

# Revitalizing Strategic Agility in a Turbulent Environment: A Conceptual Discourse

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## Abstract

This paper conceptually examined revitalizing strategic agility in a turbulent environment. In the current turbulent and highly competitive environment of today, agility, that is the ability of organizations to quickly sense and respond to environmental changes, is an important determinant of organizational success. With the advancement of information technologies, company strategy focuses nowadays on sustainable competitive advantage, and gives importance to short-term advantages of flexibility and fast response. In the unpredictable and competitive world of today, organizations must have different competitive features to compete; otherwise, they will move towards annihilation. One of the capabilities that organizations need in the turbulent environments of today is agility. Strategic agility is the ability to continuously and adequately adjust and adapt in appropriate time the strategic direction in core business in relation to changing circumstances. Agility provides the organization with the possibility of quick response and compatibility with environment and allows the organization to improve its efficiency. The paper is largely conceptual in nature and adopts a desk research methodology in reviewing extant literature. This study concludes that firms operating in dynamic environments must realize the need for change and adaptation and thereby stimulate their in developing agility that can better respond to a dynamic environment.

**Keywords:** Strategic Agility, Turbulence, Strategic Sensitivity, Collective Commitment, Resource Fluidity

## Introduction

*“In the age of disruption, businesses live and die by their ability to adapt. Agility and adaptability have become catchy buzz words to get to the point of what businesses need to do – change.”*

--Dave Sutton

Organizations face a lot of challenges, because of rapid and fluctuating changes in the work environment (Qin & Nembhard, 2015 cited in Al-Romeedy, 2019). In today's 21st century of globalized and knowledge based economy, no organization can survive and achieve industry competitive advantage without agile workforce, information technological capability and strategic foresight be it developed, emerging or developing economies. As emphasized by Al-Romeedy (2019), that organizations in different industries faced a lot of challenges in attaining targeted competitive advantage due to rapid and fast fluctuation of visible and invisible forces like technological development, globalization, innovation, creativity, and changing customers' preferences in the business environment. Based on these aforementioned challenges, scholars around the globe have recognized strategic agility as a business strategy to gain competitive advantage (Arokodare, 2020; Arokodare & Asikhia, 2020; Nkuda, 2017). Considering the important and significant contributions of strategic agility in achieving competitive advantage, studies have argued that strategic agility is the firm's future preparedness and powerful predictors for becoming an outperformer in

the industry and for attaining superior competitive advantage and market share growth (Arokodare & Asikhia, 2020; Nkuda, 2017; Oyerinde, Olatunji, & Adewale, 2018).

The contemporary business environment is characterised by increasing levels of complexity, turbulence and uncertainty. For organizations to survive and thrive in this environment, they need to become more “agile” or adaptive (Rigby, Sutherland & Takeuchi, 2016 cited in Jordaan, 2018). Today, businesses operate in an environment characterized by turbulence, uncertainty and rapid technological, social and political change unlike anything we have experienced before and in which the old models are becoming obsolete (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014 cited in Jordaan, 2018). This new environment is often referred to as a “VUCA” environment, a term first applied to military strategy after the end of the Cold War but that has become a trendy managerial acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. The result is flux, instability, paralysis (due to information overload), doubt, dualities, distrust and increased levels of unresolved conflict. The VUCA environment affects not only businesses but all levels of the society and its institutions. In this environment, “traditional” leadership styles fail to deliver the innovation and entrepreneurship that is required to remain competitive.

Threats and opportunities arising from environmental uncertainties have been established to impact on business performance (Kim, 2018; Kwon, Ryu & Park, 2018). Companies perform in the environment that is part of their functioning conditions and generates not only opportunities but threats as well. The general trend in the business environment nowadays is to shorten the product’s life and business model cycle (Dyduch, 2017). At a time when the global economy coupled with global competition is creating rapid changes and intense competition is shortening product life cycles, it is clear that traditional managerial techniques are inadequate to respond properly to these changes or to rapidly changing market conditions.

