then are ranked according to level of uncertainty and importance. The top-ranked uncertainties then are used to construct multiple scenarios for the future. These scenarios are defined and analyzed by developing implications and selecting leading indicators. Next, contingent strategies are developed for each scenario and further analyzed to identify which components of strategy are relevant to which scenarios. An action would be considered low-risk if it applies to all scenarios. Finally, a course of action is selected while continuing to monitor leading indicators to determine which scenario is likely to occur.

The scenario planning process takes practice because it is as much an art as it is a science. It also may be more rigorous than many healthcare organizations might care to undertake. Discussing alternate scenarios, even to a minor degree, helps identify critical differences in key executives’ perspectives on the future. Whether scenario planning is used or not, if the planning process does not bring these differences to the surface, the organization will struggle to
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Implement the plan, the different perspectives of key executives will probably lead to conflicting or uncoordinated actions.

Even if an organization has the best intentions and has developed what appears to be a good plan, two obstacles can prevent turning the plan into reality—organizational culture and tight budgets. Culture can be defined as the set of beliefs, implicit and explicit assumptions, attitudes, and values that shape decisions and behaviors. For example, if an organizational strategy requires major changes but the organization does not have a history of successfully implementing change, then the strategy most likely will fail unless executives and middle managers are willing to communicate the need for change and hold people accountable.

Additionally, the organization may lack adequate resources to implement the plan. If all financial and human resources are allocated to the annual operating plan or if components of the strategy are insufficiently budgeted, then the strategy will likely languish or fail. It has been frequently said that “Culture eats strategy for lunch.” A similar statement can be made about budgets: “Budgets, too, eat strategy for lunch.”

In summary, many of today’s healthcare organizations do not have a current, well-defined and well-communicated organizational strategic plan. A good plan requires organizational discipline and forces tough decisions that executives may prefer to avoid. Even if the organization has developed a good strategy, it may be difficult to implement because of the organizational culture or changes in the availability of resources, such as tight budgets.

Effects on IT Strategic Plans

For a variety of reasons, the lack of a good organizational strategic plan historically did not create as large an impediment as it does for today’s IT organization. First, IT may have been regarded more as a tool to improve productivity or reduce costs rather than as a critical enabler of business strategy. Thus, IT-related initiatives were easier, but not always easy, to justify on a financial basis.

Also, although many of the IT-related initiatives were complex because of the nature of healthcare, they did not affect as many departments or people as today’s initiatives might. The initiatives might have targeted other shared services units, such as finance, human resources or materials, or specific clinical areas, such as laboratory or radiology, within a healthcare organization. Many of today’s IT-related initiatives revolve around advanced clinical computing, which may affect almost all major clinical processes and all clinicians. In short, they are at the heart of what the organization does.

Assuming the organization builds a business case for these advanced clinical initiatives, they must be justified on both financial and strategic metrics. It is more difficult to identify and justify strategic metrics—in other words, to know what to do or how to measure success—without a well-defined organizational strategy.

Definitions of Useful Constructs

Several useful constructs are helpful during strategy formulation. As with the word “strategy,” many of these terms are used in multiple ways.

The most broad and enduring constructs are mission, core values, and vision. A good mission statement defines why a company exists or how a business unit fits within an overall corporate structure. The mission statement should remain relevant for several years—historically, 10 to 20 years. Typically, healthcare organizations define their mission in terms of improving the health status of the individuals in the communities they serve. While this is certainly a desirable and motivating undertaking, its intentionally broad nature leaves considerable latitude in interpretation, and its common use by healthcare organizations is hardly differentiating.

Core values define the guiding principles or tenets by which a company would like to operate. They are intended to help shape attitudes, beliefs, and ultimately, the culture of the organization. In healthcare, the core values framework frequently includes values in areas such as the importance of quality or excellence, integrity, how the organization wants to appear to its customers, or how employees are to be treated. Most organizations find that it is much easier to develop a set of lofty core values than it is to actually enforce and reinforce them on a regular basis, therefore delivering confusing messages to employees.

Many organizations also have developed a vision statement. The vision statement includes a clear, compelling description of the organization as it carries out its mission at some point in the future. The vision statement helps clarify the direction of the organization. These three constructs—the mission, core values, and vision—help describe at a high level why the organization exists and what values it holds dear as it progresses to its desired future state.

Frequently, an organization also identifies long-term goals to fulfill the mission, uphold the core values, and achieve the vision. These goals are typically not time-bound or measurable and lack specific ways to determine who is
accountable and measure outcomes. All too often, these long-term goals—for example, what were previously called “pillars of excellence”—masquerade as organizational strategy, but these goals are not detailed enough to drive organizational plans, decisions, and behaviors.

