

Fading memories of the future: On the dissipation of strategic foresight among middle managers

Abstract

Strategic foresight among middle managers is crucial, considering their responsibilities and authority vested in them in directing everyday organising. Emphasising practices as the locus of strategic foresight, we argue that imposed organising processes and bureaucratic routines may interact to dissipate the cultivation of strategic foresight among middle managers in their situated practice. Building on an explorative case analysis of a European sportswear retail company, our study highlights how top-down changes in organising processes may induce the dissipation of organisational 'foresightfulness'. We identify four dimensions emphasised by the new organising processes and their associated routines (rhetoric of legitimation, instrumental rationality, suppression of creative freedom, and the formulations of solutions in search of problems) which typify the observed patterns of foresight dissipation among middle managers. The study and its findings extend our understanding of contextual antecedents that could lead to the dissipation of strategic foresight among middle managers in organizing.

Keywords: Middle managers, organising processes, routines, strategic foresight

Introduction

Strategic foresight - i.e. the creative evaluation and (re-)configuration of sources of potentialities (and limits) into resources and productive outcomes - has long been promoted as an important element in the creation and capture of competitive advantage (Chia, 2008; Heger and Rohrbeck, 2012; Tsoukas and Shepherd, 2004). The nurturing and leveraging of strategic foresight at both the individual and group level has been associated with adaptive learning (Bootz, 2012; Rohrbeck and Schwarz, 2013), the identification of opportunities for innovation (Sarpong and Maclean, 2011; Könnölä *et al.*, 2007) and strategic renewal (Vecchiato, 2012; Baden-fuller and Volberda, 1997). While the locus attribution of strategic foresight remains debatable, middle managers in particular, by virtue of their broad responsibilities and roles and the authority vested in them in directing everyday organising, are frequently promoted as strategic actors in the nurturing and cultivation of strategic foresight (See: Constanzo, 2003, Constanzo and Tzoumpa 2010; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011).

Drawing on the recent turn to practices in contemporary social theory, in reiterating the strategic importance of the actions of middle level managers in enabling strategic foresight, scholars have emphasised organising practices as the site of strategic foresight (Sarpong and Maclean, 2013, Sarpong and Maclean, 2014, Cunha *et al.*, 2006; Waehrens and Riis, 2010). They go further to explain how micro-interactions and the (re)production of often taken-for-granted organisational routines and practices (Feldman, 2003; Pentland and Reuter, 1994) could help us grasp not just the logic of strategic foresight, but also novel ways of theorising strategic foresight as a distributed capability (Cunha *et al.*, 2006; Sarpong and Maclean, 2011; McKelvey and Boisot, 2008). In short, organising practices do

matter for the cultivation of strategic foresight. Despite the progress made by the existing literature on the contribution of middle managers to foresight, Appiah and Sarpong (2015) observed that there is limited research exploring how organisational context and antecedents may influence strategic foresight. In particular, there is sparse literature examining the extent to which new organising processes and routines in organisations interact to cultivate (or dissipate) strategic foresight among middle managers in practice. By 'organising processes' we refer to the formal and informal canonical rules and structures that prescribe, coordinate and govern situated practices and the "acceptable way" work is done (Sarpong et al., 2013). Moving forward, we contribute to this body of literature by taking a step towards a theory of the dissipation of strategic foresight in contemporary organising. To do this, we studied how the introduction of new organising processes and routines (what we call 'post acquisition system re-alignment') aimed at streamlining the operations in and improving the competitiveness of a newly acquired business, might inadvertently lead to the dissipation of strategic foresight in practice.

Empirically, we focus on how post-acquisition, top management changes to the organising processes of one European sports apparel retail company precipitated the decline of strategic foresight among the firm's middle managers. We delineate our findings into the categories of rhetoric of legitimation, separation of knowledge forms, suppression of creative freedom and the formulation of solutions in search of problems, as these four dimensions of the new organising processes gave rise to the observed patterns of foresight dissipation among middle managers. Our study offers two contributions: firstly, our study provides insight into how the work of middle managers may contribute to organisational 'foresightfulness'; secondly, we introduce and describe four dimensions of organising processes and routines which explain how strategic foresight could be precipitated in organising.

