
Conscious Thinking as an Approach to Strategic Analysis

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Abstract: This article deals with the area of strategic management and strategic analysis. The main focus of our study is to find the links between the theory of human thinking and improvement of thinking and theory of strategic analysis. We try to examine how approach to thinking can support better performance and outcome of strategic analysis. In strategic management as well as in strategic analysis, the key elements are future orientation and preparation for the future. However, to perform a strategic analysis is not an easy subject and in the current dynamic environment it is very difficult to predict and forecast future developments. As a research team at our faculty, we have been studying development of strategic analysis and its possibilities for improvement. Our main aim is not only to develop new analytical methods and techniques, but more importantly, to search for the possibilities and the capabilities of human thinking involvement in strategic analysis. The main purpose of this article is to understand and examine the ways of thinking and approaches to thinking in relation to strategic analysis. In the research we examined the behaviour and the thinking of managers while they perform strategic analysis and make strategic decisions. We used interviews and questionnaires within a qualitative approach to understand and identify approaches to thinking of managers and find the approach to thinking that can ensure success in current praxis. The results of research point out that conscious thinking and creative thinking are necessary approaches to strategic analysis in current praxis. The outcome of research also shows the need of current managers and also the space for improvement of strategic management theory in strategic analysis.

Keywords: *Strategic Analysis, Conscious Thinking, Creativity, Intuition.*

Introduction

The theory of strategic management has dedicated several decades to development of strategic analysis how to recognize, understand and predict what can determine the success and the fulfilment of our expectations and intentions in the future. Most theories of strategic analysis however deal with application and implementation of various methods and techniques of strategic analysis (Savanevicien et al., 2006). Thus there is a need to connect strategic analysis with approaches to thinking. Therefore, the main purpose of our study is to search for the possibilities and the capabilities of human thinking involvement in strategic analysis to get the better performance and outcome of strategic analysis. There are three objectives in our research. The first is to identify and describe the major approaches to thinking of managers in strategic decision making. The second is, based on interviews and questionnaires, to examine the behaviour and to evaluate thinking of managers in current praxis of Slovak companies. The

third, to identify the need and the improvements for performing strategic analysis based on the results of the research.

The paper is organized as follows. After introduction, Section II reviews the literature on the theory of strategic analysis and development of human thinking. In the first part of literature review we point out that many methods and techniques in strategic analysis were created in stable environments and they were successful under different conditions from what are now facing in current praxis of companies. The second part of the literature review deals with development of human thinking in the context of strategic analysis and preparation for the future. Section III describes the data and methodology of our research. The results of research are reported in section IV. Section V summaries and concludes our main findings.

Literature Review

Strategic analysis

The future orientation is the key element in strategic management as well as in strategic analysis. Strategic management is concerned with a set of strategic decisions and actions taken by top managers to determine the long-term and successful direction of the organization (Wheelen et al., 2014). A clear and well-formulated strategy helps managers take the right decisions to obtain superior performance. Strategic management is in fact the study of why some firms outperform others (Dess et al., 2013). Having a strategy means thinking about the future, preparing in advance for the future, having an active approach to the future (Papula, 2012). The preparation of strategy demands that we perform analyses that allow us to understand ongoing changes in the environment. Analyses should enable us to evaluate the situation, to reveal the factors that cause changes in the environment, and to anticipate developments in the environment. Based on results of analysis of external and internal environment, we are able to develop a strategy that will guide our progress in achieving the strategic objectives (David, 2013). At Figure 1 (adapted from Wheelen et al., 2014) we can see that strategic analysis is the key step for formulation of strategy and strategic decisions. The concept of strategic analysis is understood and defined differently by various authors (Vaitkevicius, 2006) however the performance of strategic analysis can significantly influence the quality and efficiency of the formulated strategy.

