

Highlights:

- We apply a combined theoretical lens of high-performance work systems (HPWS), organisational development (OD) and socio-technical systems (STS) approach
- We examine the impact of HPWS, OD and STS in creating an agile and ambidextrous context for managing strategic dualities, especially in times of uncertainty
- This study offers a longitudinal and processual analysis of how during challenging times of uncertainty of global competition, the EMNE shifted from a purely managerialistic to a more humanistic set of values
- Our contribution provides exciting insights into how an MNE can balance pressures for local responsiveness and global integration through the effective creation of dual headquarters
- Our choice of a ‘critical’ and exemplar EMNE case analysis and presentation of future research propositions
- Overall we have helped identify how and why diverse strategies, during challenging and uncertain periods, lead to success through agility ambidexterity.

A Longitudinal Investigation into Multilevel Agile & Ambidextrous Strategic Dualities in an Information Technology High Performing EMNE

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Abstract: Applying a combined theoretical lens of high-performance work systems (HPWS), organisational development (OD) and socio-technical systems (STS), this paper examines the impact of HPWS, OD and STS in creating an agile and ambidextrous context for managing strategic dualities, especially in times of uncertainty. Using a qualitative case study of an emerging markets multinational enterprise (EMNE) from the Indian IT-BPO (information technology-business process outsourcing) industry, this study offers a longitudinal and processual analysis of how during challenging times of uncertainty of global competition, the EMNE shifted from a purely managerialistic to a more humanistic set of values through OD interventions and investments in digital assets. We identify and discuss critical interventions for managing various strategic dualities at multiple organisational levels over time. Our contribution provides exciting insights into an essential yet under-researched issue: namely, how an MNE can balance pressures for local responsiveness and global integration through the effective creation of dual headquarters, especially before and during the global financial crises. EMNEs are equally faced with numerous dualities when implementing strategic change initiatives to pursue firm growth due to global pressures. Some of these critical dualities that EMNEs are faced with include the simultaneous pursuit of managing exploratory and exploitative learning, local responsiveness with global integration, flexibility versus efficiency and formal versus informal organisations. Our choice of a ‘critical’ and exemplar EMNE case analysis and presentation of future research propositions have helped identify how and why diverse strategies, during challenging and uncertain periods, lead to success through agility ambidexterity.

Keywords: Organizational Agility and Ambidexterity; Change Management; Indian IT-BPO Industry, High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS); Organisational Development; Socio-technical theory; EMNEs.

Introduction

Management scholars increasingly simplify the complex, often messy phenomena of organisational paradoxes, arguing that greater simplicity renders organisational phenomena understandable and testable, often resulting in reductionist and incomplete theories (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, and Smith, 2016). Recently, Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, and Lewis (2018) argue that early paradox theory is built upon micro-level insights from psychology and philosophy to comprehend the nature and management of varied competing demands. However, corresponding empirical studies are often rare and only offer limited insights into why some individuals successfully cope with tensions while others fail. Considering these developments, it is worth unpacking the micro-foundations of organisational paradoxes with a theoretical model that includes management and strategy lenses that help explore individuals' varied approaches to tensions. Therefore, a future research agenda is needed that enriches a meta-theory of paradox by revisiting such underdeveloped themes as *relationships* within paradoxes, *individual approaches*, and *dynamics* to improve our understanding of the rich and diverse conceptual roots of organisational paradox (Schad et al., 2016; Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis, and Tracey, 2017).

Organisational paradoxes require un-bundling of complexities. Often the use of a simple and parsimonious singular theoretical lens is not sufficient to explore the challenges. This is especially true of emerging market multinational enterprises (EMNEs), where the nature and extent of challenges and paradoxes are contextually embedded. This requires the researcher to employ a rich and theoretical elegant framework that is mutually reinforcing and allows a deeper understanding of the problem. Our distinctive contribution, therefore, lies in analysing strategic dualities at the interface of three theoretical lenses of high-performance work systems (HPWS), organisational development (OD) and socio-technical systems (STS). We show how an EMNE resolves tensions by creating an agile and ambidextrous context for managing strategic dualities. Multinational enterprises (MNEs) and EMNEs have to deal with dualities, such as managing global integration and local responsiveness (Birkinshaw, Crilly, Bouquet and Lee, 2016) through the effective coordination between the subsidiary and headquarter operations. Some of these critical dualities that EMNEs are faced with include the simultaneous pursuit of managing exploratory and exploitative learning, local responsiveness with global

integration, flexibility versus efficiency and formal versus informal organisations (Adler et al., 1999; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Gulati and Puranam, 2009; March, 1991; Malik, Sinha, Pereira and Rowley, 2019; Prahalad and Doz, 1987; Rosenzweig, 2006).

The literature notes one such duality, namely organisational ambidexterity (OA), as particularly important to a firm's source of sustained competitive advantage (Gupta, Smith, and Shalley, 2006; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004; Raisch, 2008; Raisch, Birkinshaw, Probst and Tushman 2009; Taylor and Helfat, 2009; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). In general, the OA literature conceptualises exploration and exploitation as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable processes and suggests structural, contextual or temporal strategies for creating an ambidextrous context. Nevertheless, Papachroni, Heracleous and Paroutis (2015) argue that by observing ambidexterity through the lens of paradox theory, we can move beyond the separation-oriented prescriptions toward synthesis or transcendence of paradoxical poles but also towards a longitudinal investigation of how paradoxical poles dynamically interrelate over time.

Rather strikingly, even though conflicts stemming from the pursuit of agility and ambidexterity are well documented in the literature (e.g., Bodwell and Chermack, 2010; García-Granero, Fernández-Mesa, Jansen, and Vega-Jurado, 2018; Zimmermann, Raisch, and Birkinshaw, 2015), what remains largely unexplored is how these tensions are interpreted and managed by the actors themselves (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2016). Moreover, the top management team leadership role is critical in enabling tensions to become salient for their respective lower-level managers when there are initial differences in how tensions are interpreted across various levels within an organisation dealing with ambidexterity-related conflicting demands (Knight and Paroutis, 2017).

Further, research on strategic human resource management (SHRM) and OA has assumed that operational managers who pursue both exploratory and exploitative activities lack in-depth insights on how the HR practices may facilitate operational manager ambidexterity and how their agility and ambidextrous approaches may result in OA (Mom, Chang, Cholakova, and Jansen, 2019). Recent evidence from China (see Chen, Tang, Lee Cooke, and Jin, 2016) found that top management team effectiveness partially mediates the effect of the executive SHRM system on OA, and knowledge-sharing intensity from middle managers to top management teams strengthens the effect of the SHRM system on OA. Chang (2015) examined the process linking HPWS and OA both at the unit and firm-level of analyses by integrating SHRM, human capital and social capital perspectives. The study concluded that firm-level HPWS were positively related to unit-level employee human capital, and unit-level

employee human capital partially mediated the relationship between firm-level HPWS and unit OA. Firm-level social climate moderated the impact of firm-level HPWS on unit OA through unit-level employee human capital. Revealing the effects, mentioned above, of firm-level HPWS and mediating mechanisms and identifying boundary conditions for pursuing unit-level OA provides novel insights (Chang, 2015) and stimulates further empirical studies on this topic.

