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It's time to question everything: From wavering wisdom to wise uncertainty

After two seasons of "Keeping up with the Kardashians" and long before a Kardashian 'broke the internet', Susan Boyle, a Northern-accented English woman, stood in 2009 on a stage on April 11, in the UK, bewildered and with a bemused Simon Cowell giving side eye during an episode of Britain's Got Talent. Ms. Boyle began to sing "I dreamed a dream" and the wonderful Amanda Holden was transfixed and shed a tear. By daybreak on the USA West Coast, 23 million people had been captured by the moment. That moment made its way from the subtle slopes of the UK to the antipodes of the southern hemisphere, to the ears of California and beyond; tracking sunrise, fed by clicks, tears, shares and wonder at the human spirit and the success of an underdog (https://youtu.be/5D5DgQi2oqA?si=8arBggA7LOh6LFez).

The video of this unlikely star has literally been viewed billions of times. It has metastasised and is on so many sites it is no longer entirely possible to track the number of views. This researcher on said day in America questioned the eminent marketing professors overseeing the Ph.D. program in which he was researching, of the meaning and cause of this moment. Most had not seen it but were curious. In retrospect it was likely the first people-driven virtual and real-time globally shared moment, click by click, emotion by emotion and connection by connection. It is likely a moment that along with others, heralded a change that only a few had even dreamt of or anticipated.

Why does this matter? What can we learn? Why do Susan Boyle and Amanda Holden matter so much? It was a moment in time when unexpected connections and user action unexpectedly leveraged evolving technology that took hold in ways that were not predicted. Connections, one to one, were made. And the act of bravery, surprise, the unexpected and some human kindness and wonder were in play. These elements underpin much of human endeavor.

Our experiences and insights as researchers and practitioners hope that this short and messy paper, can provide motivation and excitement, as well as semi-structured ways to create and operationalise complex yet parsimonious strategic marketing actions that leverage technology and the wisdom of insight, intuition and expertise.

This paper, unapologetically, is a thought piece designed to be a provocation and a plea. It is driven very much by happenstance, by the shared and independent experiences of these two researchers. These shared and independent experiences include countless collaborations on national defence-related issues, 'project managing' hundreds of project managers focused on delivering complex projects of national importance, interviewing national leaders on sensitive policy matters, guiding and supporting thousands of feedback-seeking graduate students, and tending to aspiring leaders and their organisations.

The Research Underpinning Overall Precept

The genesis of the paper however is a Global study of EMBA students which focused on strategic success in the era of AI and the drivers of capability development in complex environments. This paper is underpinned by the findings of that study, under final review, which focused on the behaviours and attitudes of EMBA students, faculty and employers who were canvassed seeking insights into strategic workplace projects, engagement with strategic issues and artificial intelligence and focused on pathways to strategic success in the age of artificial intelligence and rapidly changing business dynamics in the global business landscape. The research indicated that experiences in real world, live and ambiguous contexts were foundational to the growth and development of capability for students and graduates moving forward. It also indicated that whilst employers sought 'job-ready' applicants from advanced

business programs, when employers were prepared to foster complex and ambiguous project participation, then the outcomes of such projects tended to deliver the 'unexpected' and at times breakthrough solutions.

The research also found that traditional measures of EMBA student success and also university rankings and ratings were not encouraging the kinds of learning experiences that are essential for students to thrive in future business environments. It also found that when employers and HR organizations were seeking new ways to encourage and embed their new employees, and at the same time, being able to leverage the capabilities that high performing students were able to bring to organisations, this messiness and dramatic change in the university learning and HR environment was a driver of new ways of thinking about strategic development. Our interpretation of these findings was that by exploring strategic success, developing strategic initiatives, and leveraging AI in an efficacious and also structured manner, yielded a coexistence of concrete outcomes. We also believe that the qualitative findings suggested that such outcomes were partly the result of this focus and allowing the context to be as expansive as possible thus leading to efficacious and useful possibilities.