Therefore, in a turbulent environment, one of the important features of organization's key success factors is strategic agility. Firm’s agility and/or the capability to perform changes in diverse competitive ways with destruction of competition, speed and surprises’ attention as a firm being able to compete efficiently in the recent market atmosphere (Sambamurthy, Chakravarty & Grewal, 2003 cited in Akintokunbo & Agi, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has created the need for strategic agility in organizations.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, which originated in China, has infected tens of thousands of people. Its spread has left businesses around the world counting costs. The virus is posing a growing threat to the economy of many nations as the pandemic is moving from travel restrictions of individuals to that of business organizations (Davidson, 2020). This extends the pandemic’s reach into nearly every corner of commerce as many consumers avoid large gatherings of people in commercial places and beyond. Trade shows and business conferences and trips were cancelled. At the beginning of the year 2020, the first quarter to be precise, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), which represents global airlines, boosted its estimates of the global financial hit of COVID-19 from \$29.3 billion to \$63 billion and then to \$113 billion as the bookings keep falling beyond the china and Asia at large (Oruonye & Ahmed, 2020).

The outbreak and spread of covid-19 disease led to rapid shutdowns in cities and states across the country, which greatly affected most industries. Some of the impacts of covid-19 include increased cancellations of hotels and travel bookings and increased cancellation and rescheduling of events in the entertainment industry, resulting in billion-dollar revenue loss and millions of job loss. It is feared that the volume of revenue loss may affect the ability of most of the industries and businesses in the tourism sector to return back to normal operations after the covid-19 pandemic without appreciable financial support from the government (Ahani & Nilashi, 2020). The current pandemic has necessitated the need for strategic agility in the post coronavirus era. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the need for organizations to build strategic agility in a turbulent environment.

Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- i. To examine the need for strategic sensitivity in a turbulent environment.
- ii. To understand the need for collective commitment in a turbulent environment.
- iii. To highlight the need for resource fluidity in a turbulent environment.

## **Literature Review**

### **Strategic Agility**

A standard definition of agility is that it is "... the ability to create and respond to change. It is a way of dealing with, and ultimately succeeding in, an uncertain and turbulent environment" (Agile Alliance, 2020). Gren and Lenberg (2019) have proposed a shorter and more straightforward definition of agility as "responsiveness to change". From these definitions, it becomes clear that the concept of agility is mostly concerned with organizational responsiveness and adaptability in what many commentators describe as increasingly turbulent and dynamic competitive environments (Millar, Groth & Mahon, 2018).

Strategic agility has to do with the capacity to respond swiftly to changing situations as demonstrated by business organizations. The ability of an organization to have the foresight to see the trend and forecast the future in order to respond appropriately defines the strategic agility of such an organization. Tende and Ekanem (2018) opine that SA is the capability of an organization to predict, anticipate, and forecast trends and events in the business environment to fashion appropriate response with proactive moves. Therefore, survival is no longer guaranteed on the premise of having financial muscle or capital, but in the ability to adjust to changes in the environment and device means to stay relevant. Akhigbe and Onuoha (2019) posit that it is no longer the fittest organization that last longer, but organizations with high resilience and capacity to adjust.

Strategic agility was considered by Tabe-Khoshnood and Nematizadeh (2017) as a concept consisting of two components: sensing agility and knowledge management. They further interpreted strategic agility as the ability of an organization to detect and initiate a rapid response to business environmental changes through the opportunities and threats existing in the business environment, hence, giving a rapid response through the recombination of resources, processes and strategies. Extensive review of the strategic agility literature shows that an agile organization can be successful in competitive environment through the abilities of sensing agility, acting agility, decision-making agility and speed so that it achieves competitive advantage in the market and other overall firm performance (Oyedijo, 2012).

Doz and Kosonen (2010) cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020) considered strategic agility to be a means by which organizations transform, reinvent themselves, adapt, and ultimately survive. They see strategic agility as the capacity of a firm to continuously adjust and adapt its strategic direction in a core business in order to create value for the firm. Sampath (2015) considered strategic agility to be about being adaptive to changes in the business context, spotting opportunities, threats and risks, and launching new strategic initiatives rapidly and repeatedly; while Teece, Peteraf and Leih (2016) referred to strategic agility as the capacity of an organization to efficiently and effectively redeploy and redirect its resources to value creating and value protecting (and capturing) of higher-yield activities as internal and external circumstances warrant. In this paper, strategic agility is described as how an organization employs strategic insight and foresight, internal response orientation, external response orientation, human resource capability, and information technology capability to achieve overall firm performance.