That leads us to strategy. Before defining strategy, it may be helpful to define the dimensions of strategic decisions or issues. In one of the most widely used textbooks in business schools, Pearce and Robinson define six dimensions or characteristics:2

- Strategic issues require decisions by top management. Usually only top management has the perspective to understand the implications and the power to authorize the actions needed.
- Strategic issues involve the allocation of large amounts of company resources and a major organizational commitment. Strategic decisions commit a firm to a series of actions over an extended period of time, thus involving substantial resources.
- Strategic issues are likely to have a significant effect on the long-term prosperity of the organization. Effects of the decisions typically last five years or longer.
- Strategic issues are future-oriented. Strategic decisions are based on what leaders and managers anticipate or forecast rather than on what they know. In other words, there is an element of risk.
- Strategic issues require consideration of the organization’s external environment. For example, what are the organization’s competitors, customers or partners, and suppliers likely to do?
- Strategic issues usually have major multifunctional or multibusiness consequences.

In light of these dimensions, major IT-related issues and decisions certainly qualify as strategic. These decisions allocate large amounts of company resources and require a major organizational commitment. These decisions are future-oriented with the associated element of risk, and they affect the organization for five years or longer, sometimes much longer. These decisions also have major multifunctional or multibusiness consequences. Despite recent articles and books declaring “IT Doesn’t Matter,” IT-related issues and decisions in healthcare match the criteria to be considered strategic.

In developing a working definition for strategy, it must be acknowledged that strategy has been defined in a variety of ways by the strategy gurus. Many of the definitions agree that strategy relates to the way an organization chooses to compete and create value. While this definition certainly applies to healthcare organizations, it may be more relevant to think in less formal terms.

A frequent approach to strategy is sometimes referred to as goals-based strategy, meaning the strategic planning process is based on achieving the long range goals of the organization.3 So in less formal terms, a strategy can be defined as the actions an organization is taking to close the gap between its current reality—its current markets served, offerings, processes, people, technologies, or finances—and its desired future state, documented by its long-term goals, vision, mission, or core values (see Figure 1). Stated even more informally, strategy is what an organization or business unit is doing to get from where it is today to where it wants to be.

![Figure 1](image_url)

Figure 1.

An action or initiative is strategic if it involves changing what the organization is doing today to get an organization to its desired future state. This can be contrasted with operational plans, which tend to focus more on what needs to be done to support or improve the ongoing day-to-day operations of the organization. Any good overall plan for an organization has to properly balance strategic actions or initiatives with operational plans.

The Strategy Lifecycle

After the actions or initiatives to achieve the long-term goals have been defined—a strategy has been formulated, in business school terminology—the planners in some organizations may believe that they are through with strategic planning. However, formulation of a strategic plan is really just the beginning. Now, the organization must determine how best to accomplish the actions and initiatives it has defined. In short, a plan must be developed to implement the strategy.

As previously stated, strategic initiatives typically affect several areas of the organization. For example, internal communications plans, organizational structure, resource allocation techniques, business and clinical processes, and supplier relationships may have to change as the organization moves from the current state to the desired future state—in other words, to implement the strategy in the organization. These changes needed to implement the
strategy must be coordinated, planned, and managed or they probably will not happen.

After a critical mass of changes has been made to implement the strategy, the organization can begin to execute it. During execution, the strategy must be monitored to ensure that it is actually working. Because strategy is partly based on assumptions about the future, it is rare that a strategy is perfect from the start. Additionally, in the time since the plan was formulated, there may have been significant changes in either the external environment (for example, a new specialty hospital was approved or a regional health information organization was initiated) or the internal environment of the organization. Even though a strategy must provide continuity of direction, midcourse corrections during strategy execution are frequently needed to keep the strategy relevant.

**IT Strategic Planning Principles**

The threat of Y2K drove many healthcare organizations to develop an IT strategic plan in the late 1990s. A major focus of these plans involved rectifying noncompliant technologies and systems. Early in this decade, IT planning seemed to fall out of favor as capital spending for IT decreased, and many organizations still were picking up the pieces from all the systems rapidly implemented to address the Y2K problem.

Now, there is renewed interest in IT strategic planning, driven in part by the new challenges that healthcare organizations are facing, coupled with the increasing realization that IT must be a part of the solution to these challenges. Even so, the concept of IT strategic planning is unsettling to many non-IT executives because they are uncomfortable dealing with IT-related issues. This is obviously not good, as an IT strategic plan is a valuable tool in communicating to the organization how the focused efforts documented in the IT strategy will help the organization achieve its goals.

There are several things IT executives and professionals in the organization must do during the IT strategic planning process to help non-IT executives be more comfortable with the decisions they need to make and with the general direction that the IT function is taking:

- **Involve key non-IT executives and managers throughout the planning process.** This principle may seem obvious, but too often, an IT strategy is developed without appropriate involvement of key people outside the IT function. The plan then is viewed as the IT function’s plan rather than as the organization’s IT strategic plan.