Purpose of this paper

Overall this work is a culmination of countless opportunities, experiences and interaction, all focused on the business of success and failure. Thus, the overall purpose of this paper is to explore the means of moving beyond the current linearity of thinking regarding marketing, communication, influencing and success built upon transactional relationships and 'trend-ism' and the 'push' mindset, and toward opening up the mindset and exploring options, capabilities and possibilities in terms of how to incorporate a multitude of building blocks and fundamental strategic marketing principles and to leverage autonomous pattern learning, autonomous and artificial intelligence technologies, to create long term organisational success, particularly focused on the foundations and models of lifetime customer value, longevity and tenure, plus strategic fit in terms of capabilities and resources.

Ultimately, these are the drivers of organisational success and customer long term loyalty. In practice, however current models are linear, transactional, and tactically driven, and oddly short term. The current business models of multiple organisations is to create 'push', often using influencers who communicate directly to end users and utilise a delivery channel that creates, in our opinion, less value for participants in all elements of these channels and which limit the options for true innovation and future success.

We propose an entirely new way of approaching strategic marketing as an all-encompassing overall value system. We propose the leverage of the concept of a value system and the elements within; a focus on single points of success, single points of failure, and the power of multiplicity, multitudinous-ness, and the optionality of infinite possibilities by melding truly complex strategic integrated marketing systems enabled by artificial intelligence models and autonomous learning coupled with concentrated strategic options and decision points.

Given the current model of iteration and trial in the use of AI by so many, it is time for creating more robust thinking models within the chaotic and turbulent world of emerging technologies.

Methodology for this Thought Experiment

This is the structure of the paper. Firstly, we took the findings of the global EMBA research project and addressed the suggested shortcomings and also the potential leverage points that we discovered in the study. We used these to identify potential courses of action in terms of developing student, HR and organisational capabilities for success. We then explored just over 600 workplace project submissions to identify the overall scope of strategic marketing, leadership and organizational design models that were applied and evaluated in those projects. From these, we selected a composite of 52 overarching marketing and strategy processes, which we term building blocks for success. From there, we then condensed these into categories.

The categories loosely were based around those that contributed to customer lifetime value, those that addressed what we term strategic fit (Dandis & Al Haj Eid, 2022), an overarching construct we define as resources, capabilities and organisational design, and the third element we identified as value in action, or longevity and value delivered over time. These three categories we see as long-term measures of strategic success.

We then took the constructs that most carefully fit and also aligned with these that were actually most used. We separated those into each of the three categories. In other words, we identified three overarching categories. We then were able to identify 14 core models that fit within those overarching categories s. We combined our insights from the workplace submission examination with an intense review of marketing and strategy texts, as well as Harvard Business Review strategy articles, and insights from IDEO-U, plus the Standard d-school to seek strategic development ideas, processes and reported strategic successes. From here we identified nine core strategic themes which we label strategic building blocks.

Thus we developed a structure meta-model consisting of three overarching success categories, nine strategic keys and a focused set of fourteen strategic building blocks which as a cohort create a binding and self-reinforcing and interactive set of insight development ciphers. This latter point is key. From our observations of workplace projects and our consulting engagements, we noted that when the various tools and models were interrogated and interpreted in the light of the interrogation and insights of the OTHER related and at times dissimilar tools and processes, there was a stronger likelihood of uncovering unique and meaningful decision-making propositions and inputs.

We then identified nine core strategic tools, and we took what we called strategic keys, separated those into these categories. From there, we actually identified the core purposes of each of those of the building blocks. And from there, we developed not hypotheses, but propositions and usage proposals of what would enhance the overall meta model. In other words, we built an over-arching structural meta model, and identified the components of those also with loosely defined propositions, all of which we believe is the scaffolding for an initial exploratory model to build a artificial intelligence strategy system. Initially, the idea was to specify a complex structural model. However, we after initial attempts, we decided that it was more effective to identify rather than pathways, but identify potential constructs and define both scope scale and boundaries of those constructs and set instructions for artificial intelligence to actually explore those and look for patterns, look for correlation, covariance, and if possible, Also look for causation. We then expanded again from the core elements of our building blocks and identified the 48 overall tools that appeared to be the most used tools overall in the 600 plus workplace projects that we explored.