Accordingly, this paper aims to capture how OD interventions can embed an agile and ambidextrous set of values and orientation for an organisation as it responds to external (and internal) changes. More specifically, our longitudinal case study captures and explains how OD was used as a mechanism to achieve a balance between managerialistic and humanistic orientation whilst simultaneously attempting to achieve its strategic objectives over time. The rationale for focussing on the Indian information technology-business process outsourcing (IT-BPO) context, as a high growth industry, which is also reflective of the Indian business environment (Cappelli et al., 2010; Kumar et al., 2009), identifies several SHRM challenges that persist (Pereira and Malik, 2015; Malik and Rowley, 2015). These SHRM challenges can be resolved by developing meso-level organisational capabilities critical for managing dualities and growth (see, e.g. Athreye, 2005; Malik Sinha and Blumenfeld, 2012, Malik and Blumenfeld, 2012; Malik and Nilakant, 2015).

Recent research has examined how various management and leadership practices support the management of strategic dualities, including through the creation of an agile and ambidextrous context at multiple organisational levels (Ahammad, Lee, Malul and Shoham, 2015; e Cunha et al., 2020; Junni, Sarala, Tarba, Liu and Cooper, 2015; Malik, Pereira and Tarba, 2019; Malik, Sinha, Pereira and Rowley, 2019). However, it is not clear to what extent HRM practices support creating an ambidextrous context and leads to multiple-level OD interventions for managing strategic dualities. More specifically, little research exists on the consequences of multiple-level OD interventions by adopting HRM and HPWS in Indian IT-BPO firms? Further, little understanding exists of how the Indian IT-BPO firms were supported by OD, during the pre-and post-global financial crisis eras? Scholars have highlighted the importance of leadership and HRM practices in managing the adverse impacts firms face during a significant crisis, such as the global financial crisis (Malik, 2017; Malik and Sanders, 2021). However, what is still not clear in the literature and what forms the core research question of this study is: *why and how this Indian IT-BPO deployed OD interventions in managing strategic dualities during challenging times of uncertainty?* To this end, this study offers new insights into the rationale for employing such strategies and why and how such an

approach is critical to delivering sustainable levels of growth, especially in times of economic crisis.

This study's distinctive contribution lies in explaining how strategic agility, OA and performance consequences are achieved through a culture of HPWPs and OD interventions in EMNEs. While strategic HRM approaches have been noted as a key source of sustained competitive advantage and growth (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Boxall and Purcell, 2003; Boxall and Macky, 2009; Budhwar et al., 2006a, b; Guest et al., 2003; Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995; Lawler, 1986; Malik, 2018; Pfeffer, 1994, 1998; Walton, 1985), OD focuses on improving the capacity and effectiveness (Beckhard, 1969; CIPD, 2009; Cummings and Worley, 1997; Malik and Rowley, 2015; George, 2015). No research connects OD interventions for managing strategic dualities using strategic agility and ambidextrous context, to the best of our knowledge.

We are employing an integrative theoretical approach by including the theoretical lenses of HPWS, OD, and STS to guide our research and report the findings from a five-year longitudinal case study, incorporating multiple OD interventions. The interventions were part of the organisation's broader HPWS strategy. Our findings suggest that OD should not be studied in isolation but in a more holistic and integrated manner. In doing so, we unbundle the micro-foundational aspects such as agility and OA to achieve performance effectiveness. In what follows, the relevant literature is reviewed, thus forming a guiding theoretical framework for subsequent analysis. After that, the case study organisation context is discussed, followed by the methodology used, the findings and discussion and a conclusion.

Literature review

We provide a further rationale for the research context in studying strategic agility and ambidexterity within a performance context in EMNEs, followed by a review of HPWS literature, agility, ambidexterity and OD practices. *First*, India remains the top choice among various offshoring destinations for western client firms (Lahiri, Kedia and Mukherjee, 2012; Luo et al., 2010; Zaheer et al., 2009). *Second*, the Indian IT-BPO industry has evolved from low-value-added services (e.g., call centres) to high-value-added knowledge-based services. *Finally*, as the most complex and dynamic economies, India-based studies add value to the global business environment's overall understanding (Pereira and Scott, 2015).

HPWS, OD, Strategic Agility, Organisational Ambidexterity and Performance

People management or employment practices in high performing work systems/practices (HPWS/P) tradition has a diverse set of classifications such as HPWP (e.g. Bohlander and Snell 2007; Boxall and Macky 2009, Boxall and Purcell, 2003; Guest, 2011), and HPWS as composed of HPWPs (Bae et al., 2011; Heffernan, Harney, Cafferkey and Dundon, 2011). The HPWS literature, in the main, focuses on how HR practices increase performance (e.g. Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994; 1998) through a variety of approaches such as Pfeffer's (1994) sixteen HPWPs or High commitment management (HCM) or high commitment employment practices by Walton, (1985) and Wood and Albanese (1995). The fundamental premise of these alternative approaches is that the identified practices that affect organisational commitment, which in turn, influences organisational performance. Also seen as an ingredient of the 'high performance' theory is the high involvement management (HIM) or the high- involvement work practices (Lawler, 1986). The fundamental emphasis here is towards enlarging employees' skills and knowledge, information sharing, flexible job designs and so on. Still other variants such as 'Alternative Work Practices' (AWP) (e.g. Godard, 2001), participatory practices constituting alternative job designs and practices allow employees freedom to design their work. Such practices include- work teams, job enrichment, job rotation, quality circles or problem-solving groups, cross training, and training in problem solving (Boxall and Macky, 2007; Godard, 2004). 'Innovative Work Practices' (IWP) (Guthrie, 2001), focus on practices that enhance discretionary behaviour among employees and thus lead to innovative work behaviour in the workplace through practices such as cross-training, flexible job designs, training in problem solving, decentralised decision making, teams (e.g. Guest, Conway, Michie, and Sheehan, 2003).

Most HPWSs studies employ ex-post facto quantitative designs and large scale industry wide surveys. There is an ongoing call for in-depth, qualitative case-studies of HPWSs (e.g. Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Boxall and Mackay, 2009; Guest, 2011; Tregaskis, Daniels, Glover, Butler and Meyer, 2013), but few exist. Limitations in quantitative studies highlight problems such as single informant and ignoring a 'broader range of outcome variables' (Truss, 2001: 1121). Consequently, there is a gap in the literature on why HPWSs are incorporated, decisions for their incorporation, and the role of HR and HR professionals in implementing HPWPs (Glover and Butler, 2012), alongside the role/influence of senior management, leadership and line. Also, little is known 'about the processes by which these plans and policies come to be implemented' (Hutchinson, Purcell and Kinnie, 2000: 63). Thus, adopting qualitative research design into looking at OD's development, over time, seems apparent and timely. The impact of technology and the environment on business, employee and team efficiency, and

productivity are often confounded. Researchers suggest a need for a ‘fit’ between different existing subsystems such as the technical, social and environmental subsystems, which together makes up an organisation (see e.g. Clegg, 2000; Mumford, 1995). For example, the technical subsystem comprises the devices and techniques needed to transform inputs into outputs, such that there is an increase in the organisation’s economic performance. The social system, on the other hand, for example, comprises the employees (at all levels), its work and project teams, the individual and team knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and needs they bring to the work environment as well as the HR system and control (managerial) structures that exist in the organisation. Similarly, customers, suppliers, rules and regulations, formal and informal, who govern the relations of the organisation to society at large, come under the environmental subsystem.

Strategic Agility, Organisational Ambidexterity and Performance

While there is a growing body of literature that maintains that OA is increasingly important for attaining the sustained competitive advantage of firms and enhancing their performance (Birkinshaw, Zimmermann, and Raisch, 2016; Gupta, Smith, and Shalley, 2006; Luger, Raisch, and Schimmer, 2018; O’Reilly and Tushman, 2004; Raisch, 2008; Raisch et al., 2009; Taylor and Helfat, 2009; Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996; Zimmermann and Birkinshaw, 2016), empirical studies have been conducted in a wide variety of industries and methodological settings, the empirical results have been mixed. This necessitates a need to reveal some of the other influences by providing a more fine-grained understanding of the effects of OA on firm performance (Junni, Sarala, Taras, and Tarba, 2013; Wilden, Hohberger, Devinney, and Lavie, 2018).

