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**Title:**

Crafting Collaboration: a conceptual exploration of strategizing by constituents in HUBs

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**KEY WORDS**

HUBs, emerging strategy development, learning schools of strategy, strategy as practice, grounded theory

**ABSTRACT**

This conceptual conference paper intends to examine strategy development by constituents operating in regional HUBs. HUBs are polymorphic, horizontal network structures connecting diverse constituents linked by a common aim to cooperate, co-create shared values, and realize common goals. A HUB emerges as a form of organising structure, to some extent, in the realisation of common goals and enabling value creation by the cooperating constituents. HUBs evolve over time into value creating networking forms of organising that may contribute to regional developments.

In a HUB, an incremental process emerges in which constituents develop strategies, whether deliberately or not, to accumulate human, social, natural, physical, and financial capital in order to accomplish common goals and to co-create shared values. We refer to this process as strategizing by constituents in HUBs. How this process evolves is ambiguous and can be construed as an engagement with cooperation and value creation as elements of a strategizing process that has an emerging character. This contribution sets out to explore this process by comparing a number of strategy schools whereby we aim to envision how determinants for emerging strategy development by constituents in HUBs can be determined. We find that elements of the Learning School of Strategy fit the emerging and evolving strategizing process in HUBs. The Strategy as Practice approach demonstrates interesting leads as constituents in HUBs strategize while simultaneously developing a form of organising in practice.

**Introduction**

We are living in a network economy in which networking and shared value creation are increasingly being perceived as the way to move toward a sustainable future (Elkington, 1997; Jonker, 2012; Macarthur, 2013). Partnerships and new alliances are considered crucial in a transition towards a more sustainable society (Elkington, 1997). A new kind of collaborative network can be observed that is integrating ecological, economic, and social values and experimenting with new value propositions (Jonker, 2012). In urban and rural regions, several companies, public institutions, not-for-profit organisations, social

enterprises, and citizens and social initiatives collaborate in new ways of inter organisational networking to establish common goals, products, and services. In this paper, we refer to these regional, polymorph, multi-constituent networking organisations as HUBs.

While creating a HUB, constituents are developing new forms of cooperation and organising value creation (Jonker, 2012; Young, 2011). As HUBs transform from ad-hoc initiatives to more overt organisational forms, they will likely set future goals and plan how the constituents will realize these goals within a set timeframe while cooperating within the HUB. Otherwise stated, they begin, either deliberately or not, to develop a strategy to ensure a future direction. Although constituents may differ in the appreciation of different values, they engage in planning how to co-create added value in the region where they operate. An incremental process emerges in which constituents develop strategies to accumulate human, social, natural, physical, and financial capital in order to accomplish common goals. This process is known as strategizing by constituents in HUBs. Actual contemporary knowledge regarding the ways HUBs evolve, how they formulate goals, and how constituents craft a strategy while engaging in a process of cooperation and value creation is shrouded in assumptions. In this conference paper, we investigate to what extent existing literature provides insight into the process of crafting strategy by constituents in HUBs.

We begin by explaining how we perceive HUBs to be new forms of organising followed by a brief overview on strategy formation. Pointing out relevant elements of five descriptive Schools of Strategy will explain how we perceive elements of these schools to be of importance when researching the process of strategizing by constituents in HUBs. For this a longitudinal empirical study observing the strategizing process in HUBs with a multi-method approach is proposed.

### **HUBs**

HUBs often emerge as informal, horizontal networking forms of organising consisting of a rich diversity of constituents within a relatively small geographical area. HUBs enable the alignment of shared values leading to polymorph, cooperative, networking organisational entities to which collaboration and co-creation are key.