The Proposed Structural Integration of AI System Thinking for Strategic Success

The proposed framework is intended to challenge linear assumptions by foregrounding interactivity, adaptability, and strategic behaviour as systemic constructs. Its purpose is to enable organisations to integrate human, structural, and AI-enabled capacities into a coherent analytical lens. This aligns with contemporary views of organisations as complex adaptive systems.

Figure 1 shows the overall proposal for the System, including what we call the Spirit of the System, the eight characteristics and modalities that we propose should drive the 'nature and ethos' of the AI specification.

The paper highlights the eight core themes of the proposed value system which we label strategic keys, and the attendant building blocks with insights to use in conjunction with the associated autonomous technological tools and processes.

The overall focus is how, in the evolving era, we understand, leverage and use, for efficacious outcomes in an ethical manner, the power of autonomous intelligence and machine learning.

The researchers have explored potential building blocks and principles that underpin the themes of the model and pose potential ways questions and insights that can be given to and extrapolated from AI, including interpretation, insights and proposed solutions.

We also highlight what we call the Spirit of the System, positing the nature of the AI programming to include, as a precept, the actions of the wise worker; the subtext being that a 'worker' is the owner of agency in the system; by who, for whom and why the initiative it being considered; the importance and power of language, 'spark' and symbolism; the Grand Opera of ideas and the power of data as a product; the power of play, rigor and problem solving in systems; the importance of both the willing optimist and the miserly misfit; the AI promise of accessibility, viability, validity and value; and finally, what to do next? In the model we term these as AI Characteristics and Modality.

