# THE USE OF THE INTERNET AS A STRATEGIC PRACTICE IN DECISION-MAKING BY THE MIDDLE MANAGER

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**ABSTRACT**

The role of the middle manager is essential in the strategy implementation process, since it requires speed, accuracy and up-to-date information so that the subject can make decisions. We consider that the middle manager acts as an integration agent between the upper and lower levels and can affect the direction of the company, due to its insertion in the organization from a practical perspective. This study aims to analyze the use of the Internet as a tool that assists the middle manager in practical actions to implement strategies. We adopted a qualitative methodology, through a single case study, carried out in a large textile industry. The main techniques of data collection used were semi-structured interviews, document analysis and direct observation. In order to anticipate some results, we verified that the system adopted by the company, accessed through the internet, assists and expedites the middle manager in the decision process.

**Descriptors:** Internet; Strategy-As-Practice; Middle Manager; Decision Making.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Strategy is present in the daily life of organizations. In recent years researchers Rouleau (2005) and Whittington (2006) have been focusing on micro-organizational issues, day-to-day strategies, and employee activities. And it is the middle management's job to control the team and coordinate people in order to achieve a better use of each employee's potential.

This study analyzes the use of the internet as a tool in the decision-making of the middle manager using the strategy perspective as a practice described by Jarzabkowski (2005) and by Witthington (1996, 2006). The study focuses on the micro-practices developed by people in their day-to-day lives of the organization (following the Strategic Managent Review's call for further studies on the process of strategy formation and how it occurs at the micro-organizational level).

On the one hand, as we approach the practices, it can be seen that strategy is not an attribute of organizations, that is,

it is not something that organizations have, but rather something that constitutes an activity developed by people, for something performed by them (Johnson *et al*., 2003, Johnson *et al*., 2007). Researchers of the strategy approach as a social practice study people in the organizational context, routine activities or not, but activities carried out by them. According to Jarzabkowski (2004), the social interaction, the daily life of the members of the construction organization, the implementation and strategic control are part of the range of researchers' studies. The strategy implementation process is not only rational, since there are cognitive and environmental limiters.

On the other hand, there is the perspective of the middle manager who, due to the increasing number of changes and the dynamism present in the organizational environment, requires a more assertive participation of all the hierarchical levels of the organization. This entails a forced shifting of the top-down strategy to the bottom-up strategy, which observes the organization from a micro-organizational perspective. In this line of thinking, we can find a series of studies, such as Nonaka (1988), Wooldridge *et* Floyd (1990), Floyd *et*

Wooldridge (1992, 2000), Floyd *et* Lane (2000), Balogun *et al*. (2003), and Lavarda *et al*. (2010), who analyze the middle managers and their involvement with the decision-making process with a practical perspective of the organization's strategies.

From the approach that considers that strategy is something that people develop, we can perceive it as a social practice similar to any other, be it domestic, political or educational, in which people can be helped in a way to better understand them, improving their practices (Whittington, 2004).

In the implementation, the middle manager acts as a link from which an intense flow of relationships occurs at all levels, whether operational, high management, or within the level itself, according to Franzon *et al*. (2012), Schwingel *et al*. (2012) and Angonese *et al*. (2013).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the use of the Internet as a tool that assists the middle manager in practical actions to implement strategies.

To achieve this goal, the qualitative methodology carried out through a case study (Eisenhardt, 1989), applied to a large textile industry, was adopted.

From the results of the data collected in interviews, direct observation and document analysis, we can consider that the use of the internet favors the decision-making process conducted by the middle manager, since he is increasingly involved in the daily activities of the organization, facilitating information and coordinating the various processes that require agility and precision.

## 2. STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE

One of the pioneering studies that explicitly emphasizes the focus of strategy studies on a strategy-as-practice approach was Whittington's 1996 paper Strategy-as-practice. In the article, the author analyzes the different perspectives of strategy (politics, planning, process and practice), affirming that the focus of the latter is to adopt the perspective of strategy as a social practice in which the practitioners of strategy can act and interact. The author further concludes that strategy as a social practice occurs much more by tactical knowledge than by formal or explicit knowledge. In this context, for Jarzabkowski (2005), strategy is understood as a flow of organizational activities, in which thinking, acting, formulation and implementation are suppressed by strategic practice.

Balogun *et al*. (2003) argue that there is a need for more accurate research on strategies in practice, which should re-flect the large scale of business activities in many different places.