Fig 1: Strategic Management Process



Analyses are in general among the important thought operations that help to improve human thinking. We use analyses to uncover problems, to identify the underlying factors and to study their impact (Sternberg, 2009). Analyses help us understand the essence of what we see but do not know perfectly or we do not understand in context. In strategic management, analyses allow

us to objectively assess the initial situation, to anticipate development of the environment and to reveal on what the development will depend (David, 2013). Furthermore, analyses prepare us to set strategic objectives that should be derived from the trends that exist in the environment, as well as the factors that influence these trends, and to search for succession of changes which lead us to targeted positions.

The theory of strategic management provides us with many tools and techniques suitable for strategic analysis and for creating variants and appropriate solutions (Savanevicien et al., 2006). But the situation in the environment has, in comparison with the past (foundation and development of many strategic analytical tools), changed significantly. For instance, here are some examples of traditional tools of strategic analysis: macro-environmental ESTP/PEST analysis originally formulated by Aguilar (Aguilar, 1967) and improved into STEP (Strategic Trends Evaluation Process) by Arnold Brown in the 1960s; Porter's techniques for analyzing industries and competitors was created in 1980s; or the widely known SWOT analysis which can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s (Selznick, 1957), (Chandler, 1962), (Andrews, 1965). Many of the traditional techniques have a rather static character and are used to assess the current situation and position of the company in the environment. The later development of traditional techniques has been oriented to assessment and forecasting of the future.

However, application of many analytical techniques might be limited only with application of rational and logical thinking. It is due to the character of the current environment which is rather turbulent and unpredictable that we require application of other types of thinking. There also irrational factors guide the strategy as emotion, feeling, will, faith, belief, unconsciousness, intuition, inspiration (Afsar, 2011). As evident in the process of strategic management at Figure 1, some argue that the strategic process is not linear as with phases, stages or elements. On the contrary, it is rather intuitive and creative. With intuition and creativity, there are also other aspects of the strategic process: strategic thinking, strategy formation and strategic change (De Wit, Meyer, 2010). Thinking impacts strategy formulation, strategic actions, and business performance (Nuntamanop et al., 2013). The perspective of thinking is what we want to explore more. In the next section we want to look at the aspect of thinking in the context of strategic analysis and preparation for the future.

Thinking and strategic analysis from a historical perspective

People have always admired and respected those who can exceed and overtake others with their thinking based on ability to understand the past and the present and on ability to predict the future. There is always an interest in finding ways to improve human thinking. If we look at people in prehistoric times, hunters-gatherers lived in nature and perceived their being as part of nature (Jockenovel, 2009). Most likely, they lived naturally in the present and were uninterested about the past or the future. They left the future to the hands of a higher power that influenced everything around them. If someone nevertheless was interested in the future, such a person still turned his/her questions rather to supernatural powers than their own abilities. However, even in the distant past, people were able to predict the future in a rational way. When archaeologists search today, they can find many traces of *rational and logical thinking* that brought people to the use of instruments and to prepare for the future even thousands of years ago. A significant turning point in the evolution of human civilization was 10 to 12 thousand years ago, when people turned from hunters-gatherers into producers, farmers and artisans (Renfrew, 2009). It was mainly due to changes in their thinking and learning that the future could be prepared, and therefore it became necessary to foresee the future.

About the sophistication of human thought and realization of human rational and logical thinking in the distant past, we have proof from the ancient Sumerians, who, more than five

