Framing strategy under high complexity: Processes and practices of ongoing reframing in the becoming of strategy

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This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Abstract:

Framing is a key concept in research on how strategists legitimize and win support for strategic change by establishing a frame of reference for that change. This article advances research on strategy framing by showing how, under conditions of high complexity and uncertainty, strategists continuously reframe strategy in relation to shifting constellations of stakeholders. It presents the findings of an ethnographic study of strategizing in the highly complex context of the digital transformation journey of a global manufacturing firm. It shows how (re)framing practices are combined to iteratively shape strategy formation in ways that sustain strategic influence in the face of constant threats to legitimacy. By accounting for how (re)framing practices reach back and forth in time, the ethnographic findings refine conventional understanding of how framing resources of past strategizing enter and reworked in present strategy work. Finally, the article contributes empirical insights into how information systems specialists, often marginalized as strategic actors, frame and pitch strategic projects to gain and exert influence in strategy formation processes.

Keywords:

framing; strategy as practice; complex context; digital transformation; ethnography

1. Introduction

Strategy scholars have clarified how managers and employees give and make sense in formulating, communicating, and accomplishing strategic change (Balogun et al., 2014). Resources deployed for strategic sensemaking and sensegiving include narratives, rhetoric, and strategic concepts (Jalonen et al., 2018), which are used to frame strategic issues in order to mobilize support for a particular strategy. Research on meaning construction in strategy work has often addressed specific instances of strategic change (Logemann et al., 2019), for instance how a CEO shapes the interpretive frames of organizational participants during the initiation of strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), or how middle managers sell a strategic change in their everyday work (Rouleau, 2005). Studies on strategic framing have sought to explain how an interpretive frame of reference for a single, episodic strategic change is formed and how legitimacy is created by means of various rhetorical devices and resources (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Logemann et al., 2019).

Frames and framing are thus widely used theoretical concepts in management and strategy studies, particularly in research that addresses the symbolic and cognitive dimensions of strategy processes (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Studies have often considered frames that underpin strategy formation as relatively stable systems of meaning (Kaplan, 2008; Schneider & Sting, 2019). The processual dynamics of framing during practitioners' work have thus been left under-researched (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). The lion's share of research on frames and framing in strategy processes is thus characterized by an underlying ontology of being, for instance in accounting for how frames structure and cue behavioral responses and expectations (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014), how their alignment and congruence have consequences for strategic decisions (Kaplan, 2008), and how they facilitate implementation of episodic change by winning stakeholder support (Cornelissen et al., 2011; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Logemann et al., 2019). Inspired instead by the strong process ontological turn in research on strategy as practice (SAP) (Kohtamäki et al., forthcoming), this article grounds the study of framing in strategy formation in an ontology of becoming (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Sztompka, 1991) and what some refer to as temporality, according to which the past, present, future, and their interrelationships are under constant revision (Hussenot et al., 2020). This allows theoretical resources to shine a different light on the processual dynamics and practices of framing strategic issues with catchphrases, key words, and other rhetorical resources in the ongoing becoming of strategy.

Strategists often operate in situations of high complexity, uncertainty, or volatility, where their work involves iterative revisions of strategy rather than perfecting a transitory design (Whittington et al., 2006). This adds other dimensions and hence more complex processual dynamics and practices of framing. For example, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) showed how, in order to make progress in the face of uncertainty and associated breakdowns in strategic sensemaking, practitioners reconstruct provisional strategic accounts through temporal practices that link interpretations of the past, present, and future (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

Reflecting on frames in strategy research, they (2013, p. 990) briefly allude to that a possible consequence may be that the past is not merely a source of frames, as otherwise often considered (Kaplan, 2008), and they encourage future research to explore this. For instance, if the past is not a stable source of frame accumulation through accretion of experience, the question arises of how strategists mobilize and work with framing materials and resources of past strategy work. However, relatively little research has addressed how framing practices are involved in iterative processes of shaping strategy formation in situations demanding constant recalibration of frames, such as highly complex contexts. Highly complex contexts are often rife with unintended consequences, tensions, and requirements for ongoing adjustments (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). This rarely allow practitioners to fall back on periods of stability (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). Accordingly, this contextual and ontological operationalization serves to go beyond spotting and filling gaps in previous research (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011); it helps to refine theorization of framing practices, their interactional dynamics, and their effects in strategy formation.