The Proposed Structural Integration of AI System Thinking for Strategic Success

Figure 1:
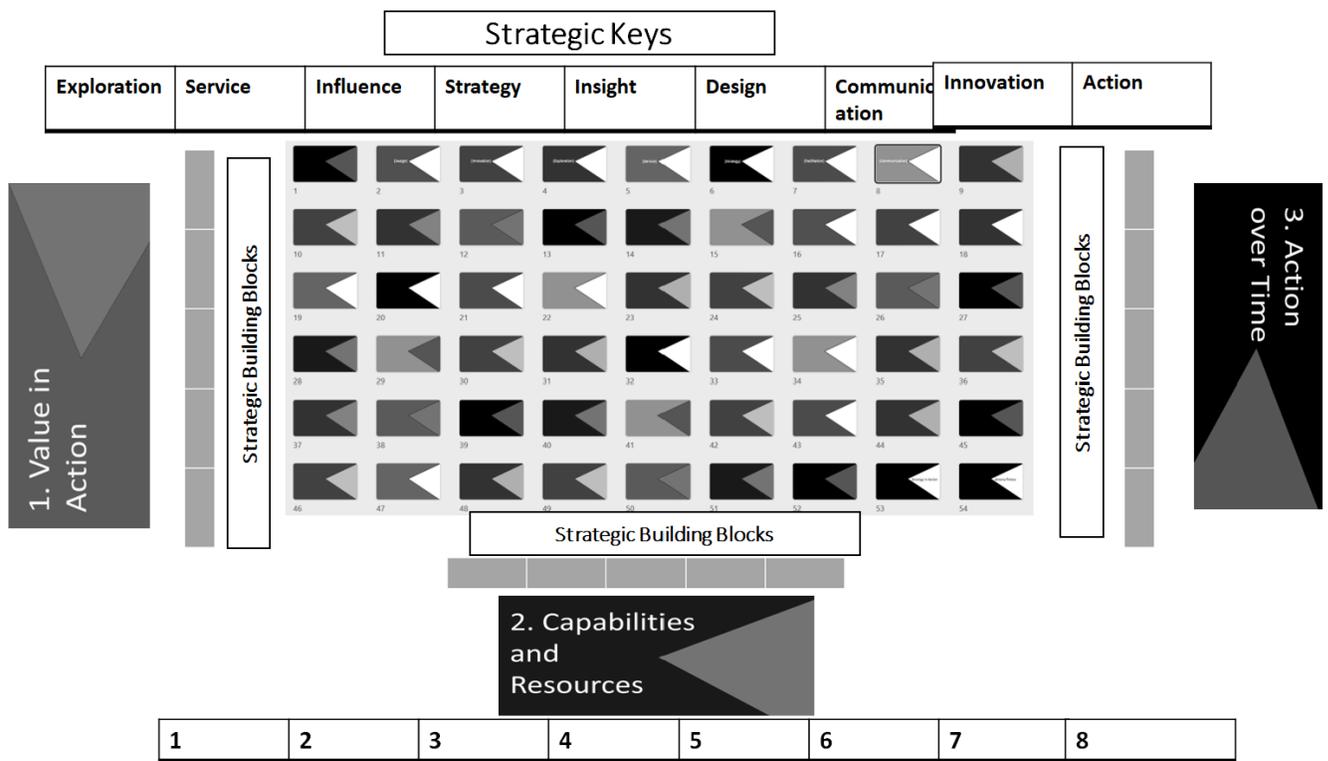
AI Characteristics & Modality

1. What does the wise worker do
2. By whom, for whom and why
3. Language, Spark and Symbolism
4. The Grand Opera of Ideas & Data
5. Play, Rigor & Problem-solving
6. Willing Optimist & Miserly Misfit
7. AI Promise: Accessibility, Viability, Validity, Values
8. What to do Next

The Character, Nature and Focus of the Structural AI Process

This, the Spirit of the System is the underlying value, values and programmed, intentional, underpinning modalities.

What does the wise worker do focuses on the premise here is that the wise worker, or whoever is the project owner – those with agency is sitting in place, sense making in this chaotic space, in this time when along with well-known trends, macro and micro, there is an era of hyper extenuated self and one, the era of raw emotion as a driving force, the era of hyper connectivity, and the era of a global factor of particular notice, the era of disintermediation, of global links and global trading systems. Thus the AI project of the wise worker. in this domain, faces both the challenges of the evolving era and untold opportunities.

By whom for whom and why highlights the interconnectivity of customers. Customers are interconnected in systems that are complex, random and unpredictable, as well as highly organized and orchestrated. The long standing and long held supposition of the strength of weak ties is as important as ever. The power of language, motivating spark and symbolism are key. Raw emotion is a critical driver. Understanding this is key. Hence the link with the modality of Language, Spark and Symbolism. In this era of raw emotion as a critical driver it is essential to understand its dynamic, power and downsides. The ultimate idea of this is that any one individual can influence any one other individual, anywhere in the world, on mass or individually.

The language that emerges is of the utmost importance, which ultimately manifests as a spark. In this endeavor, artificial intelligence can be put to use to model inputs and outcomes in a hypothetical manner. This is one of the most dangerous areas to explore when working with respondents and AI models can be used to extrapolate and infer with the need for contact with potential respondents.

The concept of the Grand Opera ideas and leveraging data as a project focused on wide and deep search for ideas as well as successes and failures within the broader scope of system members (Si et al., 2023). Ringland's model (2010) works like a very large and very strong and powerful elastic band, held out to create an operating field anchored by four posts - user needs, provider needs, the operating environment and the operating system. These are supported by the technology systems which drive growth and expansion and enable the operating field. The point of Ringland's work is that with strategic insight we can create evolving dynamics of these posts to enable success. AI models can be pivotal in creating exponential variations of the operating field.

Insight creation is key. Play, rigor and problem solving leverage the premise of this paper, that it's time to question everything, to work on creating an ideal state that might be an ideal product, an ideal state of being, an ideal context, an ideal world, ideal outcomes, always focused on ideal and potential value.

The premise of intentional change, along with the practice of using scenario thinking. Scenario thinking perfectly fits in with the idea of going from wavering wisdom to wise uncertainty and at the absolute idea of ambiguity and potentially ideal solutions, at the same time, moving away from certainty and moving much more into the idea of hunches and possibilities.

Future scenarios and new ways of thinking, not only creating new scenarios, but using the scenario model and the other tools that we have at hand to create new ways of thinking. Given that artificial intelligence models, artificial learning models, have no thought, no emotion, and no inferred meaning to them, we can program these models to focus on the things that we want them to focus on, and at the same time, it's the humans who are making the ultimate decisions.

The balance here is to explore before action. Complexity models are essential and the system must operate on the notion that it is balancing on the point of complexity and chaos (Snowden & Rancati, 2021), which can be a powerful precursor to deep and all-encompassing innovation and change. The idea of hunches highlights the contrast between the willing optimist and the miserly misfit - infinite possibilities versus what is most likely to work. Again, based on the premise of single points of failure and single points of success, the contrast in decisions systems is essential.

