

# Strategic Planning Portals

**Javier Osorio**

*Las Palmas de Gran Canaria University, Spain*

## INTRODUCTION

The history of strategic planning begins in the military. According to Webster's *New World Dictionary*, strategy is the science of planning and directing large-scale military operations, of maneuvering forces into the most advantageous position prior to actual engagement with the enemy (Guralnic, 1986). Although the way we conceive strategy has changed when applied to management, one element remains key: the aim to achieve competitive advantage.

Strategic planning in organizations originated in the 1950s and was very popular and widespread from the mid 1960s to mid 1970s, when people believed it was the answer to all problems and corporate America was "obsessed" with strategic planning. Following that "boom," strategic planning was cast aside and abandoned for over a decade. The 1990s brought the revival of strategic planning as a process with particular benefits in particular contexts (Mintzberg, 1994).

Here is a brief account of several generations of strategic planning. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis model dominated strategic planning of the 1950s. The 1960s brought qualitative and quantitative models of strategy. During the early 1980s, the shareholder value model and the Porter model became the standard. The rest of the 1980s was dictated by strategic intent and core competencies, and market-focused organizations. Finally, business transformation became de rigueur in the 1990s (Gouillart, 1995).

Deregulation and internationalization have increased competitive intensity. Together with accelerated technological change, shortening market life cycles and increasingly dynamic markets, the risk of committing strategic errors has increased considerably. Companies that neglect conscious strategic planning can expect to drift into a hopeless position. A systematic approach to strategic planning, which is firmly grounded in reality, is seen by many company leaders and management researchers as an essential requirement for long-term corporate success (Grunig & Kuhn, 2002).

If one wishes to accomplish something, the chances of achieving that goal will be greatest if one uses one's available resources and leverage to maximum effectiveness. That means having a strategic plan, which is designed to move from the present (in which the goal is not achieved) to the future (in which it is achieved). Strategy pertains to charting the course of action which makes it most likely to get from the present to the desired situation in the future.

Subsequent newer models of strategic planning were focused on adaptability to change, flexibility, and importance of strategic thinking and organizational learning. "Strategic agility" is becoming more important than the strategy itself, because the organization's ability to succeed has more to do with its ability to transform itself continuously, than whether it has the right strategy. Being strategically agile enables organizations to transform their strategy depending on the changes in their environment (Gouillart, 1995).

## BACKGROUND

We undoubtedly live in times of continuous change in every field (technological, social, economical, political, etc.), which confirms the saying that only change is permanent. In such circumstances avoiding establishing aims and goals for the future would seem the wisest choice, considering that the future setting will most likely differ considerably from the one we imagined when fixing those goals. Surprisingly, though, this high degree of uncertainty that the future holds is precisely what has encouraged the proliferation of strategic plans in nearly every field. Not only can we find strategic plans in private enterprises and public institutions, but also in a wide range of sectors (strategic plans for health, education, or industry), territorial strategic plans for cities and regions, and even national and supranational strategic plans. We can get an idea of the importance of this phenomenon just by typing "strategic planning" in any Internet search engine. The number of results is well over hundreds of millions.

The explanation for this apparent contradiction is that precisely this uncertainty compels us to establish guidelines that will help us to reach our desired goals. Strategic planning allows us to set out the strategies that will show us the specific way towards our appointed destination, that is, the course of action we must follow. There is no doubt that during this process changes of circumstances can and will occur, and they will have to be taken into consideration in order to contribute to our progress. This will assure us that we will reach our aims.

We must not be surprised, therefore, that this management tool has become so important as a means of establishing plans of action for organizations. Most medium and large companies have strategic plans that are routinely updated and are also used to communicate, both on an internal and external level, the organizations intentions (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994).

In private companies, a formal plan will help define the objectives to reach. These aims, which are mostly quantifiable, become an indicator of results and are often referred to in order to determine whether the organization's efforts have been sufficient to reach the established goals. It is easy to imagine the importance of these plans. Crucial decisions are taken on their basis, such as the allocation of resources, employees' wages, promotions, and so forth. A company's strategic plan is, most of all, a document of internal interest, as it contains the guidelines for the activity of all the organization's members. Most importantly, it defines work relations within the company by fixing the attainable goals (Porter, 1985).

To the contrary, strategic planning in public institutions is most relevant where social response is concerned, that is, as regards what external agents can expect from these organizations. Although on an internal level it is also useful to set courses of action, the outstanding aspect here is the public service the organization wishes to offer and which, one way or another, links society and the institution together. A public organization that does not reflect a set of aims and objectives in its strategic planning which are of interest to the citizenship will hardly find social support and neither will it have clear guidelines for the public servants that work for it.

In a non-military field, strategic planning originated in the great private companies. This is why business planning is still the most prominent aspect. Nevertheless, this has not prevented new fields from being developed and nowadays it covers a wide range, both in public bodies and private companies. Therefore we can encounter the following fields of action:

- **Operative or Administrative Planning:** it designs the desired future state for a certain entity and efficient ways of reaching it. As we have already mentioned, it is the most extended field and, from an organizational point of view, it includes corporative aspects (diversified companies), business units and functional areas (marketing, information systems, human resources, operations, finances, etc.).
- **Economic and Social Planning:** it defines resources and needs, as well as establishing goals and programs to arrange these resources in order to attend such needs. All of which is done to contribute to the country's economic and social development.
- **Physical or Territorial Planning:** it adopts the appropriate rules and programs to develop natural resources, including agriculture and farming, mining, power supply and so on. Also, those concerning the growth and development of cities and regions.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PORTALS

There are no portals specifically designed to offer information about strategic planning, which is surprising if we consider the number of references Internet gives us for this term. These are always extensive spaces that deal with this topic as part of a wider subject, normally referred to management in an ample sense.

Management is, in effect, a very wide field due to the many disciplines it compounds (operation management, human resources management, financial management, marketing management, etc). Each of these spaces can be very large, even to the point of considering each one independently as a true portal of knowledge. This is the case of strategic planning. On the one hand, it is part of larger portals, but on the other it contains a large number of possibilities, as many as sub-disciplines can be found in this scientific field. For example, one of the portals that usually appears in the first few places of any Internet search is [www.themanager.org](http://www.themanager.org). It has the following structure: (a) management; (b) operations; (c) strategy; (d) marketing; (e) human resources; (f) finance; (g) e-world; (h) legal; (i) industries; (j) small business; (k) economics; (l) career, and (m) information.

The strategy section is just as important as other fields of management. In turn, the subcategories it contains are in Table 1.

Other portals, such as [www.brint.com](http://www.brint.com), managed by the *BRINT Institute*, and [www.computer.org](http://www.computer.org), managed by *IEEE Computer Society*, have a different approach. They offer IT information with an accent on strategic planning as a way of making this information useful to companies. Therefore, an important part of the portal's space is given up to dealing with this discipline.

In most cases these portals do not explain the concepts of strategic planning, but rather they refer to publications, either journals or books, that deal with the subject as a main or secondary topic. Sometimes they link to financial news portals (stock market information) or to firms that provide assessment in this field. Not surprisingly, the organizations that manage most of these portals are private consultancy companies whose services are often requested by clients as a result of visiting the portals.

Internet portals usually respond to the managing companies' commercial interests and there is normally an economic purpose behind them. Just as companies segment their markets according to the public (their products or services are objectively aimed at) something similar occurs with existing strategic planning portals. Most of the ones observed basically contain articles and references to books and professional or academic journals. In other words, they are directed towards a public with a sound knowledge of the subject that will fall within a managerial or university

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