The paper is organised as follows: in the next section, we provide an overview of the concept of strategic foresight and the role of middle managers in contributing to organisational foresightfulness. Following this, we explain our research methodology and provide an overview of our case study organisation, data gathering and analysis. After this, we present the case study evidence showing how the introduction of new pervasive organising processes dissipated the potential of middle managers to enact 'foresightful' actions in their situated practice. We then conclude with a discussion of our findings and their relevance to theory and practice.

Strategic foresight among middle managers

Broadly conceived as a human capacity to identify, explore and exploit opportunities glossed over by others, strategic foresight has emerged as a skill required for successful organising. As an organising

competence, strategic foresight helps to prepare the organisation for the future by broadening the boundaries of perception in strategy formulation, evaluation and implementation (Cunha et al., 2008; Rohrbeck, 2012). Acknowledging the relations and linkages between strategy and the future, together with the relevance of foresight for value creation and capture, strategic foresight is frequently presented as a managerial competence (Mackay and Mckiernan, 2004; Major et al., 2001), with a positive correlation to firm performance (Amsteus, 2012). From this perspective, the foresight literature tends to focus on the 'legendary' founder (Harris and Ogbonna, 1999), the 'great' CEO (Bezold, 2010; McKelvey and Boisot, 2009) and organisational elites or top management teams (Mackay, 2009; Constanzo, 2004), in accounting for organisational foresightfulness.

Meanwhile, a recent scholarly turn to the coal-face of organising has directed attention to middle managers as a strategic group of doers whose actions, activities and routines could have profound influence on organisational foresightfulness and entrepreneurial initiatives (Tsoukas and Shepherd, 2004; Costanzo and Tzoumpa, 2010). Zooming in on the micro-practices and routines which form an integral part of the day-to-day work of organisational members, this stream of work does not only draw attention to the strategic and symbolic contribution of middle managers in enabling foresight; it also delineates how strategic foresight could be harnessed and nurtured in contemporary organising (e.g. Sarpong, 2014; Darkow, 2015). Specifically, they argue that middle managers' integrative responsibilities for ordering, directing, learning and organising (Kerzner, 2013; Sarpong *et al*, 2015) play an important role in developing their organisation's capacity to cope with unforeseen external factors (Schwarz, 2008) and in facilitating learning within teams and departments (Constanzo & Tzoumpa, 2010). Balogun and Johnson (2005), in arguing that foresight does not apply solely to senior management, suggest that strategic foresight among middle management is much more crucial because of their knowledge and perception of both the internal and external environments in which their organisations operate (Darkow, 2015; Constanzo & Tzoumpa, 2009). From this perspective, successful corporate foresight exercises such as scenario planning, value chain analysis and business war-gaming all rely on the contribution of middle management to the interpretation of external views about the future and how they could be converted into internal reusable knowledge (Major, 2000).

In our view, the successful integration of strategic foresight in organising is determined by the active interaction between what Appiah and Sarpong (2015) referred to as "ostensive" and "performative" aspects of routines within a focal organisation. It involves the strategic integration of disparate and often competing blocs of knowledge which are products of organisational activities and routines, organised into representations of potential futures (Feldman, 2003; Durand, 2008). Yet we know that organising routines are themselves shaped by organising processes (Felin *et al*, 2012; Weick

et al, 2005). In this regard, we observe that organising processes - the formal and informal canonical rules and structures that prescribe, coordinate and govern the situated practices of middle managers - are a useful antecedent to the enactment of strategic foresight in organising (Sarpong, 2016). In this paper, we contribute to a better understanding of how organising processes, whether seen from a change- or stability- inducing perspective, could lead to the dissipation of strategic foresight among middle managers. This, we argue, is likely to be the case when changes in organising processes are not well managed to accommodate feedback from middle managers and the organisation's external environment. Thus the main research question driving our empirical inquiry is therefore as follows: "How can organising processes dissipate strategic foresight among middle managers?" Our empirical research context is a Dutch retail company that made sea changes to its organising processes after going through ownership changes. In this context, the company offers an interesting empirical research case study to examine the influence of organising processes on managerial foresight. We accorded the organisation in question a pseudonym (Mabodia Inc.) to preserve its anonymity. In the next section, we provide an overview of the case study.

The case study- Mabodia Inc.