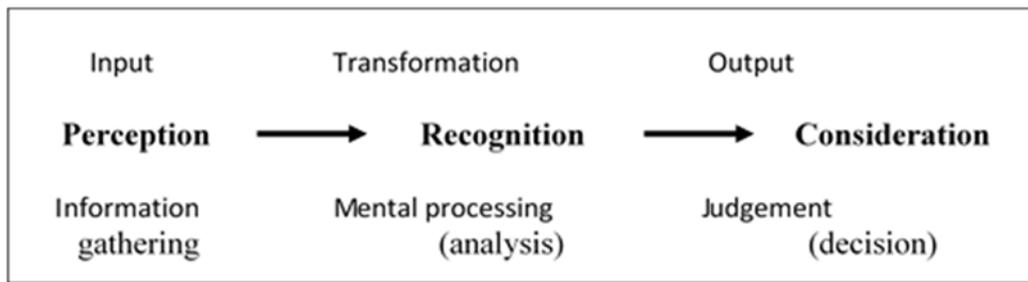
millennia ago, managed to *forecast* alternation of fertile and barren years by exploring and tracking stars in the sky (Jockenhovel, 2009). The ancient Egyptians already more than four millennia ago were able to predict the flooding of the river Nile (Bergmann, Rothe, 2001). Even today admire the immense patience of the ancient Egyptians or Babylonians who for centuries almost daily recorded the movements of the stars in the sky and on that basis they managed to find the context of what was happening in nature and around them and forecast future developments. In addition to the use of rational and logical thinking, there is a lot of evidence that people attributed great importance also to supernatural forces, myths and abilities to foresee the future. For instance, the famous Delphic oracle, which had become in the time of ancient Greece not only a centre of Hellenistic culture but was considered as the centre of the then world, is a case in point. (Bergmann, Rothe, 2001).

In the ancient world particularly, philosophy as the science of thinking had become the leading science because it raised the possibility of developing the skills of human thinking and its application in various other scientific disciplines (astronomy, medicine, mathematics, mechanics, etc.). The first ancient philosopher, Thales of Miletus (624-546 BC), the founder of the Milesian School, encouraged others to use their mind and skills to understand the patterns of the world. He is also known for his ability to forecast the solar eclipse of May 28 585 BC (McGreal, 1992). Many of his followers helped to develop various disciplines as well as examine human thinking. For example, Plato (427-347 BC) was among the first who studied human thinking in greater detail and considered *intuition* as a part of human thinking. He distinguished *analytical (discursive) thinking* as inferential, temporal; it grasps objects piecemeal, is propositional, representational, yet fallible. *Rational intuition*, on the other hand, is non-inferential, grasps all at once, non-propositional, non-representational and infallible (Henden, 2004). He considered *intuition* as a superior thinking (Störig, 2000). Plato was known as the "dualist" for his philosophical position. He laid emphasis on scientific knowledge, but at the same time he pointed out the limitation of human senses and therefore considered it important to lead by the visions which may come from the transcendental world of ideas.

Aristotle (384-332 BC) as his pupil drew attention to more reality and placed the main emphasis on human rational thinking. (Heller, 2011). Discussions about the importance of rational thinking and intuition continued among philosophers in the Middle Ages. For instance, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) moved Plato's teachings into so-called Neo-Platonism (Jockenhovel, 2009). In contrast, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) did not tend to Platonism. A similar opinion about intuition as a Plato was held also by Immanuel Kant (1724 –1804). He, with his philosophical thought, developed dialectics, in which we generate knowledge at first through rational cognition "a priori" (knowledge or justification independent of experience) that lead us to the need for cross-linking and generalization "a posteriori" (knowledge or justification is dependent on experience or empirical evidence). Kant distinguished *rational intuition*, based on "a priori", deduction and *emotional intuition*, based on "a posteriori", induction. (Remisova, 2008). However, in his book "Critique of Pure Reason" he aptly characterizes *rational thinking* as a process where knowledge comes from perception, continues with understanding and ends with judgment. Based on that, it is possible to illustrate to rational and analytical thinking in connection to strategic analysis as a process with three essential phases (Figure 2, Papula, Papulova 2013).

According to this model, if we want to examine and understand our environment, we should at first perceive (collect information), then get to know and recognize (analyze and reveal the essence and context) and then consider (through synthesis we create variants, then with criteria we make judgments and decisions).