In response to the above theoretical and substantive issues, the present article explores the following question: *How are framing practices engaged in the iterative process of shaping ongoing strategy formation under conditions of high complexity, how do they interact, and with what effects?*

The article develops an empirically grounded theorization of framing practices and how they interact in ongoing strategy formation as it evolves under conditions of high complexity and uncertainty. The theorization is developed from the findings of a one-and-a-half-year ethnographic study of strategizing in the context of the digital transformation journey of a global manufacturing firm headquartered in Northern Europe, a global leader and the largest

firm in its industry, referred to here under the pseudonym of BEM. Over the past decade, strategy development for digital transformation has emerged as a significant concern for strategy practitioners, consultancies, and researchers (Brooks et al., 2018; Westerman et al., 2014), and is often presented as one of the great challenges of our time (George et al., 2016). Digital transformation offers an intriguing context in which to study strategizing under conditions of high complexity and uncertainty, as it requires practitioners to embrace multiple complexities (Brooks et al., 2018). Digital transformation is a radical change that involves business model, the entire value chain and all areas of an organization (Brooks et al., 2018). It thus entails a high level of complexity in relation to stakeholders and competencies across the firm (Brooks et al., 2018; Leonardi, 2020), including R&D, marketing and sales, human resources, supply chains, the C-suite, board members, and IT. Digital transformation also necessitates changes in organizational behavior and identity (Brooks et al., 2018; Leonardi, 2020). Such transformative organizational change is temporally complex, requiring projective strategizing while dealing with unanticipated changes, such as novel technological opportunities (Brooks et al., 2018).

We follow the micro-processes through which information system (IS) strategists frame strategy toward and in cooperation with multiple other organizational constituents in the context of the complexities and uncertainty of a firm's digital transformation journey. Although IS strategists often are considered to devise strategy in line with the firm's overall (digital transformation) strategy, their roles and strategic influence merit exploration (Peppard, 2010; Whittington, 2014). As Whittington (2014) observes, there is a particular need for research on how IS strategists and practitioners exert strategic influence as they "frame strategic issues, pitch strategic projects, form internal alliances, negotiate deals, etc. What are the dominant strategic discourses to which IS practitioners need to relate, and what are the discursive competences they require?" (Whittington, 2014, p. 90). Researchers have considered the IT department's traditional role as merely being a business-supporting cost center. However, as IT departments gain influence in corporate strategizing, leveraged by their domain-specific knowledge (Choudhary & Vithayathil, 2014; Ross, 2014), some researchers suggest they might more accurately be regarded as strategic partners in digital transformation. The present study responds to calls for research into actual IS strategy praxis (Whittington, 2014), exploring how, through framing, IS specialists exert strategic influence

in ongoing formation of strategy, and what strategic roles they play in a firm during its digital transformation.

This article contributes to strategy framing research by showing how practices of (re)framing are engaged in response to ongoing, unanticipated demands for adjusting frames of reference for strategy and address shifting constellations of stakeholders. It particularly shows how they build and sustain the legitimacy of strategy, as well as of the strategy participants and their framing concepts, in the face of ongoing contests. The ethnographic findings reported here clarify how reframing practices work with past framing resources, thus responding to calls to refine conventional understanding of how past framing materials enter and are engaged in present strategizing (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Second, this study goes beyond conventional perspectives on strategy framing, instead analyzing across what emerged as multiple iterative cycles of reframing strategies. It thus unveils practices through which even seemingly deferred strategy framings and decisions come to resurface. Third, the article contributes empirical insights into how IS strategists frame and pitch strategic projects to gain and exert influence in strategic conversations in a firm.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual background to this study, and Section 3 explains the ethnographic methods used. The findings are reported in Section 4 and the implications discussed in Section 5.

2. **Theoretical background**

2.1 **Strategy as ongoing activity**

SAP research has served to shift research attention from strategy as the accomplishment of organizational elites foreseeing future trends and toward strategy as an ongoing and distributed social activity co-constructed by a wide range of actors within and beyond the firm (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Conceiving strategy as an activity, rather than as a static attribute, offers insights into the practices and processual dynamics involved in the ongoing becoming of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009). The work of strategizing involves activities such as attending and organizing meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008), producing PowerPoint presentations (Kaplan, 2011), formulating texts (Arnaud et al., 2016; Whittington, 2006), and convening outside the office for conferences, workshops, and away days (Whittington, 2003). Through these activities, strategy is framed by practitioners who draw on

a range of conceptual and rhetorical resources as they frame strategic issues to accomplish various effects. In this article, a practice-based approach to the study of strategy work facilitates analysis of the processual dynamics and practices of framing within ongoing (re-)strategizing. The rest of this section elaborates a theoretical background for sensitizing empirical analysis of framing practices and dynamics in ongoing strategy formation.