Mabodia Inc. is a sports apparel retailer based in the Benelux region. Mabodia Inc. was formed by a young entrepreneur and sport enthusiast some 30 years ago. It expanded by opening new stores, extending its collection and focussing on quality garments, personal advice, expert knowledge and service. By 2004, Mabodia Inc. had 27 stores in the Benelux region, a time when its growth and sales figures were attracting the attention of many investors. It also received great acclaim from the Dutch and Belgian press for its family-friendly flexible working practices, emphasis on creativity and managerial autonomy in making localised decisions. In that very year, an ex-employee, still enthusiastic about the company, swiftly initiated the acquisition of Mabodia Inc. by Kingtana, a Benelux sports investment company. The new parent firm decided to maintain the management of Mabodia Inc. and therefore made few changes to the business's organising processes.

In 2007, the company was acquired by a British private equity firm and became part of a group of sports companies. The new owners initiated some pervasive structural changes to the way work and business as a whole were organised at Mabodia Inc., to bring it into line and harmony with how 'things were done' in the other businesses within the group. The external image was revamped (new logos, new mission statement, new shop lay-outs). Among the major internal changes was the introduction of a monthly cost and turnover target for every store. The job and role of store managers was re-prescribed in detail and what store managers were expected to do in an 'emergency' was formalised and codified. In an effort to improve performance and efficiency, the planning of work

rotas was transferred to the head office. No one was allowed to work extra hours. Employees were no longer to be paid for a forfeited break; hence store managers needed to make sure their staff took their breaks even when the store was busy. The corporate style of the J-60 parent group is one that emphasises planning and tight budget controls. Table 1 is a summary of the biographical case history of Mabodia Inc.

Table 1 Biographical case history of Mabodia Inc.

<i>Founded by a sports enthusiast</i>	<i>Acquired by Kingtana Sports investment company</i>	<i>Acquired by a foreign equity firm - the J60-Group</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Privately owned firm ▪ Simple management structures ▪ Store managers played central role in decisions making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Top management team maintained ▪ Firm saw few changes in the way work was organised ▪ Store managers' role in decision making was reduced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduction of new management ▪ New organising processes aimed at formalising and professionalising working practices ▪ Store managers' role in decision making reduced to the barest minimum
Period 1: Late 1970s–2004	Period 2: 2004–2007	Period 3 2007–Present

The changes, according to the company were completed three years after the acquisition and led to a major improvement in performance. Nevertheless, Mabodia Inc., which used to be an industry pace-setter, is currently posting just above industry growth rates. Management tend to blame the economically difficult time in which the firm is operating. However, according to store managers, while the new organising processes may be delivering profits for the organisation in the short term, the store managers no longer feel empowered to organise work. The shift from bottoms-up, empowered management closely attuned to the local market to a more top-down, numbers-driven management approach has been a bone of contention. At the time of data collection, we were told that staff turnover was an unprecedented level, and that many managers felt disenchanting about the new regime which tended to understand organisational performance only in terms of the balance sheet.

Research methodology

In addition to publicly available materials on Mabodia Inc., we searched the company's website and intranet and downloaded sets of texts and documents. These included organisational and reporting structures, strategy plans and newsletters. This gave us an unprecedented insight into the old and

'new ways' of organising business at Mabodia Inc. Our chosen level of analysis was the middle managers (store managers) in Mabodia Inc., who are relied upon by the organisation to use their skills, expertise and experiential knowledge to mobilise distributed organisational resources in order to get work done. From this pre-given ontological status, we conceptualise a typical Mabodia Inc. store manager as a "manager who is forced to superficiality by fragmented, discontinuous events occurring throughout the organisation; the manager who must be a master politician, master negotiator, expert psychologist and counsellor, expert communicator, and much more" (Introna, 1997: 22).

Due to practical considerations including availability and geographical proximity, we invited twenty managers, who had been in post long before the acquisitions, to take part in the study; fifteen of the twenty agreed (about 50% of Mabodia Inc. store managers). We then collected 10 narrative interviews from the store managers. The managers were interviewed over a period of four months. The twelve managers had over one hundred years' combined experience working at Mabodia Inc. and an average of seven years each as store managers. The interviews were open-ended, starting with broad questions about their everyday work and personal stories within Mabodia Inc. We then drilled further down to their perceptions of the acquisition transitions, how they have impacted on their situated practice and how work is organised in their individual stores. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. They were digitally recorded and transcribed within 24 hours. In total, we generated 200 pages of interview transcripts.