- **Speak the language of the business.** Discussions must be in terms of solving business problems and creating business benefits instead of “techno-speak.” Also, IT executives must be willing to instill transparency in the IT function’s operations and finances. The IT function cannot be viewed, as it all too often is, as a “black hole.”

- **Use every opportunity to educate non-IT executives** about relevant IT-related issues and subjects. These executives have little time for “education for education’s sake.” Education is particularly useful when people are going to have to make a decision or when there has been a problem. These situations are sometimes called “teachable moments” because the student is more receptive to being educated.

- **Define, evaluate, and present alternatives.** Almost always, there is more than one possible solution. By presenting and evaluating alternatives to the executives, they are able to make a more informed decision and support that decision when questions or objections arise.

- **Have the right people making the decisions.** Appropriately, business executives are becoming more involved with IT-related decisions. An article in the November 2002 issue of *Harvard Business Review* recommended that business executives make the following decisions: How much should we spend on IT? Which business processes should receive our IT dollars? Which IT capabilities need to be companywide? How good do our IT services really need to be? What security and privacy risks will we accept? Whom do we blame if an IT initiative fails?

- **Communicate.** This almost universal principle also applies to IT strategic planning. A good communication plan includes regular communication from the IT and non-IT executives to their groups and peer-to-peer communication from the IT professionals to key people outside the IT function.

Business and clinical executives will not be comfortable making and supporting these or other decisions related to IT strategy unless IT people are speaking the language of the business, providing appropriate education, and presenting viable alternatives to issues.

Just as a good IT strategic planning process is based on key principles, so too must a good IT strategy adhere to key principles.

First, the IT strategy must be aligned with the organizational strategy. While this principle is certainly not new, it is not uncommon to review an IT strategy with no obvious links to the organizational strategy. In these cases, it is rare for anyone outside the IT function to understand what the IT strategy is or how it is supposed to affect them. This leads to the second principle, which is that different audiences can understand the IT strategy and its impact on them. A good IT strategy document tells a logical, compelling story about where the organization is headed and how IT will help it get there. It is not just a long list of IT projects.

Next in importance is having an IT strategic plan that can be implemented. Just as with organizational plans, most IT strategic plans today affect large parts of the organization. The implementation of the plan requires coordinating efforts of multiple functions and departments with the activities controlled by the IT function. As shown in Figure 2,
the IT strategic plan must appropriately balance the need for providing continuity of direction with the need for some flexibility to deal with changing realities. Stated differently, the IT strategic plan needs to chart an appropriate direction without being so detailed or specific that one relatively minor change in the external or internal environment makes the plan obsolete.

A Recommended Planning Approach

There are almost as many ways to approach strategic planning as there are strategy gurus. As shown in Figure 2, our recommended IT strategic planning process at a high level follows an approach most people already know, a traditional gap analysis approach. First, the organization must determine its desired future state, assess its current state and identify the major gaps. Then, alternatives must be evaluated and selected, and the plan must be documented.

This seemingly simple process is not without its pitfalls and difficulties. One challenge is that of aligning the IT strategy with the business strategy. As previously stated, many healthcare organizations do not have a current, well-documented organizational strategy. In those cases, a derived organizational strategy must be developed and endorsed by top executives.

This so-called derived organizational strategy can have multiple components. First, key current organizational priorities and metrics must be identified. The current allocation of critical resources, including how executives spend their time, and key organizational metrics are good indicators of the actual short-term implicit strategy. This implicit strategy frequently does not reflect what is documented or articulated as a strategic plan.

To develop a long-term view of the organizational direction, business and IT principles can be used. By reviewing key organizational documents, a “straw man” set of business principles and IT principles can be developed and presented to executives. The selected principles can then be evaluated for misalignment. For example, if an IDN operates with a high degree of autonomy overall but wants to create a centralized IT organizational structure and decision-making model, then the high likelihood for strong organizational resistance to the new structure and model must be addressed during strategy implementation. The principle-driven approach is more useful than developing a vision statement for IT. The principles are more concrete, may not create as many unrealistic expectations, and are beneficial in identifying and addressing exceptions to the plan in future IT governance processes.

Next, key organizational assumptions can be documented. Assumptions are positions on some possible future issues or events over which the organization may have very little control. These may be explicit (in other words, they are documented and the executives agree on them) or implicit (the assumptions are not documented and there may not be executive agreement on them). Assumptions are important because they help shape the current organizational strategy. If these assumptions change, then the organizational strategy needs to be re-evaluated and may have to change.