In this context, Whittington (2004) and Wilson *et* Jarzabkowski (2004) propose a double agenda. The first agenda, that of theorizing, which is based on practice and social theory, seeks to create a strategic theory based on the knowledge of social theories, whose main audience is the academics and theorists on strategic practice (still under construction, since social theories are little discussed in comparison to theories of organizations). The second agenda, the managerialist, seeks to reflect the request from the academic community and the funding bodies of management research to reflect on the work and concerns of practitioners of the strategy in practice.

Both the agendas proposed by Whittington (2004) and Wilson *et* Jarzabkowski (2004) are interconnected. In them, there is the proposal of strategy-as-practice, privileging the performance of the strategist in relation to the organization.

The strategy-as-practice perspective, despite being a new theme for the strategy, presents some points of convergence. This is because, in the strategy study, there is the simultaneous interest of the organizational strategy with the subjects praxis, practices and practitioners and their connections (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006). Each of these concepts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007) is represented by a different point of view for research analysis. Research that analyzes only one of the three activities presented, neglecting existence and interconnection with other activities, may leave an impression of incompleteness in terms of scientific work (Whittington, 2006). This study was carried out in order to analyze the three activities: praxis, practices and practitioners.

Jarzabkowski (2005) studies the dimensions of strategy-as-practice analysis and classifies three elements of study: praxis, practices and practitioners, whose intersection is called strategizing, that is, the strategy being executed, implemented, Figure 1.

***Praxis***, in a broader definition, constitutes a set of human actions. It is the current activity, of what people do in practice (Reckwitz, 2002). It is related to the actions of the actors, with activities performed by the people in their organizational routine (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006, Johnson *et al*., 2007, Jarzabkowski *et al*. Praxis is the adaptation of existing strategies in order to meet the day-to-day particularities of the organization. Praxis is how the practitioner will perform the practice of the organization, the interpretation of practice. For Jarzabkowski *et al*. (2007), the cognitive, behavioral, procedural, discursive, motivational and physical practices are combined, coordinated and adapted for the construction of practices.
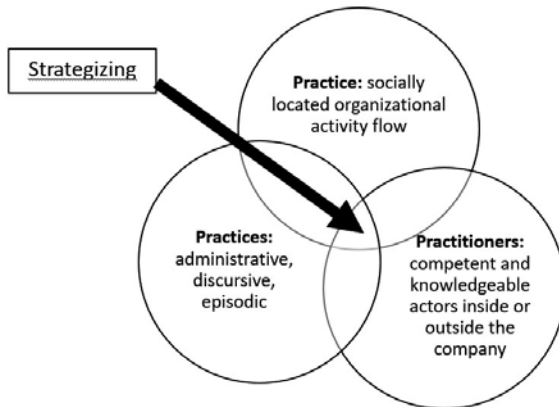
**Figure 1.** Strategizing: the dimensions of
strategy-as-practice analysis
Source: Jarzabkowski (2005)

**Practice** is related to shared routines of behavior, traditions, norms, and procedures for thinking and acting. The set of activities belonging to the institutional context includes norms and expectations of behavior, strategic episodes and ostensive routines (Johnson et al., 2007).

Praxis is the identification and analysis of the practices used by the organization, as well as its employment, of its use in the environment; it is the impact of the day-to--day practices of the organization. We can cite examples of practices: SWOT matrix, Gantt chart, Paretto theory, among others.

**Practitioners** are actors who are or are not part of the organization, who perform their praxis and carry out their practices, constructing strategy as a social practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Whittington, 2006). Practitioners (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007) are actors who use praxis to act, produce and carry out practices. Among the practicing actors are the middle managers, who adapt the practices, elaborating and putting into practice their own praxis.

The study of **strategizing**, according to Balogun *et al.* (2003), is the study of the practices carried out by its practitioners in the place where it occurs, in the context in which it is inserted. The strategy-as-practice highlights how the middle manager performs his/her strategies, emphasizing the concept of strategizing, which relates the accomplishment of the activities to the strategists' elaboration of strategies (Whittington *et al.*, 2004; Jarzabkowski, 2005). Johnson et al. (2003) complement that, as the activities generate results for organization, they are shown as competitive advantages of the organization. Therefore, they are considered organizational strategies.