Constituents in HUBs direct and adjust common and overlapping goals based on those values leading to new, cooperative, experimental, and innovative approaches of, e.g., energy, care, mobility, waste, food, and wellbeing. These themes are, to some extent, being associated with sustainability and a circular economy by the constituents of the HUBs and their environment. By cooperating and co-creating shared values, constituents of HUBs facilitate developments that require a diversity of cooperating parties. HUBs can lead to the realisation on a regional<sup>1)</sup> level of, e.g., sustainable energy facilities, food cooperatives, healthcare networks, or circular waste organisation. It can be observed that, at some point, HUBs become intrinsic addressable entities; they become the ‘face’ of certain projects and the joint networking constituents. The reasons for this are mostly practical. Ideas become projects and ad hoc initiatives could evolve with a more permanent character. In many cases, this requires an organisational and/or legal body in order to coordinate, direct the realisation of processes, bring structure, and/or acquire resources.

It was previously indicated that HUBs thrive within a networking economy in which new opinions regarding organisations and entrepreneurship emerge (Jonker, 2012). Governments are beginning to recognize this (Ansell, 2000; Horlings & Marsden, 2012; Morgan, 2007) and are initiating facilitation and even participating in networks and communities of practice. (European Commission, 2010, 2014; Kennisprogramma Duurzaam Door, 2013; Provincie Limburg, 2015). We assume that a form of strategizing emerges within HUBs to establish cooperation in order to realize common goals and value creation.

### **Strategy**

Up to now, it remains ambiguous to what extent existing insights into strategy development apply to strategy evolution within HUBs. Scholars like Simon, Porter, Freeman, Eisenhardt, Mintzberg, Prahalad and Hamel have, amongst many, emphasized the importance of strategic development for organisations in order to react to external changes. The process of strategy development can be studied from many perspectives of which most, in their pure form, are being defined by the two opposing perspectives of strategy development as a deliberate and planned activity and strategy development as an emerging and often unplannable process. There appears to be current consensus that, within many organisations, strategy development in practice is often determined to be a hybrid between deliberate and emergent processes (Mintzberg & Lampel, 2009). In for-profit organisations, this often takes the form of a business plan which ultimately describes financial targets. Strategy or policy plans for not-for-profit and public organisations commonly address societal targets such as wellbeing or education.

#### *Preconditions for strategizing*

Hamel (1998) notes that organisations must satisfy five preconditions in order to realize new, emerging strategies: 1) New Voices: diversity created by new constituents and stakeholders from within the geographical periphery of an organisation give way to a pluralistic process of strategy creation; 2) New Conversations: the diversity of the constituents leads to new conversations in which innovative insights emerge through sharing knowledge, views, and approaches on common goals; 3) New Passions: people will invest when there is an opportunity to create a unique and exiting future in which they can share new passions; 4) New Perspectives: in order for a new strategy to emerge, the constituents must be facilitated in developing new perspectives. In an existing organisation, a manager should be searching for new outlooks that enable individuals to reconceive whatever they are involved in; and 5) New Experiments: organisations must be susceptible to new experiments to learn about the effectiveness of possible strategies.

### **Schools of Strategy**

This conference paper attempts to explore elements that shape the process of strategy development by constituents in HUBs. Given the nature of HUBs - new and still unfolding forms of organising – we choose to investigate the descriptive schools of strategy (Mintzberg, Ahlmstrand & Lampel, 2009) as they study the strategy process as it unfolds.

### *Learning School*

According to the Learning School, strategy formation is an emergent process. An organisation learns from its own actions and gradually adapts a pattern through learning that could be called a strategy. As a learning process is destined to happen for organisations that are in a novel situation (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009), we presupposed that HUBs - being novel forms or organizing in a novel situation - learn to strategize. In many cases, the learning process is the result of the interaction of constituents within an organisation. It is, however, important to realize that this does not imply that a collective learning process automatically leads to an emerging strategy. To actually learn, a person must be able to reflect, and the reflection must subsequently lead to conclusions resulting in new actions. This requires the ability of organisational sense making (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005)). From the existing literature on the Learning School of Strategy, Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2009) conclude five premises: 1) strategy formation as a process of learning over time; 2) strategy formation as a collective process; 3) anyone within the organisation can take strategic initiatives; 4) the strategy process can be managed by stimulating interaction, learning, and reflection; and 5) strategies can represent past patterns, future plans, and eventually become an inherent guide for organisational behaviour. These premises can easily be related to the incremental and collective process of strategizing that emerges when constituents in HUBs begin to cooperate, define goals, and realize value creation.