Recently the OA phenomenon as an important dynamic capability in the globalisation of the MNE started receiving growing scholarly attention in the international business literature (Debellis et al., 2020; Rao-Nicholson, Khan, and Stokes, 2016; Rao-Nicholson, Khan, Akhtar, and Merchant, 2016; Rao-Nicholson, Khan, Akhtar, and Tarba, 2016; Shams et al., 2020; Vahlne, and Jonsson, 2017). As indicated by Hsu, Lien, and Chen (2013), conventional international business theories underscore the importance and implications of a firm’s exploitative strategy, but the unprecedented competitive nature of contemporary business necessitates the simultaneous execution of exploitation and exploration activities that promotes a firm’s performance (see also Vecchiato, 2015). For example, the process of digitilisation is seen as a major innovation in disrupting technologies, which has created transformative companies as well as enabled firms to internationalise (Chan, Teoh, Yeow, and Pan, 2019;

Hinings, B., Gegenhuber, T., & Greenwood, 2018; Linstone and Phillips, 2013). Related to this is the relationship between firm agility and the internet of things (IoT), which has been another focus of the recent literature (Akhtar, Khan, Tarba, and Jayawickrama, 2018; Bresciani, Ferraris, and Del Giudice, 2018). In this sense, investigating the significant yet unclear role of domestic market activities for the internationalising firm through the theoretical lens of agility and ambidexterity, the findings of Karafyllia and Zucchella (2017) uncover how firms leverage the intrinsic organisational synergies and manage the tensions resulting from the interplay between exploitation–exploration while operating in the domestic and international markets.

The simultaneous pursuit of dual modes of learning, balancing efficiency with flexibility and adaptability is akin to the concept of strategic agility. Lu and Ramamurthy (2011) argue that inherent in an ambidextrous organisation is an aspect of agility as for firms to be able to balance a duality they have to demonstrate strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity and leadership unity in making decisive actions when and to what extent they must engage in exploration and exploitation. The ability to deploy different learning resources for different activities is also highlighted by Zain et al. (2005), highlighting that agility's resource fluidity aspect is central for any ambidextrous firm. Still others have noted that ambidextrous firms are in essence agile firms (Lubatkin et al., 2006; Rialti et al., 2016). Akin to ambidextrous organisations, strategic agility also requires managing a duality of market-capitalising agility (responding fast to changing market needs by offering new services and products) and operational-adjustment agility (be able to cope with the new demands and changes, for example, in its product/service portfolio). Rialti et al. (2018) argue that as environmental dynamism increases, ambidextrous firms leverage their dual learning modes and a firm's operational and market agility, noted above is critical in informing helping ambidextrous firms to benefit from a firm's dualities of strategic agility (Lu and Ramamurthy, 2011; Vrontis *et al.*, 2017). Collectively these two serve as dynamic capabilities that are critical for a firm's overall performance. The literature on both strategic agility and OA have also identified HPWS/P bundles as its antecedents as HRM practices create a context for ambidexterity and to practice strategic agility. Such capabilities are increasingly relevant for IT and BPO firms who face disruption and change in the digital offerings.

OD and Performance

Indian IT-BPOs are knowledge intensive firms that depend on HR for delivery. Thus, in the context of the socio-technical approach, 'fit' is to be achieved by a design or change process aiming at the synergy and joint optimisation of these collective subsystems (Mumford, 2003).

Therefore, any design or change redesign must seek to impact each subsystem on the other and must aim to achieve greater outcomes by warranting that all the subsystems are working in synergy. Organisational development is one such design and/or redesign strategy that could accomplish this objective. It is a 'planned and systematic approach to enabling sustained organisation performance through the involvement of its people' (CIPD, 2009). Earlier characterisation also for example, Beckhard (1969, p 9) defined OD as, "an effort planned, organisation-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organisation effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organisation's 'processes', using behavioral-science knowledge". Common themes of OD are: use of a "behavioural sciences" paradigm; 'systematic' and 'planned' approaches to change; and a focus on improved 'firm/organisation performance'. OD can thus be linked to the premise of HPWSs as well as the socio-technical paradigm, in that they both concern people and planning systematic approaches and changes for people working for them; and this effort invariably should lead to improved firm performance.

Studies, such as by Cherns (1976); Clegg (2000); Mumford (1995); and Mumford (2003) portray how socio-technical principles can be implemented. In the context of and within the field of 'management information systems' (MIS), Mumford (2003) for example, use the 'Effective Technical and Human Implementation of Computer-based Systems' (ETHICS) approach. According to Mumford (2003), ETHICS has three objectives related to the management of change. First, it seeks to legitimate a value position in which the future users of computer systems at all organisational levels play a major part in the design of these systems. The second objective is to enable groups/teams concerned with the design of computer systems to set specific job satisfaction objectives in addition to the usual technical and operational objectives. The third objective is to ensure that a compatible, well-functioning organisational system surrounds any new technical system. Mumford (1995; 2003) was thus interested in change and the way it is reflected in society and organisations. She established that change as a principle pervades modern societies and organisations, but at the same time, she believed that change is not something that must be accepted passively but that it should be embraced. Change must 'always be accepted by the participants' (Mumford and Ward, 1968: 148). Furthermore, management 'is essentially problem-solving in a complex and changing environment' (Mumford and Beekman, 1994: 159) and hence, 'socio-technical systems design...wants to replace tight controls, bureaucracy and stress with an organisation and technology that enhances human freedom, democracy and creativity' (Mumford, 2003: 262).

However, within the socio-technical paradigm, as is with the HPWSs, OA and the OD paradigms, there seems to be a conflicting set of value systems (Land, 2000). On the one hand, there is a belief in the importance of humanistic principles' where the main task is to enhance the quality of working life and the employee and team's job satisfaction. In turn, achieving these objectives will lead to enhanced productivity and yield greater value to the organisation. On the other hand, the socio-technical paradigm, HPWS and OA, generally reflect managerial values. Managing the above dualities along with other business dualities such as work in a pre- and post-GFC era is a difficult enterprise. Thus, socio-technical principles are merely seen as instruments for achieving primarily economic objectives, in sharp contrast to OD's humanistic objectives that have no value in themselves but if their achievement produces a better performance from employees and teams, the fulfilment of the economic objectives. In summary, there seems to be a link between the paradigms of HPWSs, OD, OA and STS, both from a 'humanistic' and a 'managerialistic' value systems viewpoint. We argue, that effectively balancing these dualities can lead to the creation of an agile and ambidextrous context, which is critical in achieving competitive advantage, as is depicted in figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Methodology

For the sake of anonymity, the case organisation is hereinafter referred to as 'Alpha'. Alpha is a critical case (Yin, 2009) as it is a major Indian-owned conglomerate, which also owns one of the largest global outsourcing firm, as part of its varied portfolio of businesses. It has a disproportionate influence within the Indian IT/IT-BPO industry. As part of a larger Indian conglomerate for many years, its role makes Alpha an important case study organisation. It is one of India's main indigenous IT-BPO providers that has grown rapidly. As of 2011, it employed close to 200,000 employees from over thirty nationalities. With offices in forty-two countries, Alpha offers information technology consulting, IT-BPO services to clients across fifty-five countries. Most of its revenues are from the UK and USA from the banking, financial services, and insurance industries.