The study by Whittington (2006) proposes a framework that integrates strategic research (following the studies already made by Jarzabkowski, 2005) based on three con-

cepts: praxis, practices and practitioners. The work develops research on the impact of strategic practice, the creation and transfer of practical strategy for the elaboration of professional strategies. Hambrick (2004) and Jarzabkowski (2004) argue that, increasingly, the strategy should be seen as a practice, something to be accomplished. They define this concept in two directions: on the one hand, the strategy that is rooted within organizations, which involves people in all the necessary details (Johnson *et al.*, 2003; Samra-Fredricks, 2003). This direction of strategy is closely linked to the organization's top managers. On the other hand, there are the external factors that influence the organization of the general society and that lead the individuals, responsible for business, consulting and people in general, to develop strategic practices that help to adapt the company to the world in which they live. Whittington (2006) calls this intra and extra organizational bifurcation.

Whittington's study (2006) presents a (re)conceptualization of the strategy in a broad way, considering that the activity and the social context must always be linked. There is a similarity between strategic research and intra and extra organizational strategies. The study presents concepts of strategy as praxis, practice and practitioners and describes the critical implications, which are linked to practice and the elaboration of practice standards through strategic activity. In this sense, it addresses the types of important professionals in the process of transferring strategic research to the application of this strategy, and finally, the way people make strategy effective (Whittington, 2006).

Individualistic actions ignore the phenomena that come from society, and associative actions focus on the great forces coming from society and forget individual actions. Thus, Whittington (2006) presents three central themes for the practice of theory. According to the first, there is society, with its cultural norms, its shared understandings, its languages and its procedures that guide human activity. The second deals with the importance of knowing not only what was done, but also how it was done, in a way that the anthropological question can be seen. Bourdieu (1990) reinforces this theme by confirming the need to grasp the meaning of things. The third involves the practical skills that exist to solve the problems (tricks, strategies and maneuvers). Practical skills make the difference; theory and practice are different, complete, and integral issues.

On the issue of the strategy-as-practice research, Whittington (2006) presents a few examples of technology-based and workplace learning, institutional change, marketing, and accounting. The extra organizational strategy exerts an increasing influence on the sectors of society and, on the other hand, the intra organizational strategy examines how managers carry out activities and the ways in which they handle the problems.

Next, the strategy is dimensioned as *praxis*, practice and practitioners, and the interrelation between them is presented in a model (Figure 2).

According to Whittington (2006), the middle manager also has his participation in the elaboration and development of strategies; after all, he is responsible for the monitoring and execution of the strategies and is able to interfere in the process with the experiences that have been experienced, whether positive, or negative.
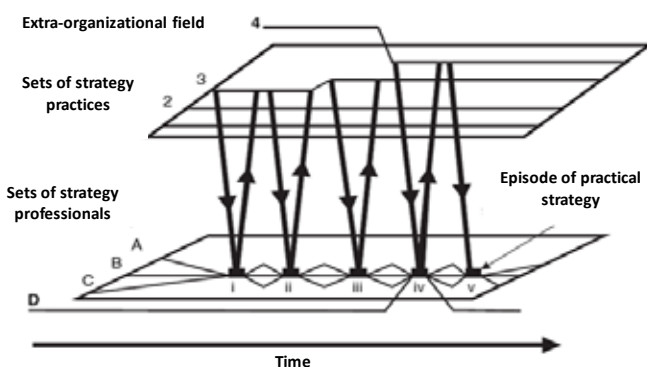


**Figure 2.** Integration of praxis, practices and practitioners
Source: Whittington (2006)

At the bottom of Figure 2 are the strategy professionals, practitioners, named "A" to "D", consisting of members of the top management, their counselors, consultants, advisors, and potentially middle managers, as well as others who may be people outside the organization. Initially, three of these practitioners from "A" to "C" are internal members of the organization, represented by the smallest parallelogram, while the "D" practitioner is external and forms part of the extra organizational field, indicated by the larger parallelogram.

With regard to vertical arrows, they represent the use and feedback of practices, as used by strategists. In the various episodes, they reproduce and may cause changes in the set of available practices.

The figure focuses on five points of convergence, episodes of strategic practice from "i" to "v", which can be council meetings or even informal conversations. As strategies, practitioners base the set of practices available in both the organizational and non-organizational contexts.

The accepted practices, legitimized by the organization, are represented in the upper parallel of "1" to "4". These practices include both routines generated inside and outside the organization. The practice "4" represents the social practices that, currently, are not included among the practices accepted by the particular organization, being in its extra organizational domain. Practices are not fixed, because as they

put these strategies into practice, there is a return to middle managers of what actually occurs in praxis and what is needed to perfect those strategies. It is noted that the episode "iv" is influenced by the extra organizational field, changing the set of strategic practices.