An interesting model within the Learning School is the 'Grassroots Model' of strategy formation (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel, 2009; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985). Briefly, the Grassroots Model encourages a strategy to 'grow' by allowing patterns to emerge. Strategies can root anywhere in an organisation as people anywhere in an organisation possess the capability to learn. This may lead to patterns that are being adopted throughout the organisation. They become collective and, therefore, can become organised. In the Grassroots Model, the management of the process is important as it can provide an environment in which all types of new strategies can flourish while, at the same time, recognize and address contra productive patterns and unwelcome changes. Although it has not specifically been associated with the Learning School, it is important to mention the Strategy as Practice approach in this aspect. Scholars like Whittington (Whittington, 2006; 2003), Bromiley and Rau (2014) and Jarzabkowski (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl, & Whittington, 2013; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009) study strategy development from a sociological perspective rather than a pure organisational or managerial view. They perceive strategy as something that people do rather than something organisations have (Whittington, 2003).

### *Power School of Strategy*

Evolving HUBs experiment with horizontal organisational structures without a clear 'power base' within the organisation. Still, there are a number of interesting concepts within the Power School of Strategy which perceives strategy as a means of influencing political agendas, not only by individual organisations but increasingly by conglomerates and networks. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Mansell (2009) distinguish between power *inside* an organisation and power *by* the organisation. Within evolving HUBs, both aspects may be addressed: who are or become the decision-makers in the HUB, and how can the HUB be of

influence in the decision making process in the region. Within the Power School, Astley and Fombrun (1983) introduced the concept of Collective Strategy, laying the foundation for the idea of strategic alliances that are formed due to collaborative advantage. To some extent this could be the case for HUBs.

*Environmental School of Strategy*

Where the Learning School conceives a complex environment as a place for collective experiences and learning, the Environmental School establishes the environment of the organisation at the centre stage of strategy development. The organisation shapes itself in response to its environment whereby strategy formation is a reactive process. This could also be the case for developing HUBs with, e.g., regional development as a defining environment. However, there is a twist. According to the environmental school of strategy, once organisations are formed in response to a certain environment, they will prove to be unable to respond to changes in the environment. Therefore, their long-time survival depends on choices that have been made at an early stage. We believe that it may be too early to conclude that this may one day be the case for HUBs.

*Cultural School of Strategy*

Within the Cultural School, shared beliefs, visions, and passions form the organisation as a community. Strategy forms on the basis of social interaction. Strategy formation is rooted in intentions that may not be explicitly evident to all members of the community. When related to HUBs, the Cultural School has an interesting uptake on strategy in that it focuses on community building by sharing ideas and beliefs which is what brings constituents in a HUB together in the first place. It appears to be a viewpoint that might be applicable at a future stage of HUBs bringing insights in how to sustain a flourishing ‘culture’ of cooperation and creating shared values.

*Configuration School of Strategy*

To the Configuration School, the stability of the organisation is considered important and whatever process of strategy development that is most appropriate should be selected at the given time or context. This could be an interesting uptake for HUBs, however, as they are still emerging, it cannot yet be stated that HUBs will prove to be stable organisations at all. Moreover, from an organisational point of view, it should first be established what a ‘stable HUB’ is or should be. Nonetheless, several elements of the Configuration School are interesting for HUBs. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2009) distinguish seven organisational configurations of structure and power within the Configuration School each with its own specific understanding of strategy formation. It is conceivable that some of these may be discussed within HUBs as possible organisational models: the diversified organisation, the adhocracy organisation, the missionary organisation, and the political organisation.

While the Learning School of Strategy seems beneficial for envisioning *how* strategy formation evolves in HUBs, other descriptive schools may be helpful in determining *why* strategy development evolves and, if appropriate, *by whom* this process is managed, as stated below in Table 1.