As a pioneer of the flexible global delivery model for IT services, Alpha focuses on delivering technology-led business solutions to its international customers across varied industries. Alpha aims to remain within the global top ten IT services companies through highly skilled resources from the Indian labour market (Budhwar and Varma, 2010; Pereira and Scott,

2015). During our study, which lasted five years (2006-2011), Alpha frequently changed its approach towards being a *global player* in the global market when faced with challenging uncertain periods. To achieve this, Alpha reorganised the structure of its global operations to implement a *customer-centric* and *integrated approach* in anticipation of avoiding risk factors arising from the global financial crisis.

Furthermore, a distinct advantage of the approach for this study, in substituting quality and depth of data for quantity of cases, concerns the unusual opportunities afforded in this case to be able to study over such a long period within the firm at a pivotal time within the fortunes of the Indian IT-BPO sector. Alpha delivers ‘knowledge work’ within the realm of ‘knowledge-intensive firms’ (KIFs) (Davenport, 2005). Moreover, these employees are knowledge workers. One of the sites we selected was Alpha’s headquarters in Mumbai, which is also India’s financial capital, and the second site was the company’s office in Bangalore, which often referred to as India’s Silicon Valley Capital. In essence, in selecting these sites, we tried to capture insights from a diverse set of respondents, including those involved in strategic planning and those associated with operational issues. We collected data using semi-structured interviews from individual respondents, focused groups, and non-participant observation of numerous meetings. Overall, we visited the two sites over ten times during the five years. Table 1 provides an overview of the schedule for primary data collected by three methods.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Data analysis

The processual approach to data analysis focussed on changes over time (Pettigrew, 1990; 1997; 2012). Following Pettigrew (1997: 338), ‘process’ here means ‘a sequence of individual and collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time in context’ to enable a widening of the interpretations through the presentation of complex and contextualised change data (Dawson, 1997). Pettigrew (1997: 339) identifies three steps, when it comes to processual analysis of longitudinal data. *First*, search for ‘patterns in the process’ and comparing the shape, character and incidence of patterns in different cases. *Second*, searching the underlying mechanisms, which shape the observed patterns. *Third*, an assessment of ‘embeddedness’ which studies the extent to which patterns across different levels of analysis; an assessment of the ‘temporal interconnectedness (i.e. studying processes in past, present and future time); after that, an examination of the context of actions; next, ‘a search for holistic rather than linear explanations of the process; and lastly, an examination of the process concerning an explanation of outcomes. Following the above steps generated descriptive historical accounts

concerning the two-time phases. After that, the analysis brought out the changes over time in self-managed teams through the firms' OD and HPWSs strategies, as Doz (2011: 583) argues that qualitative research in 'international business' is rare and hence:

'Qualitative research is uniquely suited to "opening the black box" of organisational processes, the "how", "who" and "why" of individual and collective organised action as it unfolds over time in context'.

Cycles of both induction and deduction were utilised (Pettigrew, 1997: 343) reflecting a continuous interplay between 'academic pre-conceptualisation (based on a comprehensive knowledge of the area under study) and detailed empirical descriptions of emerging themes and topics' (Dawson, 1997: 390), from which new themes were refined and interpretations developed. The intention was to gain an appreciation of the dynamic internal and external contexts the organisation, to consider issues of organisational adoption, change, innovation, and redesign of OD strategies to develop a better understanding of how Alpha attempted to remain strategically agile and ambidextrous, which is the overarching focus of our analysis. The 'core question' of this research thus investigated the role of OD strategies, as part of HPWS in embedding an agile and ambidextrous context. 'Early pattern recognition' led to further related themes and questions which overlapped with deductive themes. These also (in) formed the themes which evolved through 'early writing'. This in turn led to 'disconfirmation and verification' of the patterns and themes emerging from the first phase. The next step as Pettigrew (1997) describes was 'elaborated themes and questions' framed for 'further data collection' and for phase two of the research. This further led to 'additional pattern recognition across more case samples' emerging from the second phase and 'comparative analysis' of the first and second phases and thus (in) formed 'refined study vocabulary and research questions' for the discussion of our two phases. Thus, this research uses Pettigrew's framework and in doing so it keeps the spirit of Pettigrew's (1997: 344) central tenet that 'it is in this constantly iterating cycle of deduction and induction that the real creative process of the research takes place'.

Finally, the data from observations was treated differently than the data collected through interviews and focus groups. Extensive notes were taken through observations on the ten visits to Alpha, over five years. Thus, this led to data triangulation alongside interviews and focus group data, as observational data was linked to the other data whilst themes were coded and expanded after each set of analysis, thus integrating the data stemming from different methods. Thus, data and results through the first two approaches' i.e. interviews and focus groups were

illustrative of how managers perceived the change through OD and not necessarily on how OD evolved within the company. However, observational data triangulated and brought out aspects of the evolution.

Findings

We organise our findings under three sections. First, we provide an overview of OD interventions at Alpha, followed by analysing our overarching objectives and investigating implications of two major and distinct OD initiatives the company implemented between 2006 – 2011 to embed strategic agility in the organisation to respond to two distinct environmental conditions.

Organisation Development at Alpha

The first decade of the millennium presented two distinct challenges to Alpha. The company experienced rapid growth in the international market, primarily in the USA and Europe, until the 2006-07, and by the end of the millennium, it faced a contrasting business environment due to the impending financial crisis (2008-11). Alpha designed and implemented two OD interventions to remain agile in the two-contrasting business environment. During the rapid growth and expansion period, Alpha was struggling to balance dualities in what it calls its internal and external ‘Voices’: i.e. Voices of *Customer*, *Technology*, *Strategy*, *Employee* and *Team*. This aspect can be related to the socio-technical literature on ‘fit’ between the ‘technical’, ‘social’ and ‘environmental’ subsystems (e.g. Clegg, 2000; Mumford, 1995; 2003). Respondents reported ‘competitive advantage’ and ‘sustainability’ as the two critical concerns for Alpha’s survival and success. In this backdrop, the OD interventions, which Alpha designed and implemented at two different points in time in responding to and anticipating changes in the dynamic environment, were instrumental in embedding strategic agility in the organisation’s system in general and within its processes and practices in particular. Our respondents attributed these OD interventions to have contributed to reviewing and redefining Alpha’s relationship with its broader environment, markets, and key internal and external stakeholders. Evidence also suggests that this was achieved through a strategy of encouraging change within the overall HPWSs strategy.

During the period of this research, Alpha grew as the largest Indian software company delivering on its vision of being in the global ‘top ten’. Observational notes from the data also point towards Alpha’s movement, through its activities, towards being pioneers in the industry. However, Alpha was also, at the start of this research, grappling with concerns about its

operational paradigm. This led its management to initiate several OD interventions that would guide the organisation toward greater productivity and competitiveness. The following findings identify the reasons for, how Alpha initiated the effectiveness and ‘fit’ of several OD interventions, over the three phases of the research.

Phase One – PROPEL (Individual and Group Level Intervention).