The full data analysis followed four stages. First, we meticulously sifted through the interview data, then collated what we thought were salient narratives and cross-checked them with other vital objective information we had gleaned from the documentary sources, in order to overcome possible biases in what we heard in the field. Second, the disparate data were triangulated into a whole (Jick, 1979), re-read with the aim of identifying recurrent comparative phrases which were noted and highlighted. Third, in comparison with the extant literature on strategic foresight, we analysed and interpreted the data until common themes started to emerge and became saturated (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In doing this we focussed on how the new organising practices introduced by top management significantly altered everyday organising practices and routines in the various stores. We used this to generate analytical categories which converged on four distinct but interrelated top level codes: rhetoric of legitimation, instrumental rationality, suppression of creative freedom, and grand solutions in search of problems. Finally, we applied the analytical categories to the entire data set, after which the emerging patterns were then used to develop greater insight and form descriptive explanations of the influence of the new organising practices on the dissipation of foresight potential among the store managers. Table 2 is an overview of our data analysis.

Table 2: Overview of data analysis

<i>First-order codes</i>	<i>Theoretical categories</i>	<i>Aggregate theoretical dimension</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strict benchmarking of new organising processes ▪ Rules discounting old organising processes ▪ Emphasis on bureaucratic routines 	Rhetoric of legitimation	<div style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;"> <p><i>Dissipation of strategic foresight in organizing</i></p> </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over-emphasises on scientific and technical knowledge ▪ Overt discounts of experiential knowledge ▪ Standardisation of organising procedures 	Instrumental rationality and the separation of knowledge forms	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Codification of actions in response to 'breakdowns' in practice ▪ Broadly defined sanctions against organising deviance ▪ Resource rationing 	Suppression of creative freedom	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Managerial guidelines on how to organise the work of junior employees ▪ Preconceived and set-in-stone plans from the head office ▪ Forced synergies between activities 	Grand solutions in search of problems	

In the next section, we present how the vicissitudes of the current organising processes and the consequent assemblages of processes could lead to the dissipation of strategic foresight among the middle managers who are supposed to be the protagonists of the future.

When the organising processes unravels

According to accounts from inside the organisation, the formalisation of the organising processes had the good intention of professionalising the organisation and its workforce. However, the zeal of management in changing the organising regimes means they ignored the co-dependency of the new formalities and the long existing informal routines that had served and sustained the organisation for decades (Marlow et al, 2010). This, we argue, led to overt contestation of the new organising processes. In order to get middle managers to accept the new organising processes, the organisation then went on to launch a series of campaigns to persuade these managers to get on board. The outcome of the campaign manifested in four closely related forms of activities that gave rise to the dissipation of strategic foresight among the middle managers. We present these organising processes under four salient rubrics: rhetoric of legitimation, instrumental rationality, suppression of creative freedom and the formulation of solutions in search of problems.

The rhetoric of legitimating the new organising processes

In their efforts to streamline the operations of their newly acquired business unit, the new management introduced a raft of changes to the organising processes and routines in order to bring the company in line with their existing business units. A participant described one particular feature of the new organising processes:

Currently the focus is on up-selling of maintenance products; for instance with shoes. It only counts as up-selling when the maintenance products are on the same receipt, but what we see is that people think about it and buy the maintenance products later. They will! But head office does not look further than the receipts... [MM8].

Targets were set for every store, and new reporting procedures were imposed. In the eyes of the middle managers, the new organising processes which were solely driven by 'targets' were de-skilling in nature, and reduced their autonomy in making decisions about how work was organised in their stores.

...these targets are used as benchmarks; for the head office, these targets were important and had to be met. Since we are evaluated on this, we continuously focus on these targets and manage our personnel in not so pleasant ways to hit the targets. [MM4]

The middle managers who were not very pleased with the new changes raised concerns with the new head office and some went even further, filing a series of complaints about how their accumulated experiences at the individual level were being truncated by the over-emphasis on efficiency. Rather than confronting the concerns raised, management chose to promote the new organising processes as the ultimate means of sustaining the business. Backed with statistics that 'problematise' the past organising processes, employees were explicitly made to understand the old ways of organising work in the stores were not only unproductive but also arcane and retrogressive. Few resigned and those who proved deviant were dismissed. As observed by one participant:

All they were interested in was to run the company as efficiently as they can and to get the most out of it in terms of profit. They will do it at the expense of staff... and you cannot challenge [MM2].

The rhetoric used by management to legitimise the new organising processes reinforced the dichotomy between management and the middle managers about their visions of the future. Feldman (2003) argues that organisational actors in practice frequently use their understanding of how their organisations operate as a benchmark to guide their performances within their situated routines and this suggests that agency shapes the performance of organising routines, which in turn drives the enactment of foresightful actions in practice.

