3 Strategy and tactics

• Definitions of strategy and tactics
• The disposition of systems
• The IS environment
• Strategy frameworks
• IS within the organization
• The way forward

Definitions of strategy and tactics
The contagion of both local and global change is generating severe insecurity among managers. That information technology will come to the rescue is a vain hope; on the contrary IT is now seen as just another agent and source of this change. The present use of this technology is inappropriate for coping with this situation. Without coherent ways of thinking about the place of information systems in respect of the perpetual changes around them, companies can no longer place their faith in technological solutions. For in doing so, they surrender responsibility for IT to technocrats, who all too often indulge their fascination for irrelevant technology, without considering the wider needs of the organization. The necessary way of thinking must not be just a token tribute to philosophical problems and questions of meaning. The present emphasis on simple functional issues and short term advantages of IT, must be balanced against the application of information technology both to simplify and to enhance a company’s long term competitive position in the light of profound uncertainty and complexity. But how successful are these attempts to introduce information technology? We can be sure that the integration of an IT strategy with a corporate strategy requires a sensitivity to issues far broader than the merely technological: ‘The IT tail must not wag the organization dog’.

Organizations must be flexible in the face of the unknown while at the same time make the best response to the opportunities and risks at hand. We have seen that decisions must not be based on seductive technological fashions and simplistic mathematical models. Aggrandized management information systems, that are little more than computerized executive toys, must not be allowed to replace effective qualitative management with an alien quantitative imperative.
The real benefits of systems simplification must not be overlooked in a confusion of complexity, supported by an explosion of facile classification, as decision support systems vie with expert systems, which vie with expert decision support systems and executive support systems.

In times of change, uncertainty and transition, ‘thinking management’ should emphasize flexibility and recognize the equifinality of different starting points and alternative routes to achieve their objectives. As well as considering such aspects as the avoidance of tying in the organization to the whims of a single supplier, the emphasis on flexibility provides further justification for strategies based on the development of human resources, and tactics based on informed decisions. Of all organizational resources, the workforce is arguably the most flexible, and that flexibility can be encouraged and exploited through the provision of education and training schemes. Unless the social context of information use is fully appreciated, and unless organizations become aware of the true nature of crisis, risk, complexity and uncertainty, the benefits of strategic and tactical applications of IT will remain mere wishful thinking.

Before considering the relationship between strategies and information systems, we should really ask, ‘what is a strategy?’ Is it just another trendy buzzword, like ‘synergy’, that is sloshing around in the international business community? Can it be defined, or is it another of those nebulous concepts, and the more we try to understand it, the less we grasp its essence? The Oxford English Dictionary says that strategy is "the art of the commander-in-chief; the art of projecting and directing the larger military movements and operations in a campaign. Usually distinguished from tactics, which is the art of handling forces in a battle or in the immediate presence of the enemy". Military strategy has been the source of numerous books from time immemorial, and the business world has zealously taken up the military metaphor. Most business writers agree with Von Clausewitz's observation that strategists do not achieve certainty, they only have an edge on the opposition; and with Napoleon's notion of strategy as 'planned flexibility', although they may shy away from his policy of selecting only the 'lucky' generals. Tactics on the other hand are considered not nearly as important; they are "the arrangement of procedure, the action to be taken, in order to fulfil an end or objective". Tactics are what lieutenants do, but strategy is the work of generals; a most peculiar attitude since it is the appropriateness and quality of tactics that separates success from failure in the short term.

The vagueness implicit in the military meaning of 'strategy' has transferred into management theory with numerous observations and taxonomies. Strategies are "aggregates of philosophies or agglomerations of programmes"; they are abstractions, "concepts in the minds of interested observers". According to Quinn "a strategy is the pattern or plan that integrates an organization's major goals,