The first phase relates to a period from May 2006 to January 2008. During this phase, Alpha grew from 45,714 employees in 2005 to 111,407 in 2008. Respondents at Alpha claimed that OD interventions, overseen by the HR, were instrumental in enhancing ‘value’ to the customer through ‘value’ for its employees and teams. The interventions were primarily designed to respond to the critical challenges the Alpha was facing in the backdrop of its exponential growth over the preceding years. And thus were intended to make the organisation more agile as it expands and grows rapidly. According to a senior manager:

‘...in terms of the relationship value card for the relationship...there was a fallout of the analysis of tensions existing in the four dimensions as represented by the voices of the customer, strategy, employee, team and technology. Thus...we eh...a tool called “value card” was used to investigate and analyse the problems faced by the relationships in relation to these tensions and to arrive at workable solutions to the identified problems...all within the designated timeframes. Thus, the value card helped us to effectively capture and track this through several subsequent steps and processes’. (Chief HR manager, Bangalore, Phase 1, August 2007)

The HR team designed a specific organisation wide OD initiative, aptly named PROPEL, to explore ways for Alpha to enhance ‘value’ to its customer by creating ‘value’ for its employees and teams. Thus, PROPEL was conceptualised an organisational intervention to embed strategic agility and ambidexterity by simultaneously focusing on standardised routines of developing core competencies and balancing it with experimentation and improvisation (or innovation). The essence of PROPEL was highlighted by one of senior managers:

“PROPEL was introduced as a revolutionary intervention with the dual objectives of helping in facilitating the exchange of ideas and helping in immediate problem solving, while also encouraging bonding and self-development among and within teams...so that team-working became more enjoyable and at the same time fruitful...”. (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 1, December 2007)

This dedicated effort to embed agility in the organisation also entailed creating this new culture that embraces more humanistic and less managerialistic approach (Land, 2000) in how the Alpha functioned. According to the Bangalore based Chief HR Manager of Alpha:

‘Since we are an old organisation, we have old set ways of doing things. We felt that by and large employees tended to go straight by the book...for example, though Dr DeBono’s techniques were introduced and employees trained on these techniques to encourage innovation, there was still a need to scale up on perceived rewards for experimentation, both individually and for teams...’. (Chief HR manager, Bangalore, Phase 1, August 2007).

Thus, the OD intervention / initiative, seen through the lens of agility and ambidexterity, included critical objectives that the firm aimed to achieve. At a functional level, it recognised and encouraged the need for greater knowledge sharing and experimentation and improvisation (or innovation) (Doz and Kosonen, 2010; Hadida et al., 2015; e Cunha et al., 2020). According to a manager:

‘Knowledge sharing was very head office and centre-oriented, and although, informally, several best practices were spread by interaction and word-of-mouth, we were yet to evolve a formal system which would capture these for ease of duplication across projects. For example, multiple centres, teams and multiple projects within the same centre and teams ended up resolving the same sort of issues, and so this resulted in replication and in avoidable rework...teams needed to be aware of what each did...’ (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 1, November 2006)

To achieve this objective, Alpha adopted various inter-group / team coordination and knowledge sharing initiatives. Extant literature has identified knowledge sharing as a key mechanism for sharing both existing and new knowledge within teams and individuals, thus supporting the business need of strategic agility and ambidexterity at an intra-firm as well as, at an inter-firm level (Im and Rai, 2008; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008). Beyond enhancing practices for knowledge sharing within the organisation, at a deeper value / orientation level, PROPEL was also an attempt to create a balance between the old values (managerialistic approach) that underpinned the exponential growth of Alpha and the new set of values that it needs to embrace (humanistic approach) to continue in the growth path in the new environment. The humanist approach was central to consider employees as ‘knowledge workers’ and knowledge sharing as a not merely ‘headquartered centric’. Thus, creating a balance between the humanistic and managerialist approach was critical to embed and thus achieve strategic agility at operational / functional level.

Alpha’s senior management team recognised the need to design different reward and recognition structures to motivate its associates and encourage self-developed and managed

teams. The use of different support mechanisms for effectiveness of self-managed teams to deal with strategic dualities is noted in extant literature (Lubatkin *et al.*, 2006; Liu, and Leitner, 2012; also see Doz, 2020). This recognition for a different reward structure in Alpha was evident from the following quote:

‘The performance and reward structures and processes at Alpha is at this point in time, primarily focusing on individual people and performance and we are yet to explore the institutionalisation of teams and team-based rewards at the organisational level. We felt this was needed to be done...’ (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 1, November 2006)

In Table 2, we provide an overview of the key aspects underpinning PROPEL.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Thus, PROPEL was not merely an OD initiative in isolation rather it was a response to the need for a new change oriented ‘culture’ encouraged sharing of knowledge, ownership of work and empowerment to change. It also reflects the recognition that Alpha designed it and implemented it as to create a system that can embed and foster strategic agility and empower employees at functional / operational levels (Junni *et al.*, 2015; Wang and Rafiq, 2014; e Cunha *et al.*, 2020). Our observational notes also validate the practice of ‘valuing employees’ and self-managed teams were institutionalised through establishing processes that enable and enhance individual performance, which led to empowered project teams. Issue based mentoring was facilitated, with ‘camps’ and ‘confluences’ as enabling frameworks (terms used by Alpha) - While ‘confluences’ invested in personal transformation for the employee, ‘camps’ invested in improving the workspace. In Table 3, we summarise the key findings pertaining to design and implementation of PROPEL.

(Insert Table 3 here)

Phase Two: Darpan (System and Organisational Level Strategic Interventions)

The second phase relates to a period from September 2008 to July 2011 During this phase, Alpha grew from around 110,000 employees in 2008 to 200,000 in 2011. Also, at this point of time its existing business models were challenged and there was a greater need to balance its strategic dualities of internal (managerial agency) and external (client stakeholders) groups. Unlike Phase one, which followed the period of exponential growth, Phase two took place in the backdrop of the initial stages of the global recession following the financial crisis. The

context of the impending global recession provided an opportunity for Alpha '*...for introspection and reflection*' (Chief HR manager, interview, Mumbai, phase 2, June 2009).

This significant change in the operating environment underpinned the six themes pertaining to a set of OD interventions, which Alpha named as 'Darpan'. Darpan, in Hindi, means 'mirror' and the overall emphasis of the OD initiatives was to encourage reflection on Alpha's strategy, organisational processes and systems. Thus, the need for reflection and improvement on its OD interventions and overall strategy, was achieved through a survey 'Darpan', which translates to (mirroring our image) was seen to be widely accepted across the large organisation, as it looked at overall expectations of its associates. This was done at a senior leadership level to reflect on how well were their current internal practices were delivering are and whether they are in touch with the changing market (external/client) expectations.

'We needed to know if we were doing the right thing...with this aggressive expansion and dispersion of ever-growing associate strength...all over- the ...globally... in the relationship, communication or the lack of it, had emerged as one of the biggest drawbacks in employee and team motivation and managerial decision-making. In this context, an associate satisfaction survey at relationship level called Darpan was initiated, with the objective to "reflect and improve" at the relationship level through a better understanding of the explicit and implicit expectations of associates and teams'. (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 3, April 2011)

The essence of Darpan was to undertake a through 'scenario building', and exploring ways to attain collective transformation of what Alpha called 'dreams' and 'concerns' into response capabilities. Continuous 'scanning of the environment' for opportunities and threats was proactively looked at, to collectively map the business domain of Alpha. The overarching objective of Darpan, was to create space for reflecting and reviewing Alpha's strategy in an environment that was fundamentally different to the one wherein it had designed and implemented PROPEL. In essence, Darpan was designed and implemented to embed strategic ability to respond in an environment that was unpredictable due to impending recession (Ahammad et al., 2020; Weber and Tarba, 2014). Thus, taking stock of current strengths and capabilities and exploring new ideas for strategic flexibility and opportunity formed the focus of this phase of OD interventions. It was envisaged that the ability to explore the duality of new managing the current and exploring future strategic directions, in a period of uncertainty, would enable Alpha to navigate uncharted waters.