Fig 2: Model of Thinking



Many other prominent philosophers developed views on exploring, knowing and recognition; especially we should mention Hegel (1770-1831), as an important representative of classical German philosophy (eighteenth century), which significantly contributed to the development of dialectics (Jockenovel, 2009). Dialectics leads us to the detection of laws under which each state and its knowledge are temporary and transient, and under constant struggle of opposites, are gradually outperformed. Contradictions that are naturally encoded in everything around us mean that when examining and learning, it is necessary first of all to understand the essence of dialectics of development that leads to mutual diversity, but as the necessary unity and harmony in diversity.

Conscious thinking in strategic analysis

Many experts respect the distinction of consciousness and sub-consciousness (Ishiguro, 2006) in thinking and decision making. The irrational factors and unconsciousness can be seen in the reality of everyday life and also in decision making of managers in business practice (Afsar, 2011).

Based on our long-term research of exploring approaches to decision making of managers and the literature review the thinking of managers is not always a conscious in our sense of the term. We can basically distinguish four ways of thinking while performing strategic analysis (Papula, Papulova, 2013):

1. **Routine thinking** is based on own previous experience and knowledge and ability to solve certain standard and repetitive situations, while accepting knowledge of others without direct conscious thinking and demanding collection of information, their processing and evaluation. In this case, our brain appears to make decisions on its own, without direct involvement of our consciousness. We apply this kind of thinking and decision-making every day, for example, while going to school or work, we can solve many other problems because of the way that we know well; we have little need to consider our actions deeply. Applying this thinking, we repeat what we have learnt, we use our own paradigm based on our experience and we do not think about new solutions.
2. **Model thinking** is based on procedures and steps in a given area that were created and verified by others whom we trust; we implement these procedures. In this case, this thinking is application of conscious thinking, but only partially, because we use it only in the implementation phase of given procedures. While choosing a procedure, we rely on the result of other people's thinking and the quality of the result of their thinking. In business praxis, this thinking is used in the situation when a company has methodological instructions, norms, procedures, guidelines and models, and employees have to follow them while making or implementing decisions. In a similar way, today we have robots or autopilots that can be programmed to capture data, to process the data and to make decision or even perform actions. This form of thinking retains a certain perspective ability of human thinking but it is in fact not creative thinking.
3. **Creative thinking** is based on gathering information, processing them and developing own original solutions. In this case, it is a highly "conscious" thinking in which each of the

individuals based on their thinking and on their own abilities and possibilities makes decisions. It is an active approach to thinking and decision making and probably is also the most difficult approach because a person needs to collect data and information on his/her own, and then perform analysis and synthesis, and find own way to process them and create original solutions.

4. **Intuitive thinking** is a way of thinking that is independent of our knowledge and logical procedures. The whole course of this thinking can be described by cognitive neuroscience. Our thoughts come to a decision mysteriously while we do not know how we found exact solutions, why we came to such a solution and why they are coming in the moment we were not really thinking about that kind of problem. One is therefore able to deal with the situation quite simply and easily without the "strenuous thinking" based on the need to search and create new and unused roads and synaptic connections. This ability of the human brain is designed as both genetic predisposition and the gift of the ability of human thought, but it is supported by the information stored in the subconscious. Our subconscious can, on the principle of association, highlight problems perceived in the past and their solutions. Many scientists consider intuition as more excellent than rational and logical thought. Albert Einstein said, "*The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it intuition or what you will, and the solution comes to you and you don't know why or how.*" James D. Watson said "*Intuition isn't mystical. It's a sort of background sense of how things should work; facts hidden in the brain.*"

Methodology

Data collection and selected sample

To understand and identify the approach to thinking we used a questionnaire on the selected sample of respondents from management practice. With help of our students, we were able to collect data from 271 respondents. Our sample contains managers from various companies operating in the Slovak Republic. We structured respondents based on their managerial hierarchy, company size and company life cycle (Table 1 and 2).

