

B301 Making Sense of Strategy

Strategy is the way in which organisations and individuals orient themselves towards what they see as success in their various fields of endeavour. Traditionally this has been taken to involve formal sequences of analysis, planning and choice, and implementation of coordinated activities in pursuit of deliberate goals. Other schools of thought have argued that the wide gap between intention and achievement means that the study of strategy should focus on how winning strategies actually emerge almost in spite of such processes. As the world grows more complex from rapid change in technology, lifestyles, markets and politics, it becomes increasingly difficult for strategists to interpret and exploit opportunities for long-term advantage with any certainty. Strategy is thus a dynamic and controversial field, but an understanding of it, and the ability to critically apply strategic thinking, is more important than ever in the twenty-first century work environment.

There are six blocks in the course:

Block 1: Introducing Strategy starts by examining some common definitions of strategy and teasing out their assumptions and implications. After an overview of the course content and structure, supported by appropriate activities, you will be introduced to the fundamental skill of critical thinking and invited to see strategy as a social process that includes you both as learner and practitioner.

Block 2: The Historical Context embarks on a journey through the development of modern strategic thought. Along the way it offers some suggestions as to why one particular approach to strategy, based on economic rationality, has become so widely accepted and persistent. At the same time it will open up questions about the efficacy and continuing relevance of this approach, and outline some of the most influential criticisms which have been made of it.

Block 3: The Strategy Toolkit deals in detail with a battery of models and concepts espoused by strategists working broadly within the economic rational tradition. It examines the ways in which organisations make sense of their external and internal environments, and discusses the strengths and limitations of each technique. Stakeholder management will also feature, leading to a consideration of the wider context (ethical, political and international) in which strategy takes place. An exploration of strategic decision-making follows, relating the ways in which organisations make sense of their environments to how they select strategy to further their competitive and corporate aims.

Block 4: Case Study will extend your own analytical and decision-making skills, as you work with other students online on a case-based task. (It centres on a major case study.) The block is activity-based and develops a combination of skills that are highly relevant to employability - team-working, information literacy and problem-solving. It presents an opportunity to relate theory to practice in a way that will increase your grasp of the debates around strategy and develop your confidence to engage in them.

Block 5: Strategy Implementation seeks to demystify what in many respects is the least well-understood aspect of strategy - putting plans into practice. Key influences on implementation are examined, including the enabling (or blocking) role of culture, and how leadership affects the enactment of strategy. This block will also take account of a major focus of contemporary research, 'strategy as practice' - the close analysis of what people do - in order to examine precisely how strategy 'happens' in organisations.

Block 6: Where Next for Strategy? as a dynamic field, strategy needs to be able to address the challenges of an increasingly unpredictable world. Complementing the historical perspective with which the course began, this final block looks at some of the directions in which contemporary strategic thinking is bound, including complexity theory, which seeks to understand how organisations can co-evolve harmoniously and successfully with their continually changing environments.