### **Importance of Strategic Agility**

Strategic agility enables the organization to carry out a series of specific tasks successfully, in addition to managing the opportunities and risks in the business activities effectively (Ardichvile, Cardozob & Rayc, 2003 cited in Oga & Chima, 2020). Strategic agility makes organizations more responsive to market trends, and faster in terms of the delivery of products and services compared to non-agile ones. Strategic agility is composed of three dimensions: the sensor agility, decision-making, and agility practice and application (Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj & Grover, 2003). Strategic agility is not only "flexible" to cater for predictable changes but also able to respond and adapt to unpredictable changes quickly and efficiently (Oosterhout, Waarts & Van, 2006 cited in Mills and Keremah, 2020).

Strategic agility provides the ability to connect insights about the external business environment with internal capabilities and convert it into actions. According to Doz and Kosonen (2008) cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020) such organizations are built to be able to survive themselves. This kind of organization have an awareness structure and process that keeps them alert, and adaptive. Organizations that have strategic agility are aware of environmental changes and can respond to it quickly and, ultimately, determine

their own future. They predict the future and allocate significant resources for future development so that they can maintain their sustainable competitive advantage. They operate in capacities that are more than just survival: they lead in their own markets. Continuous self-renewal is a way of life for these organizations and their members.

### **Dimensions of Strategic Agility**

Strategic agility consists of three capabilities, namely strategic sensitivity, collective commitment, and resource fluidity (Doz & Kosonen, 2008 cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020)). All three capabilities must support each other to achieve success, firms cannot choose only one capability, but it must have a combination of the three capabilities. If collective commitment is not supported by the ability to move resources from a business unit because the individual motives and the main objectives of the business unit are not aligned, then strategic agility will eventually have a negative impact (Doz & Kosonen, 2008 cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020)).

### **Strategic Sensitivity**

Strategic sensitivity, includes the focus of the organization's attention and the level of intensity in which the company perceives and interprets the reality of market conditions. The first ability in strategic agility is strategic sensitivity which is defined as the ability to predict markets and become a leader in the industry (Doz & Kosonen, 2008 cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020)). Strategic sensitivity depends on accepting and analyzing various types of information to understand the environment in order to decide on effective actions (Fernandez-Perez, Garcia-Morales, & Bustinza-Sanchez, 2012). Reading the environment effectively, analyzing and managing market information, and understanding the market environment are very important in order to be flexible and achieve success. Strategic sensitivity is very important to create a shared vision among leaders. Collaborating with consumers enables leaders to increase market needs and strategic sensitivity. Therefore organizations must have a higher level of awareness, sustainable awareness including honest and open strategic discussions among leaders, managers, and other stakeholders, so that there will be different opinions and inputs in an effort to make further changes (Doz & Kosonen, 2008 cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020)).

Strategic sensitivity is defined as the sharpness of perception of, and the intensity of awareness and attention to, strategic developments (Doz & Kosonen, 2010). Strategic sensitivity means being open to as much information, intelligence and innovations as possible by creating and maintaining relationships with a variety of different people and organizations (Doz & Kosonen, 2008).

### **Collective Commitment**

Collective Commitment, how company management can makes quick and right decisions without taking organizational politics as consideration. Collective commitment requires managerial leadership to work together in making important decisions and avoiding political conflict and self-interest. Arokodare and Asikhia (2020) posited that the faster the leaders can make important decisions, the faster organizations can take advantage of opportunities (Schrager & Madansky, 2013). Establishing strong shared goals strengthens trust among leaders for more committed and united teams (Franken & Thomsett, 2013).

Eisenhardt (2013) looked at how organizations with organizational leaders work together, especially in developing markets, achieving the possibility of success, especially when operating quickly. Speed, conflict, and cooperation allow the organization's leadership team to create effective strategies in a dynamic environment and ambiguity (Eisenhardt, 2013). Furthermore, he also noted that formulating simple rules increased the ability of the organization's leadership team to act fast based on overall market knowledge. The importance of a healthy market is in understanding how to plan proactively in anticipating potential environmental turbulence (Mason & Mouzas, 2012).

### **Resource Fluidity**

Resource fluidity is the ability to adjust and renew business system and relocate resources quickly according to needs and circumstances. They argue that innovation and constant development of new capabilities are the only sources of excellence for sustainable competitiveness. Resource fluidity is the organization's internal ability to relocate resources quickly to capture opportunities and distance themselves from failures

further (Doz & Kosonen, 2008 cited in Arokodare and Asikhia (2020). Examples of resources that move toward opportunities arise in several studies. Busch and Hoffmann (2007) proposed that resource fluidity is needed to create and manage adaptive and anticipatory flexibility.