Table 1: Company size & Type of managers in the research

Size	Type of managers			
Micro Enterprises	48	17,71%	First-line managers	110 40,59%
Small Enterprises	66	24,35%	Middle managers	82 30,26%
Medium Enterprises	80	29,52%	Top managers	79 29,15%
Large Enterprises	77	28,41%		

Table 2: Life cycle of companies in the research

Size		
New-founded	27	9,96%
Growth	80	29,52%
Stabilization	152	56,09%
Decline/crisis	12	4,43%

The questionnaire was formulated to identify the most preferred thinking of managers under different situations connected with application of strategic management and strategic decision making. We mainly focused on analysing behaviour and approach to thinking, while managers perform analysis of environment (external environment and internal environment), implement

strategies of strategic decisions and exercise strategic control. We evaluated the most preferred thinking in the categories of four types of thinking: (1) *Routine thinking (thinking without direct involvement of consciousness)*, (2) *Model thinking (conscious thinking, but only partially)*, (3) *Creative thinking (highly "conscious" thinking)* and (4) *Intuitive thinking (not a „conscious” thinking)*. The questions were coded and gathered data was processed using MS Excel. The analysis used frequency tables and correlations.

Results

A. Approaches to strategic internal analysis

In the first part of the research, we examined approaches of managers to strategic analysis of internal environment in terms of types of thinking. Results of our research showed that almost a majority of the managers (46.86%) tend to apply creative thinking in internal analysis, that is based on scanning and collecting relevant information and selection of specific analytical procedures, creating a know-how through which a company gains significant competitive advantage. 23.62% of managers apply model thinking; they use standard methods and procedures recommended by the theory of a generally valid methodology (like financial and economic analysis, value chains, core competence, etc.). 18,82% of managers applies tradition and routine procedures recommended from the practices of enterprise and only 10,7% of managers use intuition. The intuitive thinking was strongest among the micro enterprises (18.75%), and the number was decreasing with size of the company, in large enterprises only 2.6%. We also found out that enterprises in crises were mostly using routine thinking (50%), which can be also the reason of their unsuccessful position. Creative thinking was strongest with top management (60%) and the number was decreasing with the level of management, in first-line management only 36.6%, (they were often applying routine and model thinking). An interesting result was that intuitive thinking was mainly applied by top and first line managers (15%), and in the middle management only by 1.22%. Internal analyses are analyses where it is possible to collect all important information and to evaluate them, so it is possible to use routine, model and creative thinking. The intuition does not necessarily need to be applied here. Intuition was applied mostly by micro enterprises which are not formal and are led by one manager who has everything inside his/her head. The model approach is also suitable for this type of analysis because the internal environment has a lot of techniques and methods that can be applied to its assessment. But the active approach to internal analysis of thinking is the creative thinking and as a result shows this approach used by almost a majority of managers.

B. Approaches to strategic external analysis

In the second part of research, we examined the approach of managers towards evaluation of factors from the external environment as a part of strategic external analysis. Since the external environment is much more complex than the internal environment, we can also see differences in approach to thinking. Here we can see that creative thinking is dominating as with internal analysis, but the number is a little higher (49.82%). Routine thinking has almost the same results (19.93%) as it was in results of internal analysis, and also intuition has similar results (9.59%). The model thinking was applied by 20.66% of managers; it is a lower number compared with internal analysis, but it can also be a result of difficulty of assessment of the external environment. The other results were very similar as with the internal analysis. Perhaps one difference was that middle managers used more intuition (7.36%) compared to internal analysis, but still it is a low number. To analyse and assess factors from external environment and its development is much more complicated and involves more data and information that need to be collected, analysed and forecast. The external environment consists of macro and micro levels and also the international and global context. Routine thinking will be an insufficient approach to these kinds of analyses nowadays. Also model thinking has limits

because of the dynamicity of the environment and problem of forecasting. The creative thinking will be the most suitable approach to thinking for this part of strategic analysis. But also intuition can be even more successful here, but is limited because not everybody is able to apply this type of thinking as we mentioned earlier. In our research, we see that almost a majority of managers tends to apply here creative thinking, while intuition is done only by a small percentage.

