



Editorial

Supporting strategy: Contributions from OR

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This special issue presents selected papers concerning the contribution of operational research (OR) to supporting strategy. Here, we understand the phrase ‘supporting strategy’ in its broadest sense: from working with members of a management team to help them articulate and evaluate strategic priorities at different organisational levels (eg departmental, business unit, corporate), to redesigning organisational processes with a view to creating positive strategic impact on the organisation. Consequently, the ‘strategic OR’ toolkit must include a wide variety of model-supported approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, deployed in facilitated or expert modes, and typically used in combination with standard strategy methods and tools such as industry analysis or SWOT/TOWS matrices.

Work at the intersection of OR and strategy has been consistently published in this journal over the years, although there has been only one prior attempt, by Dyson and Eden in 2000, to collate strategic OR papers under a special issue. Ten years on, we have witnessed an increase of activity in this area. For example, lively discussions of past, current and future developments of strategic OR are held in special streams at the EURO and OR Society conferences. In the UK, there is a Strategic OR special interest group that organises regular events at the University of Warwick. In addition, a number of books discussing the contribution of particular OR approaches to strategy-making have been published recently. Therefore, we thought it seemed pertinent to produce a new special issue that takes stock of the field, and provides focus for the continued research and development of OR approaches to support strategy.

This special issue contains papers that offer a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives on the role and impact of strategic OR. It provides insight into how current strategic OR research and practice is being shaped by a community of active academic and practitioners. We hope the papers selected for this issue will be a source of useful reference for ongoing work on supporting strategy, and provide a direction for future research in the field.

The first two papers both focus on the intersection between scenario planning and OR. In the first one, *Ram*,

Montibeller and *Morton* present an approach for combining scenario planning with multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA). Their approach covers the rapid development of a more diverse set of scenarios than is traditionally considered, and illustrate how regret can be used within the comparison of strategic options via a case study involving food security in Trinidad and Tobago. The important issue of integrating scenario planning with systems modelling is aptly illustrated by *Burt* in the second paper. He reports on a 15-month scenario-based intervention for an organisation operating in the UK energy sector, showing how systems modelling can complement and enhance the narrative power of scenarios by making explicit the interconnected and dynamic nature of past, present and future realities. In doing so, the integrated approach allows for the consideration of intuitive and rational aspects of reality during strategic conversations.

The next paper by *Bryant*, *Darwin* and *Booth* provides an account of a strategic change intervention in a university environment, where a high degree of participation was deemed essential following a disappointing outcome of an employee satisfaction survey. The approach developed for this intervention used a blend of large group and problem structuring intervention approaches. In working between the disciplines of OR and organisational development, the blended approach demonstrates the opportunities available for the wider use of participative approaches in strategy-making. In the following paper, *Montibeller* and *Franco* draw on their experiences with strategic decision support to recommend some modifications to the standard MCDA approach, and provide suggestions on how these changes can be implemented effectively while using MCDA in supporting strategic decisions within strategy workshops.

The next two papers are concerned with facilitated modelling to support the work of strategy teams, and provide both practical and theoretical insights. *Howick* and *Eden* offer insight into the OR model building processes within a strategic context. They describe a strategy-making intervention with a top management team within the UK police force, where a soft OR strategy-making process was used to feed into the development of a quantitative system dynamics model that explored tensions between the supply of resources (police officers), and the demands placed upon those officers. In the following paper, *Rouwette* explores the use of facilitated modelling in strategy development. His paper analyses the evaluation of three public-sector case studies in the Netherlands, where a facilitated

modelling approach was used, through the deployment of written questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. His findings suggest that questionnaires, based on clearly defined concepts and specific measurements, offer clear benefits as tools for evaluating facilitated modelling interventions.

Finally, the last two papers shed light on current practice to support strategy. *Tapinos*, *Dyson* and *Meadows* examine whether the balanced scorecard makes a difference to the strategy development process. Based on a large scale international survey on the process of strategy development in organisations, the authors found that the impact of the balance scorecard is not as comprehensive as claimed in the strategy literature. Next, *O'Brien's* article provides a snapshot of the current UK OR practice of tool use in supporting strategy. The author surveys practitioner members of the UK OR Society on-line into the strategic activities they engage in and their knowledge and use of tools. The research also explores the link between tools and activities, and how tools have been combined to support strategy. For academics, the paper updates previous research on the use of specific tools to support strategy, and addresses some of the issues raised such as the apparent lack of soft OR tools in reported use; the paper is also useful for those who teach OR and Strategy as it identifies how OR/MS tools can be used alongside or in combination with standard strategy tools.

This issue concludes with a number of viewpoints and book reviews that will be of interest to those working in the strategic OR domain. Four viewpoints are offered by *Ackermann*, *Hough*, *Phillips* and *Syms*, who all ably

articulate their particular perspectives about the role of OR in supporting strategy. All three books reviewed use systems-based modelling and simulation approaches to support the management of strategy dynamics.

Overall, the contributions selected for this special issue suggest that OR has a tangible role in supporting strategy in organisations. We hope that the works presented here stimulate more research in strategic OR, and encourages more OR academics and practitioners to explore the potential of OR in the strategy arena.

We would like to thank a number of people whose invaluable help made this special issue possible. First, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the authors who sent their manuscripts for consideration in this issue. We are also very grateful to all the referees who helped us in the reviewing process by offering their expertise, time and effort to assess the quality of the papers. Finally, we would like to specially thank Sarah Parry and John Wilson, for their support, patience and understanding throughout the editorial process.

Reference

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