Everyone felt appreciated for what they used to do; the current message from head office however, is that 'it must go better in the future', which can be harsh after you tried your best and have made the improvements they required [MM8].

In summary, we assert that through the imposition of the new organising regime aimed at efficiency gains, management tends to undermine the store managers' accumulated experiential knowledge. While the gaps between the new and old regimes could potentially lead to the identification of opportunities for innovation, for example, we argue that the zeal with which the old processes are discredited by top management deters store managers from engaging in activities which could contribute to the creative search for opportunities and subsequent exploration.

Instrumental rationality and the separation knowledge

Our data evidence also suggests that the new organising processes imposed by management placed a lot of emphasis on rationality at the expense of the intuition which drives strategic foresight in organising. This involved the active separation of the technical and embodied knowledge drawn upon by middle managers in their everyday organising and the interpretation of the usefulness of newly developed knowledge in practice. The evolving conceptual wedge between these bodies of knowledge became filled with audits and performance benchmarks. As a result, the organising process disempowers managers to spontaneously adapt their staffing arrangements into meaningful social order, especially when there is a temporary breakdown. The observation by one manager in particular reflects such visceral experiences:

Head office even suggests how to plan my staffing for the next month, without knowing the exact circumstances of my store. Their view is solely based on figures of the last year and how to improve those [MM8].

In such a situation, while this manager has an agentic responsibility of prescribing work for junior employees, the over-prescriptive organising processes to which they must adhere end up over-riding their improvisation potential to deal with problems within the contingency of the moment. In a related development, our store managers reported that they plan the future work in their stores with a maximum time-horizon of one year. This horizon, we inferred, is instigated by head office, which releases a 'retail calendar' including a general prognosis and plan for the next year. One manager explains:

...it is evolving; is becoming more figure-based, I mean so far we are looking at turnover and staffing costs as the two main variables, but it is becoming more figure orientated. [MM1].

Surprisingly, the store managers tend view this calendar as 'vague' and 'incomplete'. Reinforcing the gulf between management, and the store managers, they all conceded they hardly have the chance to

analyse the future beyond three months. Clearly, while they are well aware that unforeseen developments, such as the weather, the market itself and personnel availability could alter the future and even the present, they were constrained by the strict formal planning regime within which they were expected to operate. One manager lamented:

Nowadays the (middle) managers are more like pawns, instead of the player that controls the game. [MM9]

Apart from the strict planning regime, our middle managers also felt the new organising regime over-prioritises bureaucratic routines at the expense of their well-being.

Before the change of ownership the CEO could walk into your store, ask you how you doing, including your pet. When the new CEO walks in, there is no greeting and he immediately starts talking about things he does not like in your store and wants to be changed [MM4].

While the new CEO reserves the right not to inquire about employees' life outside work, most of the store managers reported that they used to see the business as a family and yearn for the good old days when you know the boss cared about not just about the bottom line, but also the well-being of employees. In this regard, we co-observed narratives about what it used to be like to work for the organisation and what could have been accomplished if the culture had been protected. These narratives, we observed, were being used by managers to resist the new organising demands. The offshoot is a feeling of threatened identity and the urge not to "respond to circumstances so that the organisation could get around in the world" (Tsoukas and Shepherd, 2004:10).

Suppressing creative freedom

Creativity lies at the heart of strategic foresight. It drives visioning, proactive learning established around continuous probing, interpretation of equivocal cues and the integration of disparate ideas to develop images of the future (Costanzo, 2004). Our case study evidence suggests that the new organising process which was very much set in stone, gave store managers little space to reflect on their work or to challenge their own taken-for-granted assumptions about how work should be organised. They were expected to follow laid down procedures in dealing with 'breakdowns' and their input into decisions about how their stores should be run was reduced to the barest minimum. Unfortunately, the intended strategy led to unintended outcomes in terms of creativity and the overall sense-making potential of managers (Balogun and Johnson, 2005). One store manager said she felt that she was now more of an executor than a manager. She went on to explain:

Currently, my role in the store is completely different; with the previous owner I was empowered to make decisions, and of course was held responsible for the outcomes. Now I just have to do what head office tells me, and they still hold me responsible for the outcomes; even when I initially did not liked the idea... [MM10]

Store managers are seen here to have far less agency and control, not just about strategic decisions but about the everyday running of their shops. They are expected to get clearance from the head office before making very basic decisions that may require immediate attention within the contingency of organising. One manager described what happened when some devices in his store broke down:

I sent them (the head office) a couple of emails about a broken door, but they did not respond. They only got back to me when I sent them the quotation for the repairs. They reacted by saying that I was not allowed to do things without their consent or approval [MM3].