Table 1 aspects of the descriptive schools of strategy related to HUBs

<i>School</i>	<i>Learning</i>	<i>Power</i>	<i>Environmental</i>	<i>Cultural</i>	<i>Configuration</i>
<i>Strategy perceived as</i>	<b>Strategy = learning</b>	Strategy = influence	<b>Strategy = reaction to changes in environment</b>	<b>Strategy = creating collectivity</b>	<b>Strategy = depending on the context in which it evolves</b>
<i>Who strategizes?</i>	<b>Anyone who anticipates</b>	Central manager or <b>Collective</b>	The environment determines what happens to the organisation	<b>The collective</b>	Depending on the context
<i>How to manage</i>	<b>Recognize and stimulating positive developments, recognize and deal with contraproductive developments</b>	Power is directive	Anticipating the environment of the organisation	Anticipating the collective to maintain stability	Depending on the context
<i>When can strategizing process occur</i>	<b>Anytime when anyone anticipates</b>	Anytime when influence is needed	Depending on the environment	Only when the collective feels the need to change	Only when perceived necessary
<i>Interesting approaches</i>	<b>Grassroots model, Learning Organisation</b>	<b>Collective strategy, collaborative advantage</b>			<b>Organisational configurations of structure and power</b>

**Strategizing in HUBs**

Similar to all starting and emerging forms of organising, HUBs are challenged with organisational and strategic issues. Taking the viewpoint that HUBs, however new and experimental, are in their bare essence value creating organisations and can, therefore, be studied from a strategy perspective, we reason that HUBs are breeding grounds for the emergence of new strategies.

Hamels (1998) preconditions for strategy formation are primarily intended for strategy processes at existing and for-profit organisations. Nevertheless, HUBs seem to fit all five of his preconditions. As we have already established, HUBs are diverse and pluralistic constituencies full of new voices that encounter new conversations which co-create new passions. According to Jonker (2012, 2013), this is an important trait of new forms of organising in the networking economy. Moore (2000) emphasizes the importance of shared values for multi-stakeholder networking organisations.

It appears to be a quintessential trait of HUBs that constituents collaborate for creating new, joint perspectives on common goals and shared values. HUBs meet Hamels fifth precondition by nature, being emerging organisations whose constituents experiment with organisational structures with cooperation and with defining and realizing common goals.

The descriptive Schools of Strategy offer promising views on the strategizing process in HUBs. Still, in their original form, they perceive strategy, however structured, planned, emerging or ad-hoc, as an

inseparable component of an organisation. Mintzberg and Lampel (1999) note that the descriptive schools are entangled and that the strategy process tends to become indistinct in cooperative organisations. There is a need to know how real-life strategy formation actually works by combining all schools of strategy and even searching beyond the schools (Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). This is certainly the case in HUBs, and it should be noted that studying strategy in practice offers interesting perspectives. Denis, Langley, and Rouleau (2007) contend that there is need for a pluralistic perspective on strategizing, which certainly seems to be appropriate for HUBs. Their views on strategizing in pluralist organisations appear to be promising when related to HUBs as they mention a long process of strategizing that is motivated by values and is embedded in evolving networks (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2007). An interesting, partly exploratory, approach has been elaborated by them in developing a multi-framework approach in which different sociological approaches (Actor-Network Theory, Conventionalist Theory, and Social Practices theory) are merged.

#### **Researching the strategizing process in HUBs**

HUBs represent an interesting new development in the networking economy. Strategizing by constituents in HUBs is one of many aspects that require further exploration to understand HUBs in theory and practice in order to construe their value creating role and their possible contribution to regional development. An increasing amount of literature addresses elements such as emergence, organisational structure, modelling, position, intra-organisational relations, participants' motivation, or effectiveness of networking forms of organisation including, e.g.: collaborative networks (Agranoff & McGuire, 1998; Agranoff, 2006; Camarinha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2007), public-private partnerships (Osborne, 2005), alliances (Osborn & Hagedoorn, 1997), ecosystems (Adner, Oxley & Silverman, 2013; Stam, 2015), social enterprises (Dees & Anderson, 2003), Communities of Practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wenger, 1998), partnerships (Hartman, Hofman, & Stafford, 1999; Selsky & Parker, 2005), cross sector collaboration (Bryson, Crosby, & Middleton Stone, 2006), Platforms (Young, 2011), multi-stakeholder platforms (Faysse, 2006), and New Business Models (Jonker, 2012).