'Well...an internal organisation workshop was conducted with the top management for scenario building. This program focused at a larger level, on the slogan- "The Alpha that can be". The idea was well...to challenge the traditional and eh conventional ways of thinking and to give shape to the key drivers of change

through realistic listening and dialoguing...well communicating...and these workshops were followed by eh dissemination and communication of the scenarios with teams in order to develop a new language in the organisation, consistent with well thought out future scenarios...so in essence we followed scenario management...'. (Chief HR manager, Bangalore, Phase 2, January 2009).

Engaging in critically mapping various scenarios was important due to increasing pressures from clients and increased competition globally meant that Alpha had to look at what and how much work it needed to take up:

'There was a continuing tension at Alpha, for a focus...should we concentrate on...between generating revenues and organising strategically...or on the basis of technology and business areas...should we be impacting selectivity in projects that we accepted and assigning it to respective teams...? There was also pressure from customers on schedules ... which was resulting in faster delivery and hence...a snowballing effect into further pressure on future schedules. We had to change this...' (Chief HR manager, Bangalore, Phase 3, April, 2011)

Scenario planning and what Alpha would aspire to achieve was critical for the organisation to pursue short term goals without sacrificing long term focus. **Attaining a balance between achieving short-term goals in the context of long-term focus and aspiration is an evidence of the Alpha's efforts to develop and maintain strategic agility..**

This is put across succinctly by the following respondent:

'It is with any large organisation...the pressure to retain its strong globally growing position was leading Alpha to tend towards short-term revenues, and relatively lesser efforts were being put into medium and long term markets and activities ...well the usual...products and building up knowledge, teams etc...Though Alpha built relationships with individual customers, from a HRM point of view, relationship managers largely tended to focus on obtaining short-term projects...there was lesser focus and investment on aligning to long-term objectives of customers...Thus our approach, by and large, was of reactive project management and we were yet to promote the approach of promoting proactive solutions for the customer'. (Chief HR manager, Bangalore, Phase 2, June 2009)

Darpan (or OD) was actively pursued by Alpha to identify key challenges – environmental and organisational – that the company would face as it aims to become agile and ambidextrous. This emphasis was confirmed by another manager from Mumbai:

'...it was a resultant...of the workshops, several representatives of senior management worked on building scenarios as for e.g. on Alpha tools and approach to high end consulting etc....We looked at 'what we were and what we wished to be', eh...our competition, changes and challenges with regard to our business models, clients, ex-employees, motivated teams, technologies, products and support function etc.'. Thereafter, the factors that would facilitate the desired

change and focuses that needed to be redefined were clearly laid down, focussed upon and then acted upon....' (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 2, June 2009)

The workshops highlighted the need for Alpha to systematically engage in brand building, particularly highlighting it as an attractive place for potential employees to pursue a career. Interestingly, for an organisation as old as Alpha was, the corporate brand building had never been undertaken before. However, becoming and being viewed as an attractive organisation for IT professionals, was deemed necessary in the emerging environment.

'...branding and image building strategies were not yet an area of focus...though we had a global brand presence... and, in a way... this affected the sense of pride of employees and project teams. For example, among educational institutions, where we dealt with faculty and students...eh...this meant greater difficulty in terms of attracting quality talent, which further aggravated stress among the few key performers in the organisation...who also spread the word...whether good or bad...'. (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 2, September 2008)

Another set of OD activity, under 'Darpan' involved continued embedding and institutionalisation of knowledge sharing initiatives that were developed during PROPEL. Goal alignment through cascading of the 'Balanced Score Card' concept was developed with the aim to translate learning from knowledge sharing to concrete actions:

'...as you know, in the interest of better alignment, a need was felt to re-look at a few of Alpha's organisational processes and systems, as...eh... for instance, the performance management and appraisal system at Alpha. Workshops such as Teach-Train-Transfer that concentrated on goal alignment and teams were conducted, with help from expert OD consultants...with the aim to build the context, to think through goal setting at Alpha...well...with a systems perspective to goal alignment and to explore means of institutionalising goal-oriented team-based performance management within the organisation'. (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 2, September 2008)

Further evidence of institutionalisation of developments from Phase One was also reflected in pursuing of the strategy of 'job rotation' in the self-managed teams, where were organised around the principle of 'specialisation', so that these could become High Performance teams. The continued focus on team-based approach to organise work and deliver results were also observed in this phase.

'Over time, there was a diffusion of expertise and we were yet to focus on building strategic expertise in individual centres and expert project teams...it was frustrating... associates were rotated across domains, teams and skills in the interest of a learning and knowledge sharing and gaining ability as well as for meeting requirements...so really we were multitasking...and in a sense, there was heightened focus on our OD ...voice of the customer, in comparison to the voice of employee...and team'. (Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 2, September 2008)

Clearly dynamic and uncertainly in the operational environment that underpinned the changing business needs, led Alpha to initiate OD interventions. These OD interventions, PROPEL and subsequently Darpan, aimed to create conditions that would foster agility and ambidexterity in the organisation. In the process, the company persistently pushed self-imposed boundaries, most of which had a historical bearing, and limitations through challenging organisational boundaries and limitations constantly. Through repeated engagement, senior managers in Alpha challenged para-dynamic assumptions of businesses at a content (what we currently do), process (how we currently do it), and premise (why we currently do it) levels. This process, critically, allowed for emancipatory learning to emerge. Such an approach allowed Alpha to deal with the duality of dialectic and paradoxical thinking, which helped it frame new solutions to accommodate multiple voices and manage in times of a slowdown. This was explained by a respondent:

‘We have done well for ourselves...overall...the AEP [Account excellence programme] was modelled on the lines of the famous Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and our own Alpha Business Excellence Model...this you know, touches upon seven key categories such as...eh.... leadership and team-working, strategic planning, customer and market focus...it’s then measurement I think...and then analysis and KM [Knowledge Management], then a HR focus, PM [Process Management] and one more...let me see...business results... (I have given you the booklet to confirm...) These together were aimed to help the relationship to evolve towards meeting changing business needs proactively’.
(Chief HR manager, Mumbai, Phase 2, June 2009)

In Table 4, we summarise the key findings about Darpan, the OD initiative, that was fundamentally designed and implemented aimed at the senior managers in the organisation.

(Insert Table 4 here)

Discussion and Conclusions

Our research's overarching objective was to explore and examine how the link between OD initiatives, HPWS and values systems underpinning Socio-Technical System configure to embed strategic agility and OA in organisations in general and high-technology, IT-based organisations in particular. We noted that although more recent work seeks to highlight the centrality of HRM in enhancing strategic agility in organisations (see, for instance, Ahmmad et al., 2020; Doz, 2020), there is a lack of understanding regarding how in practice HRM embeds strategic agility in organisations. Our research identifies OD initiatives as an effective

mechanism adopted by high technology organisations in embedding and enhancing strategic agility in the organisational system.