The above quote suggests there is little room for store managers to use their intuition or past experience to resolve organising bottlenecks (Akinici, 2012). Note that management did not only stop this store manager from going ahead to get the door repaired, they went further, reminding him that he cannot make routine decisions until he has been advised when and how to resolve a problem. In this case, for example, we argue that the action of the employer undermines managers' initiative and their willingness to embrace their responsibilities as a challenge to be mastered (Sarpong and Maclean, 2013) and typically results in managers acting too late in dealing with problems arising within the contingency of organising. The potential consequence is that those who have invested their efforts and reputations in the organisation begin to frame everyday improvisation or a call to duty beyond their immediate responsibilities as a threat to be avoided. This was the case when another manager observed that:

I used my experience in planning to anticipate what I expected to happen in the coming period. I did so automatically, but with the focus on meeting targets, I noticed I have little time thinking about the future [MM10].

Here we suggest that the prevalence of the unravelling organising processes has damaging effects not just on the identification and evaluation of opportunities for learning and innovation: it also stifles strategic thinking and the creative potential of store managers.

Grand solutions in search of problems

The J-60 group had made it clear to all employees they were keen to improve operational efficiency when they took over Mabodia Inc. As observed by most of our store managers, rather than looking for challenges with the old organising processes and then looking for ways to improve them, the new owners were more interested in bringing Mabodia Inc.'s operations into line and harmony with the other businesses within the J-60 Group. This involved making changes to processes with no regard to context. Over-reliance on rational analysis in order to design a fit between Mabodia Inc. and other businesses led to forced synergies between many organising activities and routines. As recounted by one store manager, some of the changes were simply not worth the bother of implementing:

Although the general planning of the head office offers some guidance, it does happen that most of the information they provide are wrong or incomplete; school holidays are wrongly planned or completely forgotten about...and since holidays are peak-moments for us, it is of utmost importance to know when to expect them, and prepare accordingly. [MM7]

Store managers had no input into these plans, which were normally delivered to store managers as spreadsheets. Per their new operational guidelines, they were not expected to engage with these spreadsheets, all they needed to do was to fill in the blanks, which the head office can then use for further planning. The major problem associated with this 'spreadsheet management' is the inherent lack of flexibility built into operations:

There is a lot of planning involved, but there is also a lot of reaction involved if you want the business to do well, and my staffs do understand. So for example, if it freezes for two weeks in January and it snows, you basically have to throw everything out of the window and get everybody to work sixty hours in the week to make sure you take advantage of the situation. Unfortunately, Head office just can't understand that if you want to achieve results you have to be flexible [MM2].

As narrated by this manager, their work (which was now planned in detail by head office) was extremely inflexible. Breaks were now compulsory and had to be taken at a pre-specified time, even if the shop was busy. In addition, no one was expected to work extra hours, a formal measure which, he argued, was unnecessarily targeted by top management to reduce staff costs. Each store was also given a monthly performance target with associated managerial guidelines on how to organise work in that particular month. Nine of our store managers found these quantitative targets problematic because what they seek to measure can, in essence, sometimes be unachievable, unrealistic or even un-measurable. One manager explains how some of these targets cannot be met due to circumstances the head office is not aware of:

You see, sometimes the store layout has to be changed; resulting in the closure or limited accessibility of some departments, or when the winter sports department is transformed to a camping department. That could take up to two weeks, resulting in a decline of sales in that period. This is necessary for the sales of that whole season, but you are still asked to explain why you didn't meet targets during the transformation period [MM5].

As recounted by the manager, the targets might not be met in the short term, but the overall turnover of the store, as a result of the ad hoc transformation, might be increased in the long-run. However, the micro-management of the organising processes means store managers get fixated on meeting set-in-stone quantitative targets. In this regard, store managers are seldom able to balance their short-term performance imperatives with the long-term 'foresightful' needs of the organisation. In summary, they refuse to 'think the unthinkable' and expend little time in reflecting on their practice.