In the last section of the study, Whittington (2006) develops four implications on strategic practice. The first deals with the weight of practices on praxis and the influence of extra organization on many internally generated strategies. The second deals with the creation of strategic practice. The third affirms that people are the center of reproduction, transference and innovation of strategic practice. The influential role of some professionals raises important questions to be researched, such as: the diffusion of practices that is dynamic and widespread, the recognition that economic and political laws adopt new strategic practices or follow existing ones. The fourth states that effectiveness depends heavily on praxis, on the ability to access and on the implementation of prevailing strategic practices.

For Whittington (2006), strategy is something that people develop with issues that come both from outside and from within organizations and whose effects permeate throughout society.

In this way, effective strategies and more appropriate professional practices directly contribute to professional performance. Strategy actors are not only members of organizations, but they are part of social groups and also of professions considered novelties, such as some consultancies and intermediate leaderships. Thus, strategic practice research becomes very necessary because it is necessary to understand how strategic practices are developed and how they are disseminated both within and outside organizations (Whittington, 2006).

The model presented by Whittington (2006) is reinterpreted by Jarzabkowski *et al*. (2007). In the study by Jarzabkowski *et al*. (2007) five aspects that need to be addressed in the constant challenges of strategy-as-practice research were presented. They are: professionals, the link between practitioners and praxis, the link between practice and professionals, theories of practice (which provide conceptual explanations of the social dynamics involved in the implementation of the strategy) and, finally, the methodological implications of different theoretical approaches.

As a registry, it is worth mentioning that Whittington (2007) introduced a fourth "P", with the concept of Profession. According to the author, it is important that the profession be treated as an institutional field, as well as law, economics, administration, among others; teachers and researchers are also included in this field. This field includes: consulting firms, business schools, academic journals,

professional societies, companies and managers. The field works as a disseminator of certain practices and types of practitioners responsible for actions that have a direct impact on the organizations in which they are involved (Whittington, 2007).

## 3. DECISION MAKING BY THE MIDDLE MANAGER

The organizational performance described by Burgelman (1983, 1994 *et* 1996), Nonaka (1988 *et* 1994), Floyd *et* Wooldridge (1992, 1994, 1996, 1997 *et* 2000), Wooldridge *et* Floyd (1990), Floyd *et* Lane (2000), Currie *et* Procter (2005), and Rouleau (2005) are influenced by the organization's middle manager. As a result, we analyze the contribution, influence and role of the middle manager in the organizational strategy, since we consider it as a facilitator and articulator of strategy-as-practice.

The typology of Floyd *et* Wooldridge (1992, 1994, 1997) supports the idea that the middle manager can be involved and actively participate in the thought and strategy formation. His studies are divided into two dimensions: (i) describing the manager's direction of influence (up or down) and (ii) evaluating the degree to which such influence can change the organization's strategy. The middle manager can act or assist in the coordination of divergent ideas, as well as sustain a coherent orientation, and thus have an integrating influence in relation to the organization's strategy (Lavarda *et al.*, 2010).

Floyd *et* Wooldridge (1992) summarize the middle manager's implication in the strategy, highlighting four types of actions: (i) to defend alternatives; (ii) synthesize information; (iii) facilitate adaptation and (iv) implement a deliberate strategy (Figure 3).

**Defending alternatives**, according to Floyd *et* Wooldridge (1992), is characterized by justifying and defining new programs, evaluating the merits of new proposals, seeking new opportunities, proposing programs or projects for higher level managers and justifying programs that have already been established. The middle manager, with the typology of defending alternatives, has the capacity to change the strategic thinking of the top-manager levels, by introducing initiatives that diverge from the design of the strategy in force.

**Synthesizing information** is characterized by providing information on the feasibility of new programs; communicate the activities of competitors, suppliers; assess changes in the external environment; and communicate implications of the new information. The middle manager of this typology interprets, characterizes the information and leads upwards to the top manager levels.

**Facilitating adaptation**, according to the authors, is to encourage informal discussion and information sharing; to soften regulations to obtain new projects initiated; save time with experimental programs; develop objectives and strategies for non-official projects; encourage the resolution of problems of multidisciplinary teams; locate and make available resources for in-process projects; and provide a framework suitable for experimental programs. This middle manager facilitates and adapts the essential activities that are beyond the expectations of the board.