In this paper, we delineate two specific OD interventions, *PROPEL*, which was initiated in 2004 in the backdrop of exponential growth Alpha achieved between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, and *Darpan*, initiated in 2008, in the backdrop of an emerging global recession. These OD initiatives, which in essence were designed and implemented at contrasting periods, provided us insights into efforts to embed strategic agility during period of exponential growth and response to an impending recession. In pursuing *PROPEL*, Alpha set out to build ‘*a culture of fostering systems thinking and creating forums for dialogue, while encouraging leadership and team-working at all levels*’ (manager, interview, Bangalore, phase two). This was an attempt to create a new work culture that would enable innovation and improvisation by fostering ‘out of box thinking’, team-work and knowledge sharing. These attempts to create a new work culture within Alpha links to the socio-technical theory discussed earlier (Clegg, 2000; Mumford, 1995). Hence, the value of people, knowledge, and skills, alongside technology, was addressed through the OD interventions at Alpha. Moreover, for the organisation at large, OD helped to reiterate the merits of valuing enquiry, expressing differences, and constantly generating new knowledge (see Bhatnagar, Budhwar, Srivastava and Saini 2010 study in an Indian case study organisation, as a previous example of this). Also, more broadly, these OD interventions were largely inclusive of the employees and teams (called ‘associates’ at Alpha), and this translated into ‘commitment’ and ‘involvement’ initiatives by the management for a larger need of leading to greater performance, at levels of the employee, the team as well as a firm. This fits into the HPWS/Ps theories discussed earlier (e.g. Bohlander and Snell 2007; Boxall and Macky 2009, Boxall and Purcell 2003; Guest, 2011; Tregaskis et al., 2012). This study thus portrays the importance of HPWS in aiding OD interventions. It also confirms a link between the three paradigms of HPWSs, OD and socio-technical theory, both from a ‘humanistic’ and ‘managerialistic’ angle. This gives rise to the study’s future research proposition (FRP):

FRP1a: *In times of major global crisis, through a system-level dialogical OD intervention focusing on developing HPWS of HRM practices enables strategic agility and an ambidextrous context, firms can manage their strategic dualities*

FRP1b: *The presence of a high performance and high-involvement work system can support effective implementation of organisation-wide OD interventions critical for managing strategic dualities.*

Overall, we observe three areas/levels where OD was deliberately adopted to foster agility and ambidexterity. The strategic corporate level is the first level, where we observe OD's deliberate use to create agility and ambidexterity. Alpha, is over 100 years old EMNE conglomerate having business interests in a range of industries, which over time included a varied portfolio, in which, over the years, it had attained prominent positions. The overall principle, belief, and values of Alpha were philanthropic and humanistic to serve the larger stakeholders. The IT branch of its operations was a fairly new addition to its portfolio of businesses. This operation from inception had pursued a global best practice strategy that was more managerialistic, consistent to the norms of the broader IT industry at the time. As the IT operation attained exponential growth, both in terms of internationalisation and revenue and increased employee numbers, the contradictions in principles, beliefs, and values underpin Alpha's other business portfolios, and the IT operation became more apparent. Therefore, attaining strategic agility and ambidexterity necessarily involved resolving these fundamental contradictions (Papachroni et al., 2016; Knight and Paroutis, 2017).

The initiation of PROPEL in 2004 was, thus, a natural response to address those contradictions. Thus, PROPEL was viewed as a bridge between the company's overall principle of being humanist vis-a-vis its existing managerialistic approach of pursuing growth in the IT sector. In essence, this organisation-wide OD initiative was an attempt to improvise organisational processes and practices and, in the process, create a culture that facilitates and enhance strategic agility and ambidexterity so that Alpha continues in its growth path (Junni et al., 2015; Wang and Rafiq, 2014; e Cunha et al., 2020). It is critical to emphasise here that, when Alpha initiated the second OD intervention, named 'Darpan' in 2008 in the backdrop of uncertainty in its operating environment, it did not question whether it should continue to embrace the humanistic values at the expense of managerialistic orientation, that had led to the IT division's impressive growth. Instead, the actions the company pursued at a strategic corporate level 'confirmed' its need for aligning its overall humanistic approach to its existing managerialistic approach. This confirmation came through the Darpan survey. More interestingly, Alpha was now more confident in going through its cultural change of striking a balance through a socio-technical lens (Mumford and Beekman, 1994; Mumford, 2003).

The second level, which we observe where PROPEL contributed in creating agility and ambidextrous conditions relate to Alpha's internationalisation and yet continued reliance on the domestic market, particularly in the attracting (and retaining) talented 'knowledge workers' (see recent work by Malik, Pereira and Tarba, 2019, in a similar vein). This highlights the recent work on global-local challenges (Rao-Nicholson, Khan, and Stokes, 2016; Rao-

Nicholson, Khan, Akhtar, and Merchant, 2016; Rao-Nicholson, Khan, Akhtar, and Tarba, 2016; Karafyllia and Zucchella, 2017), albeit in a different context. Although the parent conglomerate was recruiting at over 60 subsidiaries worldwide, in specific IT operations, the bulk of its recruitment associates were from India, who were meant to work within international clients. Thus, creating conditions for knowledge sharing and innovation and improvisation, which PROPEL was envisaged to achieve, was central to attain agility and ambidexterity, and this underpinned Alpha's evolution from an EMNE to an emerging market transnational organisation.

In contrast, Darpan, in Phase Two, was initiated when the operating environment had become extremely uncertain. However, Alpha used this uncertainty period to reflect and introspect (Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Weber and Tarba, 2014). In other words, '*to scan the outward, we looked inwards*' (manager, Bangalore, Phase Two) and decided to focus on constructing its 'organisational identity'. The workshops' set as part of the initiative encouraged its members to articulate '*The Alpha that can be*'. Apart from identity formation, developing a 'new language' to disseminate information and communication were central features of this OD initiative led to brand building exercise. This process aimed to be rooted in its organisational ethos and yet explored ways to enhance its transnational image. Also, the high levels of attrition, which are a unique feature of the Indian IT-BPO sector (see Pereira and Malik, 2015; Malik, Pereira and Tarba, 2019), was also addressed through OD interventions at the Darpan stage.

The operational level was the third level, where OD initiatives were adopted to create agility and ambidexterity conditions. One of the key objectives of PROPEL, apart from bringing forth the humanistic element of Alpha into its IT operation, was to create working conditions that would facilitate experimentation, improvisation and innovation. This was underpinned by the use of 'De-Bono techniques' aimed at organisational members – individually and in groups and teams - to encourage problem-solving by adopting "out-of-the-box" thinking rather than overtly relying on routines and historical approaches. At the same time, it also developed new reward structures to facilitate the emergence of such a work culture. This approach of using OD as a mechanism to create a culture of knowledge sharing resonates with extant work on strategic agility and ambidexterity (see, e.g. Im and Rai, 2008; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008). This gives rise to the next FRP:

FRP2: *A dialogical OD approach fosters group-level improvements in problem-solving and decision-making capabilities that are critical for sustaining agility and OA, two core capabilities for managing strategic dualities.*

In contrast, the overarching objective of Darpan was to embed further and institutionalise the work practices, including knowledge sharing initiatives developed during PROPEL. Goal alignment through cascading of the ‘Balanced Scorecard’ concept was developed to translate learning from knowledge sharing to concrete actions. It also pursued the strategy of ‘job rotation’ in the self-managed teams, organised around the principle of ‘specialisation’. This is consistent with the extant work on HPWPs (see Boxall and Macky, 2007; Godard, 2004; Malik and Rowley, 2015; George, 2015).

Apart from these three distinct levels/areas, discussed above, where the two OD initiatives were pursued to create conditions for agility and ambidexterity, we also observed that in 2008, with Darpan, the company made a deliberate attempt to balance its strategic dualities of internal (managerial agency) and external (client stakeholders) groups i.e. firm-client relationship level. In this context, it specifically aimed to address whether to pursue short term needs, i.e. generating revenue or focus on long term strategic orientation, i.e. becoming more selective in choosing clients. EMNEs inadvertently pursue growth strategies aimed at revenue maximisation, which Alpha’s also pursued during the period, as it achieved exponential growth. However, during the second phase of OD, through Darpan, it actively questioned that strategy and instead prepared itself to become more selective in who it works with.