Discussion and conclusions

Strategic foresight is imperative for successful organising. In this paper, we examined how organising processes could potentially dissipate the nurturing of strategic foresight among middle managers. We did this by studying how a new organising regime imposed on a successful sports apparel retail firm led to the dissipation of foresight among its middle managers. By drawing on a performative practice approach in our study of strategic foresight among middle managers, we bring in a wider array of influences to the theory and practice of strategic foresight, showing how organising processes, as a causal factor lying outside language, may influence talk, actions and, in turn, the enactment of strategic foresight by middle managers.

Our case evidence suggests that the acquisition of Mabodia Inc. meant that the company was now a strategic business unit of a multi-business company, J-60. The parent company, in an effort to justify to itself that its influence would lead to better performance in Mabodia Inc. than it would otherwise achieve as an independent, stand-alone entity, introduced new organising processes explicitly aimed at formalising and professionalising working practices. These changes, we observe, led to worthless, bureaucratic routines and a sharper concentration of everyday decision making in the hands of top management. The new organising regime therefore resulted in radical changes to the organising architecture, which in turn transformed how work was organised and the responsibilities, activities and routines of store managers. Practices that were once normal disappeared overnight. We found that such a new organising regime disempowered store managers in making decisions within the contingency of organising. In response, store managers became 'mindless-in-practice', thus, their capacity to sensitivity and awareness (Chia, 2008) was dulled to the extent that they not only expended little effort in identifying opportunities and potentialities to improve their work, but also unreflectively waited for instructions from above to manage basic tasks.

Our findings suggest that when faced with the need for empowerment, responsiveness to local demands, and value capture for shareholders, the management chose profits over future orientation. This shows that while organisations are frequently preoccupied with making changes to their organising practices, paradoxically, they are less able to manage the influence of such changes on the future orientation of the organisation as a whole. This raises an important question that lies at the core of foresight: what is the value of (long-term, qualitative) foresight in the context of (short-term quantitative) financial performance? Our research therefore has some implications for practice. Cunha *et al.* (2006) argue that everyday micro-interactions, foresightful micro-behaviour and the actions of middle managers are important in defining the future of an organisation. In this regard, when upper management decide to convert organising processes into quantitative calculable and saleable units, then, of course, middle managers will feel trapped in an 'organising cul-de-sac' where their perceptual abilities and improvisation skills, for example, are evaluated and measured by box

ticking. Caught in such an organising milieu, both the enactment of everyday foresightful actions and the cultivation of strategic foresight are likely to be dissipated among middle managers. While the findings of our study are illuminating, there is a question as to whether the organising patterns and dynamics reported in our study are a simple manifestation of normative acquisition outcomes. In this regard, the insights from our study could serve as a first step towards stimulating additional research into the influence of organising practices on organisational 'foresightfulness'. In accounting for foresight in the form of strategising, our reliance on textual data gave us little room to show, if indeed it were possible, how organising processes could be observed and theorised outside language. Future research may employ ethno-methodologies such as participant observation, work shadowing, video-ethnography or action research to potentially capture data on organising processes which could possibly impede middle managers' enactment of foresightful actions in their situated practices.

For the present, we are not so bold as to argue that the new organising processes are having a detrimental impact on the competitiveness of the organisation, especially when the firm is currently reporting above industry profits. The fact that the company is now realizing above-industry financial results suggests positive short-term improvements; however, our interviews with store managers suggest that the financial focus is too intense, and already is having negative effects on employee empowerment and the stores responsiveness to local conditions. In the words of Alfred North Whitehead:

The motive of success is not enough. It produces a short-sighted world which destroys the sources of its own prosperity...A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly about its function. Low thoughts mean low behaviour, and after a brief orgy of exploitation, low behaviour means a descending standard of life (Whitehead, 1932/1933: 120).

Whitehead's observation raises some pertinent questions related to what counts as best practice to organizing in fast changing environments, the locus of knowledge, and power in organizations: is the new leadership too extreme in implementing the new approach? Are they "bad" managers – or, in fact, might they be prescient, recognizing important shifts in the industry in that the "old ways" of doing things are no longer relevant? Again, this judgment is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, we are of the view that the continuous dissipation of strategic foresight among middle managers may have an adverse impact on the organisation's ability to leverage the potential of its human resources, thereby inhibiting the organisation from surpassing established boundaries or seizing the opportunities overlooked by competitors.

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