**Implementing a deliberate strategy** is characterized by monitoring the activities to support the objectives of the board of directors; implement action plans designed to meet objectives; translate objectives into action plans; translate general objectives into specific objectives; and sell subordinate initiatives to the board. The middle manager who performs this role has the task of aligning organizational activities with the strategic interaction of the top manager (Floyd *et* Wooldridge, 1992).

| Behavior | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Up | Down |
| Cognitive | Divergent | Defending alternatives | Facilitating adaptation |
| | Integrator | Synthesizing information | Implementing deliberate strategy |

**Figure 3.** Typology of middle manager implication in strategy
Source: Floyd *et* Wooldridge (1992)

According to Currie *et* Procter (2005), organizational performance is strongly influenced by actions taken by the organization's middle manager.

According to Floyd *et* Lane (2000), in order for the middle manager to interact with the top manager level, he needs to understand what the organization's objective is and what its competitive strategies are, as well as to know the political context in which it is inserted. The middle manager is expected to perform the interaction between the bottom floor level and the top manager level. In this context, the number of interactions and information complexity are greater for the middle manager than for the other levels of leadership (Floyd *et* Lane, 2000).

The Currie et Procter (2005) studies point out that there are factors capable of limiting the more strategic role of the middle manager, which are associated with the bureaucratic professional context. Currie *et* Procter (2005) analy-

ze how the middle manager interprets and influences the organization's results based on the information obtained in the strategy and through the routines and conversations related to the execution of the strategy. The analysis also shows how the middle manager, based on his tacit knowledge, can contribute to the renewal of ties with his stakeholders, especially the clients (Currie *et* Procter, 2005).

The middle manager can be considered as a fundamental piece in the process of strategy formation, as well as integrating the board's vision by transmitting the objectives and the vision of the board of directors, the practical vision of the organizational reality, provided by the workers, and by power, including, intervening and changing the course of the organization, with the integration of its practical perspectives of the organizational life (Safón, 1997; Canet, 2001; Lavarda *et al.*, 2010; Rosa *et al.*, 2012; and Martins *et* Lavarda, 2013).

According to Rouleau (2005), despite everyday nature, routines and conversations are basic forms of daily life of the organization, which are linked in a relevant way at a micro and macro-organizational level, leading to a very important contribution in the analysis of the formation of strategy.

## 4. THE USE OF THE INTERNET AS A TOOL IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The internet provides a series of facilities in the business area, making it easier for managers to perform day-to-day tasks. It works as a meeting place that, according to Balarine (2002), provides two places at a time, information and access to it, communicates values, and provides presentation of products and services. The internet is a tool the middle manager uses to get the information he needs for efficient, data-driven decision making, not just knowledge and experience.

For Drucker (1999), the information technology (IT) revolution has transformed tools to assist in strategic decision making, to assist middle managers in their managerial work. In the organizational environment, IT starts to play a strategic role and provides decisions based on this new reality, in which the information system can generate data, analyzes and reports, transforming them into strategic business assets (Balarine, 2002).

Organizations need to learn to use the internet in their favor because, according to Porter (2001), the Internet is considered a technology that provides opportunities for organizations that know how to use it as a strategic differential. For Torres *et* Cozer (2000), the Internet provides a wide variety of resources, it is up to organizations to shape it according to their needs.

Information obtained through tools that work via the Internet is a great advantage to competitors. The Internet enables people to interact and exchange data (Applegate *et al.*, 1996; Porter, 2001). In addition, it gives organizations strategic opportunities, a differential over their competitors.

For Freitas *et al.* (1993, 1995), with consistent information, middle managers can make decisions in a safer, more accurate way, as well as being able to convince their target audience more easily, as convincing occurs through arguments. The lack of adequate and secure information leads to incorrect decision making (Gerlaff *et al.*, 1991).

The internet goes through constant improvements. With the help of new technologies that emerge every day, the internet becomes a powerful tool for data generation, which provides analysis for the middle manager. For Néli (2005), software is increasingly present in support of the decision-making process, being part of the daily life of organizations that seek to make decisions in a more technical way.

For Gerlaff *et al.* (1991), decision making is inadequate when measured on the basis of uncertainties, caused by the lack of information about the environment. Information becomes the key to a better decision. Risks in the decision-making process (Harrison *et* Stevens, 1976) are minimized with adequate support to decision makers, taking into account adaptations to the requested system in order to meet their day-to-day needs.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

The present research is classified as qualitative from the point of view of the problem, and employs the single case study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989), since this technique allows the grouping of an expressive number of data (Yin, 2005). The case study can be defined as a research strategy that is characterized by studying the phenomena as a dynamic process, within its real context, using several sources of evidence, with the purpose of explaining the observed phenomena in a global way in order to consider all its complexity (Yin, 2005).