It is premature to conclude that existing opinions on networking forms of organising can already provide an overview of the above mentioned and other elements within the context of still emerging HUBs.

Nevertheless, we believe it is important to explore the emerging strategy formation in HUBs as, at this moment, it is not possible to state what form of strategizing occurs in HUBs and how it evolves. The empirical research that is planned will need to accommodate this. A grounded theory approach seems most appropriate at this moment by developing a research model in which different descriptive strategies can be tested while conducting case studies in HUBs.

Although constituents within a HUB may share views on common goals and open up to experimenting with cooperation and shared value creation, this does not automatically imply that they have shared experiences with, and views on, organizational development and defining a common strategy. HUBs will need to address a diversity of views on all sorts of matters while developing a viable organisational form and a fitting strategy. According to Moore (2000), differences in both the defining source of revenues and

the perception of value cause different views on strategy development. A multitude of constituents brings a multitude of ideas on how to realize shared values and common goals, how to develop a form of organising and, for that matter, a strategy. Moreover, HUBs interact with third parties that may be of influence on the development of the HUB and its strategy formation.

Throughout this contribution, we intend to discover elements that shape the process of strategy development by constituents in HUBs. In order to obtain a better understanding of this process of strategizing by constituents in HUBs, we propose a longitudinal empirical study observing the strategizing process by the constituents in HUBs through a multi-method approach.

### **Discussion**

Hubs are ad hoc, polymorphic, multi-constituent networking forms of organising. Constituents in HUBs cooperate to enable value creation and the realisation of common goals within the region where they operate. This implies that a form of strategizing emerges even though the constituents may not be aware of it as such.

This conference paper attempts to explore whether existing literature on strategy development can be employed in researching strategy formation by constituents in HUBs. The process of strategizing is a complex phenomenon and the known literature on strategy development does not completely address the emerging process of strategy development by constituents in horizontal networking organisation forms such as HUBs. We find that known literature on strategy development can indeed provide direction for designing a research into strategy development by constituents in HUBs. The Learning School of Strategy provides footholds on the emergence of strategy development by multi constituent organisations. Within the Learning School of Strategy, the Grassroots Model appears to be most promising when studying the strategizing process by constituents in HUBs. The Learning School of Strategy is being linked to management concepts such as Core Competencies (Prahalad, Hamel, & June, 1990), Organisational Learning (Huber, 1991), and even Chaos Theory (Eisenhardt & Brown, 1998; Levy, 1995) which are management concepts that may be discussed during the organisational formation of a HUB. Depending on the stages of development and the unfolding organising structure of a HUB, elements of other descriptive schools are of interest as well.

We consider it, for now, too far fetching for this exploratory paper to take into account organizational development and sociological views on relations within HUBs. However, HUBs are social networks, and the strategizing process evolves from interaction between the constituents. It should be noted that awareness of the entanglement of organisational development and strategy development in HUBs is important while designing a research project about strategizing by constituents in HUBs. From a pluralistic viewpoint and in addition to the Grassroots Model, a Strategy as Practice approach appears to be promising for developing a multi-constituent perspective on the strategizing process.

We aim at the development of a theory in practice on what strategy development by HUBs implies, how strategy development evolves within HUBs, and what strategic role HUBs play in regional development. For this, we propose a multi-method, qualitative research in which, amongst others, field observations,

process reconstructions, and decision process simulations will be applied.

#### Notes

- 1) There are many descriptions and manifestations of regions. We refer to regions as geographically condensed areas with a distinct lingual, cultural, institutional, historical, and/or demographical character, whether or not officially recognized by governmental institutions. Regions can be overlapping and transnational; more extensive regions such as federal states or provinces can contain several smaller regions.

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