### **Environmental Turbulence**

Turbulence describes the rate of changes, unpredictability, volatility and instability in the external environment. Turbulence leads to a great uncertainty which causes deficit of the information needed to identify and understand the cause and effect of the relationship. When the environment is highly dynamic, uncertainty may suppress the organization's ability to respond to the need for change, predicting customer requirements, questioning the existing strategic direction, and searching for new alternatives. However, an insecure environment in which external changes are nonlinear and inconsistent can also be a great source of opportunities for enterprises to strengthen existing capabilities and/or develop new ones that enable companies to overcome their organizational inertia and short-sightedness of knowledge (Petrus, 2019).

Oginni and Adesanya (2013) averred that organizations face an increasingly dynamic, complex, and unpredictable environment, where technology, globalization, resource shortages, wide swings in the business cycle, changing social values, competitors, customers, suppliers, and a multitude of other dynamic forces impact on the overall performance of these organizations. Environmental turbulence, according to Anggraini and Sudhartio (2019), is defined as environmental conditions with high level of uncertainty and risk. Environmental turbulence is an important construct that captures volatility in the corporate environment. It is made up of a competitive business environment and risks that come up from the company, and the complexity and heterogeneity of the supply chain within and outside the domain of the industry (Rimita, 2019).

A turbulent environment is indicated by being “difficult to understand” and needs a flexible organization to respond promptly and adequately to stay competitive. Stigner (2002) concludes that a turbulent environment stands in a situation that is subject to continuous, substantial, uncertain and unpredictable changes. It is important to distinguish between turbulence and rapid change. The latter is predictable, while the former is similar to uncertainty.

### **Revitalizing Strategic Agility in a Turbulent Environment**

Threats and opportunities arising from environmental turbulence have been established to impact on business performance (Kim, 2018; Kwon, Ryu & Park, 2018). In mitigating environmental turbulence risks, companies across the globe have focused on strategic workforce agility in achieving targeted performance. Volatility risks in the operating environment of business triggered by environmental turbulence serves as a threat in achieving targeted performance. Therefore, businesses cannot survive without significant consideration given to strategic agility measures and the impact of environmental turbulence on their business and operational routines as well as decision making processes. Companies need to be vibrant by maintaining a high level of responsiveness to achieve agility and to remain competitive in the global marketplace (Garbie, 2011). Considering the challenges created by business environmental turbulence in relation to firm performance, scholars around the globe have acknowledged the importance of strategic agility initiatives as a proactive business process in curtailing environmental turbulence so as to enhance firm performance especially in the oil and gas industry (Arokodare & Asikhia, 2020a).

A growing number of organizations are recognizing the impact of environmental threats and pressures on their activities and operations. One of the main issues in this process is coping with uncertainty created by environmental turbulence. In today's 21st century market conditions, companies are faced with variability of dynamic changes that frequently occur both concurrently and unpredictably, and which forces companies to revise their work practices and methods continuously in order to adapt quickly (Anggraini & Sudhartio, 2019). In this context, strategic agility is known as the ability of an organization to manage market change through rapid proactive responses to threats and market opportunities in order to achieve targeted firm performance.

### **Conclusion/Implications**

Based on extant literature, organizations that are able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances in their operating environment have a competitive advantage. This level of “agility” involves more than simply developing new strategies and organizational structures enabling the rapid gathering of relevant information and equally rapid response time. Agility also—if not primarily—requires an ability on the part of people in

the organization to collaborate effectively to improve their decision-making abilities both with respect to speed and quality of outcomes. This study concludes that firms operating in dynamic environments must realize the need for change and adaptation and thereby stimulate the efforts of the firm to develop agility-that can better respond to a dynamic environment.

The antidote to the turbulence firms face today is leadership characterized by agility or “adaptiveness,” the ability to make rapid adaptations in response to changing circumstances), creativity, improved decision-making ability through collaboration and trustworthiness. Therefore, in a turbulent environment, one of the important features of organization's key success factors is strategic agility.

### **Recommendation For Further Study**

The study recommends that further empirical studies be carried out on the topic within the Nigerian context so as to test the variables associated in the conceptual model set out by the study.

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