From the point of view of the way of approaching the objectives, this research is characterized as descriptive, since its objective is to analyze the use of the internet as a tool to help the middle manager in practical actions aimed to implement strategies.

Regarding the selection of the case, this study was carried out in a large textile company, whose headquarters is located in the city of Blumenau, southern Brazil. The selection of the case was not random, but rather intentional (Eisenhardt, 1989), since the case is, as Yin (2005) points out, a critical case to study the variables we seek to analyze, that is, the

use of the Internet by the middle manager as a strategic practice. The company name will not be disclosed for reasons of confidentiality.

In data collection, we used (i) a semi-structured interview with the 15 operational sales managers, focusing on the practical actions to implement the strategy. The interviews lasted for approximately one hour; they were recorded and later transcribed; The interview questions were related to the research question, that is, how the use of the Internet occurs in the implementation of the strategy; (Ii) documentary analysis, through reports and minutes of sales meetings and (iii) direct observation, adopting the use of a notepad to record the activities and the flow of operations observed in loco.

In order to analyze the results, we adopted the data analysis techniques: behavior pattern examination (BPE) and integrated pattern matching (Trochim, 1989, Pérez-Aguiar, 1999). Pattern matching is the recommended tactic for comparing events, behaviors, or circumstances that may result from theoretical propositions with events, behaviors, or circumstances ascertained in the case "(Pérez-Aguiar 1999, 236). The variation of the pattern matching tactic is called behavior pattern examination (BPE), which consists of formulating predicted behavior as a statement, proposition or hypothesis, which will be proven, transformed or rejected by practice, by actual behavior.

Thus, we proceed to the analysis of the results, with the description of the case studied.

## 6. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The company analyzed is among the largest companies in Brazil. The organization was one of the companies that, throughout its history, has already experienced great financial difficulties, but has always been able to reverse them through corrective and assertive strategies. The company had to reposition its product in the market, adopting new sales strategies. Currently, it is consolidated in the Brazilian market, so its brand is recognized by 88% of Brazilian consumers (Company data).

On a daily basis, the middle manager must make important decisions that can directly affect the performance of the organization. These decisions must be taken efficiently and effectively. In order to meet these needs, a tool was developed, along with the company's IT department, through which the middle manager could monitor, whenever necessary, the performance of its sales team, provided it had access to the Internet. For this, the Operational Sales Management (OSM) system was developed.

Operational Sales Management (OSM) is a web tool that allows access to the system anywhere as long as you have access to the internet. The tool provides several views and various city scenarios with their indicators, such as population, alpha index, and customer information, displaying comparisons of the current year/month with the previous one. This provides easy management for the representative and the middle manager.

This tool allows the middle manager to access a series of sales-related information; the user simply needs to be connected to a computer that has access to the internet, to log in and, finally, to verify several queries that were previously created based on the main information needs of the middle manager. As needed, new queries are created, perfecting the tool. Currently, ten consultations are available in the OSM system, thus providing users with Internet agility accessible anywhere in the world. In addition, the system has up-to-date and accurate data as the system is updated daily with the sales and billing data made during the previous day.

### 6.1 Access to the GOV tool

Using an e-mail address, the middle manager has access to the GOV tool. To access the system, users need a login and password, which are made available by the IT staff. After login and password, the user is presented with the initialization menu, where he finds ten predefined queries, divided into three categories: city, representatives and queries, Figure 4.

All queries generate reports. The middle manager can analyze the queries individually or compare with other queries, if necessary. These queries can either be analyzed on the same system as can be imported into Excel, providing mount further analysis and comparisons.

### 6.2 Category of analysis by city

In the category of consultations on "city", only one query, called "performance per city", has been elaborated, Figure 5.

In this query, the manager can obtain information about all cities in Brazil, even if there is no registered client. This is one of the utilities of the consultation, informing cities without clients and, through analysis of potential indexes available in the same query, identify the potential of the city.

The potential index used in this consultation is the consumption potential Alpha (2010), an essential tool for determining sales targets and distribution of advertising funds. This index can also be used in the analysis of the choice of the best municipalities for the installation of branches, franchises, agencies, stores and shopping malls (Alpha, 2010).

### 6.3 Analysis category city by representative

Returning to the menu, in the category of consultations on "representatives", there are eight consultations: (i) city per representative, (ii) clients per representative, (iii) budget x performed, (iv) ranking of representatives, Weekly sales follow up, (vi) client flexibility, (vii) representative flexibility and (viii) sales policy.