The final construct used to document a derived organizational strategy is that of guardrails, which define the boundaries within which the organizational and IT strategy must be formulated, implemented, and executed. Guardrails can exist for areas such as financial expenditures, key organizational synergies and competencies, product offerings, target markets, or distribution channels. Frequently, organizations have financial guardrails for profitability or revenue growth. The organization also may have financial guardrails relating specifically to IT departmental operating expenses or IT capital expenditures. Obviously, the IT strategic plan must be developed within these financial guardrails.

In summary, if the organizational strategy is lacking, then the current organizational priorities and key metrics, business and IT principles, critical assumptions, and guardrails can comprise a derived strategy to give the IT strategic planners the organizational strategic context they need with which to align an IT strategy. If the organizational strategy is adequate, then key points must be extracted and supplemented with any missing constructs to define the organizational strategic context for the IT strategy.

 Concurrent with efforts to define the organizational strategic context, the current environment must be assessed.
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Three questions must be answered to make these assessments:

- How well do customers perceive that their needs are being met today?
- How well is the IT function performing today?
- How well are IT-related assets being managed today?

To answer these questions, areas outside the control of the IT function must be evaluated.

This leads to the next step in the IT planning process: the gap analysis between the desired or future state, as documented by the organizational strategic context, and the current state, as documented by the IT assessment. This gap analysis must be done holistically—it cannot just be a long list of projects needed. Key gaps must be identified and grouped into areas such as applications; IT infrastructure; IT operations, services and processes; and the overall management of the IT-related assets, which extends beyond the IT function to areas such as IT governance and funding.

Next, overall alternative strategies to close the gaps must be identified and evaluated. It may be useful to first determine what needs to be done regardless of the strategy selected. For example, if the IT governance process is performing poorly, then it most likely will need to be improved regardless of the strategy selected. Then, define the critical areas where viable strategic alternatives still exist. For example, are there viable alternatives for core applications? Or are there viable sourcing options, such as remote or external vs. internal hosting for a critical application?

Third, identify overall strategic alternatives and the criteria for evaluating these alternatives. Some organizations prefer to document a wide variety of generally viable alternatives and eliminate the alternatives that conflict with the IT principles or do not fit within the guardrails; for example, purchasing a new core clinical system is a viable alternative for most organizations, but the financial guardrails preclude this alternative. This way, when the inevitable objections or questions arise—sometimes long after the selected strategy has been approved—adequate documentation exists as to why an alternative that would be viable for other organizations was not selected for this organization.

Next, develop and evaluate a short list of usually two to four items of strategic alternatives using the criteria identified earlier. These criteria may include overall organizational alignment, in which all alternatives should align reasonably well, but some may align better than others; overall costs and affordability; or the organization’s ability to implement the alternative strategy. As the final step, a strategic alternative needs to be recommended to and approved by key decision-makers. There may not be a perfect strategic alternative. The challenges of the proposed strategy, such as organizational readiness to implement the strategy, need to be highlighted so they can be addressed in the implementation plan for the strategy.

The final step in the IT strategic planning process is to finish documenting the plan. Two final documents can be produced: a board-presentable enterprise communication document and a strategy implementation plan. The document for the board is generally a 15- to 20-page document that summarizes the strategic context, key findings from the current state assessment, key gaps, strategies evaluated, and the selected IT strategy. This document is “board-presentable” because it should be easily read and understood by board members, non-IT executives, and other key people outside of IT.

Just as with organizational strategies, IT strategies need to be implemented. As the name implies, the strategy implementation plan documents how the strategy described in the board’s IT strategy document will be implemented. It goes into more detail and covers a shorter time frame than the strategy document—usually 12 months compared with the three to five years of the board-level document. It also is updated more frequently than the IT strategy document—generally every quarter to maintain a rolling 12-month implementation plan, compared with annual updates for the IT strategy document.

Conceptually, the strategy implementation plan lays out the sequencing, duration, and expected costs of all the initiatives or projects that need to be completed across the organization to implement the IT strategy. For example, does the governance structure need to be revamped before beginning any major new IT-related initiatives? Do we need to hire more people or transfer people into the IT function before beginning a particular initiative? A good strategy implementation plan becomes a valuable guide for the various IT governance committees and councils.

Conclusion

Organizational or IT strategic planning is a valuable
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management tool to create clarity of purpose and then focus and align efforts. It requires discipline to create the plan and even more to implement it because it may clash with the organizational or IT culture and can test the financial resources of any organization. Even so, if done well, IT strategic planning can be time well spent. It can get executives to think more strategically about IT and may cause IT executives and professionals to focus more on the business issues. The alternative of continuing to operate without a clearly defined and articulated organizational and IT strategy leaves an organization's fate to the uncoordinated, unfocused efforts of a variety of decision-makers.

Continuing to operate without a good IT strategy is roughly equivalent, but on a much larger scale, to trying to implement a complex IT-related initiative, such as advanced clinical computing, without the benefit of a good set of project plans. We know that does not work.

About the Author

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References

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Russell F. Lewis, Editor

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