In terms of limitations, three areas come to light. *First*, it being a single case-study, generalisations cannot be made and taken for granted, though the findings are generalised to a theory rather than a population. However, as a ‘critical’ case (Yin, 2009) and our longitudinal design helped validate findings. *Second*, future quantitative studies are needed to validate our results. *Third*, respondents included only the ‘voice’ of the managers. ‘Voices’ of employee are not adequately represented, thus limiting the space to critique ‘success’ of OD and OA to ‘managerialistic’ assumptions. Considering greater emphasis on HRM and its critical role in enhancing strategic agility, as reflected in recent work by Ahammad et al. (2020); Doz (2020); e Cunha et al. (2020), we would suggest that future research could undertake more in-depth examination of OD as a mechanism or other interventions or mechanisms that organisations adopt in fostering strategic agility. Overall, future research should aim to overcome these

limitations, as our analysis has revealed a number of unique aspects core to our research aim/question.

In closing, we argue that theoretically, this paper contributes to the gap in the wider OA literature in the context of an EMNE, with a special emphasis on managing dualities through OD. Evidence confirms OD to be a facilitator of the wider HPWS, OA and socio-technical strategies. OD strategies led to creating an agile and ambidextrous context, which helped Alpha deliver sustained performance. These distinctive forms in the case study Indian IT-BPO organisation was characterised by ‘shape-shifting’ and a dynamic ‘entanglement’ of problem-solving and strategic adoptive and adaptive approaches to overcoming challenges and improving performance.

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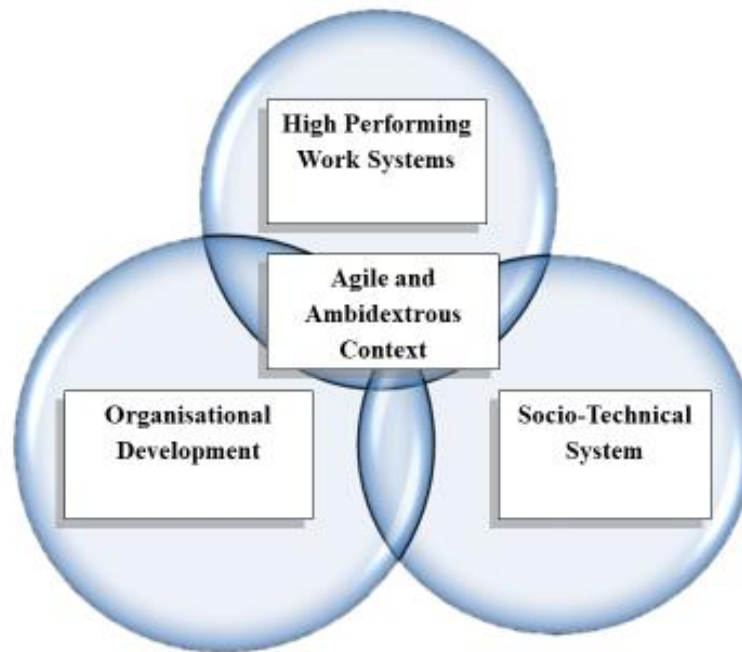


Figure 1: Positioning Organisational Change within HPWS, OD and STS, through an Agile and Ambidextrous Context

Table 1: Primary data collection, by research stage, method and location- Alpha

Data collection method	Phase 1: May 2006 – Dec 2007	Phase 2: Sept 2008 – July 2009	Phase 3: Aug 2009 – July 2010
Interviews with HR managers: Mumbai	4	6	3
Interviews with HR managers: Bangalore	3	2	4
Observation visits: Mumbai	1	2	1
Observation visits: Bangalore	1	1	1
Focus groups: Mumbai	1	0	1
Focus groups: Bangalore	1	0	0

Table 2: PROPEL at Alpha

PROPEL	What it means for Alpha associates?
Professional Excellence:	<i>How do I become a role model and a friend?</i>
Role Enhancement:	<i>How do I take up new responsibilities and set new directions?</i>
Owning Alpha Culture:	<i>How do I influence culture?</i>
Personal Growth:	<i>How do I walk the journey of self discovery and growth?</i>
Employee Involvement:	<i>How do I enable continuous improvement?</i>
Learning:	<i>How do I enable Team learning?</i>

Table 3: Phase 1- Reasons and focus areas identified for ‘Organisation development’ (OD) and the effectiveness of OD implementations at Alpha

Key reasons and focus areas identified- HOW	Key reasons and focus areas identified- WHY
Efforts on experimentation & innovation	Need to focus on ‘core competencies’ and ‘differentiation’
Inter group coordination & knowledge sharing	Need for ‘knowledge sharing’
Rewards and recognitions	Need for ‘motivation’
Culture building at Alpha- PROPEL (See figure below) – The intervention and The Value Card	Need for a new ‘culture’ identification and building

Table 4: Phase 2- Reasons and focus areas identified for ‘Organisation development’ (OD) and the effectiveness of OD implementations at Alpha

Key reasons and focus areas identified- HOW	Key reasons and focus areas identified- WHY
Scenario building workshops	Need for ‘imagination’ and being ‘proactive’
Branding and Public Relations	Need for ‘employer brand’ building due to attraction, attrition and retention challenges
Goal alignment & Balanced scorecard	Need for better ‘strategic-fit’
Job Rotation	Need to Focus on specialisation
Choice of Short term versus Long term focus	Mounting revenue pressures and increased internationalisation and growth
Improvements through measurements/ initiatives	Due to changing business needs
Revenue and Strategic organisation focus	Need for Selectivity in projects

Reflection and improvement through feedback in the form of a survey called 'Darpan'	Need for 'reflection' and 'improvement'
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A Longitudinal Investigation into Multilevel Agile & Ambidextrous Strategic Dualities in an Information Technology High Performing EMNE

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Abstract

Applying a combined theoretical lens of high performance work systems (HPWS), organisational development (OD) and socio-technical systems (STS), this paper examines the impact of HPWS, OD and STS in creating an agile and ambidextrous context for managing strategic dualities, especially in times of uncertainty. Using a qualitative case study of an EMNE (emerging markets multinational enterprise) operating in the Indian IT-BPO (information technology-business process outsourcing) industry, this study offers a longitudinal and processual analysis of how during challenging times of uncertainty of global competition, the EMNE shifted from a purely managerialistic to a more humanistic set of values through OD interventions and investments in digital assets. We identify and discuss key interventions for managing various strategic dualities at multiple organisational levels, over time. Our contribution provides interesting insights into an important and yet under-researched issue: namely how an MNE can balance pressures for local responsiveness and global integration through the effective creation of dual headquarters, especially before and during the global financial crises. EMNEs are equally faced with numerous dualities when implementing strategic change initiatives in their pursuit of firm growth, due to global pressures. Some of these key dualities that EMNEs are faced with include the simultaneous pursuit of managing exploratory and exploitative learning, local responsiveness with global integration, flexibility versus efficiency and formal versus informal organisations. Our choice of a ‘critical’ and exemplar EMNE case analysis and presentation of future research propositions have helped to identify how and why diverse strategies, during challenging and uncertain periods, lead to the success through agility and ambidexterity.

Index Terms - Organizational Ambidexterity; Change Management; Indian IT-BPO Industry, High Performance Work Systems (HPWS); Organisational Development; Socio-technical theory; EMNEs.

We the authors hereby make the following statement that we undertook the following tasks:

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