The analysis of the "consultation city by representative", added to the query "performance by city," explained earlier, it helps solve one of the great difficulties in obtaining mana-

ger middle information: identify the cities where the company has no registered client, Figure 6.

In addition to providing easy, fast and reliable analysis, it provides a series of information in terms of the cities in which the Company has customers, such as the number of customers registered, which customers were assisted, the number of new customers, in addition to the volume of sales. The same query provides the middle manager to analyze the potential of the city using the consumer potential index Alpha (2010).
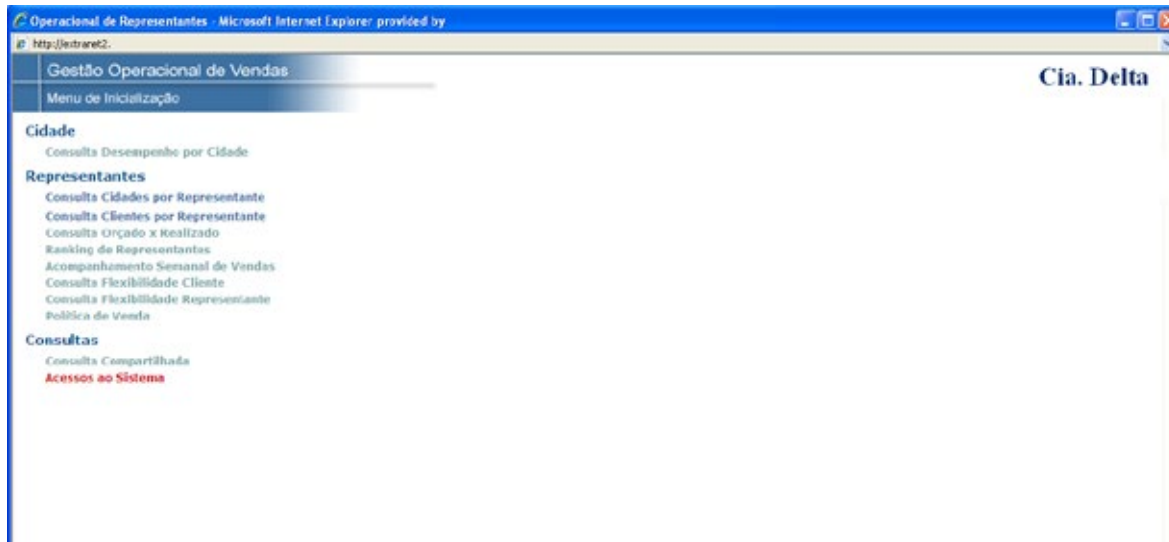


**Figure 4**. Startup menu

Source: Authors (2015)

Legend: From top to down: Operating Management of Representatives – Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by; Operational Sales Management; Startup Menu; City; Consultation of performance by city; Representatives; Consultation of cities by Representative; Consultation of Clients by Representative; Consultation of Budgeted x Accomplished; Ranking of Representatives; Weekly Sales Tracking; Client Flexibility Query; Representative Flexibility Query; Sales Policy; Consultations; Shared Consultation; System Access)



**Figure 5.** City Performance Consultation

Source: Authors (2015)

With regard to cities in which there are no registered clients, the middle manager analyzes other queries and verifies the feasibility of having or not customers in that city. If necessary, the middle manager himself travels to the city to make a field analysis, usually with the salesperson who should be working in that city.

The consultation can be done using as filters: the representative, the consultation period, the brand (in cases where the company works with more than one brand), the region, among others.

The "customer consultation by representative" provides the analysis of the main business data of customers registered in the Company, such as: the date of registration, trademarks marketed by the customer, volume of purchases, contribution margin, among others, Figure 7.

This query is widely used for quick reference, in which it is not intended to obtain many details about the clients, only identifying their profiles. If you need to know more detailed information about clients, there are other queries that are described later in this paper.

The query provides data filtering by: representative, query period, tags, among others.

The Company works with a team of 370 representatives, also called salesmen, who operate throughout the country; each representative receives a sales goal, also called a sales quota, which is prepared by the middle manager.

We can verify that each query to the OSM system has its importance and its role within the company, either as a tool to analyze the potential of Brazilian cities, as a tool for comparing results, or as a demand for accessing the system.