The AI promise of accessibility, viability, validity and value encompasses a move into the finite and creation, moving from possibilities, thought experiments, into exploring a map of innovation plotting current resources, current services and product lines. and exploring strengths and gaps. A virtuous cycle model helps to link promised offerings with promised outcomes and value delivered to users. Such models aim to link unique capabilities within teams and organizations to deliver these 'just right' options. It involves finding ways to extrapolate explore what's unique and look for what we have and what we don't have.

What to do next, a call to action, is the final element of the characteristics and modalities. Something must happen. We propose that the AI system should be presupposed to examining and exploring actions and their consequences, especially in terms of potential success and failure. This should be the underpinning, overall structural elements of an AI strategic building block system.

AI Structure Model in Brief

The three guiding principles of the AI structural model are: one, value in action; two, capabilities and resources and three, action over time. The nine strategic keys are exploration, service, influence, strategy, insight, design, communication, innovation and action. These are interconnected, and the various models that we propose as the 14 key building blocks are used are here in order.

Primarily we propose a congruence, alignment and strategy model that highlights the need for a structural and applied operating model partnered with a virtuous cycle model which explore the core underlying drivers of the business offering and the consequences of such drivers.

Optimal and exploratory tools to examine operating boundaries and the interrelationships between customers, business needs, delivery systems and the macro environment link the system to micro and macro issues, both internal and external to the entity.

Ambidextrous organization thinking is essential as is the relative balance between growth and enhancement of existing offerings and a focus on creating new offerings and ways of working aligned with decision and resource allocation.

The value system thinking, which encompasses complexity and infinite variety in the business ecosystem, requires flexible and open boundaries. Aligned with complexity decision frames and scenario thinking iterations, allow for new ways of operating.

Sense taking in terms of people, leadership and change and innovation, requires a parsimonious yet flexible model that AI can use as a boundary force aligned with exploration of motivational models for organisational success through people. This also encompasses capabilities and resources and the wishes, desires and needs of users and the providers of those offerings.

What to do next and Future Research

Ultimately for strategic success, we need to make things happen. We need to make behaviors stick. We need to achieve outcomes. Our framework and proposals are put forward as an attempt for individuals, teams, and organisations of all sizes to enhance their strategy making and implementation capabilities and leverage the power of AI in a structured and systematic manner. This help to add purpose to any moment, putting thought, effort, energy, motivation, excitement, and emotion towards one goal in that instance. Artificial intelligence and autonomous learning systems can actually help us to refine and define those and also keep track of progress.

So ultimately, we're still in the business of understanding people and place, the idea of the structure of the organization may be dramatically changing. At the same time, the dynamics of these still work. Simple sets of heuristics, and a parsimonious focus on purpose enable people to understand intent and motivation to make things work.

The research explored the premise that unexpected connections matter. Strategic innovation typically emerges through non-linear pathways, often from peripheral or poorly structured problem spaces. This aligns with research in emergence, complexity theory, and sense-making. Unexpected connections serve as catalysts for insight generation and capability reorientation. Academically, this underscores the need for interpretive capacity and systemic awareness within managerial practice.

Future research proposes to extend the EMBA research findings reveal that strategic success across over 600 applied workplace projects was strongly associated with the capacity to navigate ambiguity. Participants' ability to interpret interdependencies and behavioural patterns yielded more substantive organisational outcomes than adherence to prescriptive models. This supports literature suggesting strategy-as-practice is grounded in enacted behaviour rather than static frameworks. These findings need to replicated in time series case studies of programs in employing organisations with a focus on advanced capability development.

Traditional linear strategy and marketing models often overlook nonlinearity, socio-emotional dynamics, and contextual fluidity. Such limitations can lead to reductive interpretations of organisational phenomena. From an academic standpoint, linearity constrains explanatory potential and biases analytical outcomes. The Boyle example demonstrates how systems can shift rapidly when latent variables become active. Exploration of similar examples of such examples ideally those supported and permeated by AI-related models, is essential to finding effective operating and strategic models to power future integrated business models.

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