C. Implementation of strategy

The next part of the examination was focused on implementation of strategy. We asked managers about their approach to thinking while implementing strategies in their companies. Again almost a majority of managers applies creative thinking (45.39%), but it is a little bit less than it was used in strategic analysis. We can see also higher numbers of model thinking, 22.51%, and routine thinking, 21.03%, while managers implement their strategies. Model thinking is based on following of the standard methods and procedures recommended by theory and universal methods (for example 7S, strategic planning, BSC.) Implementation does not always demand original solutions if the company has an efficient model of implementation. However, the implementation phase can be the most difficult phase in the process of strategic management. There are not many techniques and methods in strategic management that help to implement strategies efficiently. Intuitive thinking was applied by 11.07% of managers (just a little bit higher number than in strategic analyses); that means that managers rely on their extraordinary innate "strategic" capabilities" while implementing strategy.

D. Strategic control

The last part of the research we would like to discuss is connected to the approach to strategic control. The results are quite different here from those in strategic analysis and strategy implementation phase of strategic management. We found that managers applied, in strategic control, mostly model thinking (31.73%); that can be also connected to the fact that for strategic control, it is possible to set out standards and effective procedures in the company and follow them. The use of creative thinking is in the second place (29.52%), routine (26.57%) and intuitive thinking is 12.07%. The level of using intuition in the large enterprises was really small (only 2.60%), and model thinking, the most used approach, about 44%. The model thinking might be the suitable approach here, since strategic control does not involve same dynamics as in strategic analysis. But we should also mention that strategic analysis and strategic control could be in close relationship.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurs and managers today are constantly addressing new emerging challenges and opportunities. Compared with the past, they are even more threatened by changes and have to face ever greater risks. The present situation in the environment in which managers pursue their strategic decisions, is significantly different. Not only is it marked by uncertainty related to the ongoing crisis, but above all, unprecedented dynamics and predictability of severe changes in the environment. While strategic decisions taken in the past tended to have long-term effectiveness, the current strategic decisions do not guarantee the same effectiveness in the future. Today's achievements are an expression of strategic choices in the past, but for the success in the future, it is necessary to constantly fight. From this perspective also, requirements for carrying out the analysis are also changing.

In our article we showed some historical perspectives on different types of thinking and prepare a model of active and conscious thinking that can be applied to improve thinking and also improve approach to strategic analysis. This model of thinking suggests that at first we should start with perception (collection of data and information), then follow with recognition

(analyzing and revealing of the essence and the context) and end with consideration (through synthesis create variants, with criteria make judgments and make decisions). However we also mentioned that many philosophers, scientists and experts considered intuition as a superior way of thinking.

The research shows how managers use conscious thinking while approaching strategic analysis and making strategic decisions. Based on results, we can see that managers in the majority apply creative thinking while approaching strategic analysis and implementing strategies. Creative thinking is, in this respect, thinking that is based on gathering information, processing them and developing own original solutions. It is a highly "conscious" thinking in which each of the individuals based their thinking and decision making on their own abilities and possibilities. It is an active approach to thinking and very conscious type of thinking. This type of thinking can be described and improved by using a model of conscious thinking and it requires an active approach to thinking and creativity. Managers should train, exercise and develop their own thinking capabilities to be able to use this approach to thinking.

Compared with intuition (not a conscious thinking) our results showed that only a small amount people are able to use intuition in strategic management and it is used mainly by small entrepreneurs. In this case, managers need to focus on gaining information, experiences and knowledge on everyday basis, not only when they want to make a strategic decision. They should be really interested and engaged in their business and development around the business.

Our results also showed a very low use of model thinking. In this case, model thinking refers to usage and application of various models and methods in strategic management. The results of the research can be explained at two levels. The first level is that methods and techniques in strategic management with their recommended methodology are no longer sufficient or enough to be used to assess the current environment and to forecast its development. Managers are trying to find new ways or combine classical techniques with additional information and they are active while preparing strategic decisions. The other level is that not all managers know how to apply methods and techniques of strategic analysis properly and it can be interesting to examine that in future research.

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