

The Influence of Technology on the Strategic Planning Process

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic planning came to prominence in the 1980s under the banner of New Public Management; since, several of the private sector components of strategic planning have been applied and interpreted within the public sector. While many of the concepts were not new, the application to the public sector was. The rise and general acceptance of public sector strategic planning also coincided with the digital revolution beginning in the late 1980s, offering enormous promise, but also an equal number of potential pitfalls. As the digital era became increasingly sophisticated, new possibilities emerged for governance and strategic planning.

The rise of the internet in the mid-1990s changed public sector planning from an almost exclusively hierarchical entity, into a series of interconnected networks. Hierarchical authority was still prevalent, but gradually the lines of authority, and in turn accountability, had been increasingly blurred amongst a growing number of actors. The further technological innovations have had major implications on government and governance structures, and the strategic planning process is critical in promoting innovation, growth, and effectiveness (Arend, Zhao, Song, & Im, 2017).

This entry explores the development of public-sector strategic planning, specifically the impact of technology and how strategic planning has grown throughout the digital era; along with potential opportunities and challenges moving forward as technology and organizational dynamics continue to evolve.

BACKGROUND

What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning is more than just another concept taken from the private sector to increase public sector efficiency (Hendrick, 2003). Strategic planning is a “deliberative approach and set of concepts, procedures, and tools that can help leaders to enhance the achievements of their organization” (Bryson, 2011, p. xiv). Strategic planning has become widespread throughout all levels of government in the United States over the last 25 years, and the growth of technology has only helped to stimulate it even further (Berry & Wechsler, 1995; Bryson, 2010; Bryson, Berry, & Yang, 2010; Bryson, Crosby, & Bryson, 2009; Hendrick, 2003; Poister, 2010; Poister, Pitts, & Edwards, 2010; Poister & Streib, 2005).

The importance of technology to organizations to inform both research and practice has long been realized; however, there has been little widespread agreement over how to best utilize and measure the

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impacts of technology on organizations (Orlikowski, 1992). Orlikowski and Barley (2001) suggest that to understand the ongoing innovations taking place in government it is imperative to understand both the technological advances and the institutional structures.

How to understand and best leverage the changing nature of technology is a question that will come up repeatedly throughout this review. In addition to the role of and questions over technology, debate exists over what makes up strategic planning and ultimately how encompassing it should be. Bryson (2011) explains it as the overarching, umbrella concept under which strategic thinking, acting, learning, and deliberation fall. These activities make up the most important components of strategic planning (Bryson, 2011) and collectively these activities provide an organized process for gathering information on a large scale and using it to determine a long-term direction (Poister & Streib, 2005). Strategic planning is a short-term planning strategy necessary to help ensure long-term success (Poister & Streib, 2005). It is a management tool that takes inventory of organizations' strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats and how best to take advantage of the positives while mitigating the negatives (Denhardt, 1985; Kissler, Fore, Jacobson, Kittredge, & Stewart, 1998). Strategic planning is ultimately a way to meet the needs of the citizenry through improved performance and better service (Boyne & Walker, 2010). As government at all levels has moved away from traditional hierarchical structures toward more responsive networked agencies, strategic planning has become an increasingly used tool for governance (Berry, 1994) in an effort to enhance digital connectivity and socio-economic progress (Alam, Erdiaw-Kwasie, Shahiduzzaman, & Ryan, 2018).

Contrary to the widespread public sector support, there have been numerous criticisms attached to strategic planning. For one, strategic planning is not a panacea; strategic planning is not guaranteed to improve performance, and the point is not to create rigid channels and structures that trigger specific repeatable responses (Bryson, 2011). The inherent flexibility that characterizes strategic planning, and the efforts of strategic planning to produce real change often turns into one of critics most frequent complaints; strategic planning is hard to define, even harder to measure, and perhaps most difficult to determine who it is responsive to (Bryson, Crosby, & Bryson, 2009; Bryson & Roering, 1989; Kissler, Fore, Jacobson, Kittredge, & Stewart, 1998; Mansor & Tayib, 2012). The lack of a clear definition can be attributed to the changing nature of policy and the needs of the community; new issues emerge, outcomes are difficult to discern, significance is unclear, and goals fluctuate. Nonetheless, strategic planning is a tool that provides a certain level of assurance and preparedness to public sector officials (Kissler, Fore, Jacobson, Kittredge, & Stewart, 1998). Many critics highlight these concerns and continue to treat strategic planning as a fixed object instead of a system comprised of many interacting and changeable parts (Bryson, Crosby, & Bryson, 2009).

In taking this approach it is easy to overlook the progress and evolution of the strategic planning process. Strategic planning is generally accepted to include, "clarifying mission and values, developing a vision of the future, analyzing external challenges and opportunities, assessing internal strengths and weaknesses, developing strategic goals and objectives, identifying strategic issues, developing and evaluating alternative strategies, and developing action plans" (Poister & Streib, 2005, p. 46). What ends up mattering the most "is the degree to which it (strategic planning) focuses the organization on what is important, orients the organization to identification of strategic issues, and develops the internal process where strategies and priorities are established" (Abels, 1989, p. 294).

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