The performance-by-city and city-to-representative consultations had a significant contribution to the work of the middle manager, since prior to the existence of the OSM system, it was very difficult to know with certainty which cities in Brazil did not have a store selling the products with the trademarks produced by the Company. The OSM system revolutionized the daily system to check the cities and send a representative to analyze the feasibility of opening at least one customer in each city in Brazil. With the support of the Alpha index (2010), it was possible to verify the purchasing potential of each city, not content with having only one client in each city, but rather a quantity of clients that meets all demand.

The consultation client by representative is ideal for quick client reviews and, when necessary, for more detailed information, allowing to use the sales query very rich in customer profile details, which facilitates the negotiation at the time of sale.

Due to its daily update, the "budget x performed" query, available in the OSM system, is an important tool to analyze the performance of sales representatives, because the middle manager can easily, at any time of day, access the system via the internet, check which representatives are performing poorly and get in touch with them in order to get a better performance.

The OSM system, through the query "ranking of representatives", facilitates the work of comparing the performance of one representative in relation to others.



**Figure 6.** Consultation city by representative
Source: Authors (2015)

**Figure 7.** Consultation clients by representative
Source: Authors (2015)

With this query, the middle manager can resolve doubts regarding a representative who is, for example, under-performing. The query makes it possible to compare this representative with another from a nearby region and thus to verify if the problem of the poor performance is the representative's or the region's in which he is acting, which may be going through a period of income reduction.

The consultation of "weekly sales follow-up" helps the middle manager both in relation to the order entry and in the legal relationship that requires exclusivity of the sales representative, obliging him, via contract, to work only with the sale of the Company's products.

The "customer flexibility" query is used to keep customers buying company products, since some clients have earned the right to have discounts on purchases of any product, regardless of the value of the purchase. This action strengthens clientr loyalty ties.

The "system access" query is a way to monitor the use of an investment, following the access to a system developed to aid in sales and decision making. It was created to monitor sales and enabled accurate and up-to-date information to be obtained, which provided the middle manager with the agility necessary to carry out its activities (Rouleau, 2005).

Considering the strategy-as-practice perspective (Jarzabkowski, 2005), we emphasize that this tool is a way to apply the practices (norms) used by the organization, contemplating praxis (how to apply practices) and practitioners' performance (middle manager).

## 7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We believe that the objective of the present work, which is to analyze the use of the internet as a tool that assists the middle manager in practical actions to implement strategies, has been achieved. It was possible to know a system (OSM) that works through the internet, and verify how it is used in practice. Let us also note that it effectively provides important information in terms of what is occurring in different cities (and regions) in a dynamic way, in order to favor the decision-making process by the middle manager, according to studies by Floyd et Woodridge (1992), Lavarda, et al. (2010).

We believe that this system developed for the Company is an important tool to assist the decision-making process, which is enriched with the practicality achieved with the availability of access to the system via the Internet. The cross-cut made in this study allowed us to study, in greater depth, the practice of using the Internet as a tool that helps the middle manager in performing his practical activities and in the day-to-day routines of the decision-making process.

From the perspective of strategy as a practice (Johnson et al., 2007), the middle manager shows to be the key to the success of the OSM system, he is the user, and he is the one who needs accurate, safe and up-to-date information. Therefore, he has the role of articulator of this system in order to maintain constant improvement of this tool.

The limitation of this work was the impossibility of following the application of the OSM in the different units, which was minimized by the internal contact through the internet.

Thus, firstly, from the foregoing in this paper, we firstly highlight how future lines of research will deepen the theoretical framework regarding the role of the middle manager in the decision process and the IT tools that can be used to effectively streamline this process.

Next, we intend to make a longitudinal study to analyze the same case in depth and to follow the results presented with the use of the internet in the decision-making process, in order to make a purchase between different periods of use of the system.

Moreover, it would be necessary to analyze the studied variables (middle manager, decision-making process, internet use) with variables of financial results (Hart *et* Banbury, 1994).

As a contribution to the Company, we find that currently there are only three categories, or groups of consultation, one focused on the city, another focused on the representative or on the seller and another for the control of the users of the system. We believe it is important to create at least one more category, or query group, called a client category. In this group, there could be new consultations focusing exclusively on clients; there could also be a migration of the "client-by-representative" consultation, which seems to be out of place in the midst of consultations on representatives.

On the other hand, we suggest conducting a biannual meeting in which the middle managers would discuss the performance and usefulness of the consultations already existing in the OSM system and could suggest new consultations, or even improve existing ones, according to their needs.

We believe, therefore, that the present work is a contribution to the academic environment, especially for the dissemination of this topic, which we believe is important for organizations to successfully achieve their objectives, as well as to encourage and assist the development of future lines of research related to this theme.

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