2.2 **Strategy frames in management research**

In management studies, the notion of frames draws inspiration from Goffman's (1974) seminal work on frame analysis as a conceptualization of how people make sense of the world. Frames have been considered as (simplified) social schemata of interpretation that allow people to locate, perceive, identify, and label events in ways that allow them to make sense, store experience, and guide and mobilize action (Goffman, 1974; Snow et al., 1986). Social movement studies have drawn inspiration from Goffman in exploring how frames mobilize collective action (Snow et al., 1986). Within strategy research specifically, the concept of frames has informed different types of studies, from research on the cognitive basis of strategic choices (Schwenk, 1988) to studies of SAP (Kaplan, 2008). The bulk of this research has treated frames as relatively stable systems of meaning with various explanatory effects on strategy; little attention has been paid to the processual dynamics and actual practices of framing during strategy work (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). In their major analysis of extant management and strategy literature, Cornelissen and Werner (2014) observed a common tendency to focus on frames and their consequences instead of the ongoing process of meaning construction. For example, a line of cognitivist inquiry revolves around the effects of default frames, once they are established, in priming expectations and cueing behavioral responses (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014).

Some studies within the SAP research field have focused on the political dynamics of how frames are mobilized and shaped in interactions between multiple actors. The work of Kaplan (2008) has been instrumental in advancing a political-interactive view of framing that takes account of how frames influence strategy making through a process of framing contests. Kaplan adopts a middle ground between political and cognitive views on framing. Over time and through the encoding of past experiences, she argues, individuals build personal catalogues of frames (Kaplan, 2008). Strategy participants bring a repertoire of frames that shape how problems and solutions are defined and how strategic choices are made. When

different participants perceive a frame as resonating with their personal interests, they may agree an immediate decision. When the frames are not congruent, proponents and opponents of a strategic project may deploy framing practices to ensure that their frame dominates and produce their desired outcome. Kaplan's research unveiled two types of framing practices involved in contests to shape strategic choices and establish a dominant (collective) frame. These include practices that establish or undermine the legitimacy of a frame and/or claims-makers, and practices that realign frames advanced by strategy participants. When a practice is not successful in establishing a frame, the frame remains divergent and a decision is deferred (Kaplan, 2008). Thus, in seminal research that does turn to the social and political dynamics of strategic framing, such as political contests over which frame should dominate, frames are understood as formed through past experiences that are accumulated through encoding (Kaplan, 2008). Frames are also often considered as self-reinforcing, because they process information selectively, meaning that a change of frame requires significant effort (Kim, 2021).

The ontological assumption that frames are usually stable, together with the familiar focus on single strategic changes, directs attention away from how framing practices shape strategy in a state of ongoing becoming. In such a state, meanings and framing resources do not coalesce into stable frames whose configuration or degree of alignment can explain outcomes of strategy processes (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014).

2.3 **Practices and dynamics of framing in the ongoing becoming of strategy**

The activity of framing involves "the systematic use of a set of keywords, catchphrases, metaphors, and idioms to provide an interpretive frame of reference for a change" (Logemann et al., 2019, p. 2). In discursive framing of strategic issues, practitioners may use key concepts, phrases, idioms, tropes, and metaphors to shape stakeholders' interpretations, to make strategy proposals persuasive, and to delegitimize alternative courses of strategic action. Practices of framing as a means of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving involve using and shaping framing concepts and idioms in variable constellations. Language and concepts have thus been studied as resources in strategic sensemaking to enact interests and ideas (Logemann et al., 2019; Sillince et al., 2012; Vaara et al., 2016). For example, discursive practices of drawing boundaries around a strategy may serve to include some organizational participants and exclude others (Kaplan, 2011).

Seen through a practice-theoretic lens (and thereby through a social constructivist lens), framing no longer appears as the constitution of stable frames that filter and make sense of an external world (Cornelissen & Schildt, 2015; Grand et al., 2015). Instead, analysis becomes more sensitive to the fact that framing practices have formative effects on phenomena under continuous construction by practitioners (and, potentially, researchers) (Cornelissen & Schildt, 2015). This leads to other types of research questions. For example, a line of inquiry would put less emphasis on whether past frames carried into present strategizing are aligned or become aligned through framing practices, and more emphasis on exploring questions concerning how practitioners actively reconstruct and leverage the past and its framing materials in the first place.

Strategizing in the face of unanticipated events, for instance in situations of high complexity, uncertainty, or volatility, may demand constant framing efforts to mobilize actors and guide strategic sensemaking processes. Unlike establishing a relatively stable frame of reference for a single strategic change, this is likely to involve multiple modes of agency. Strong process and practice strategy research has uncovered complexities in the temporal embeddedness of agency, for example in how strategists move between iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective forms of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) to accomplish strategy work (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Similarly, framing in ongoing strategy formation may involve investing framing concepts of previous strategies with new meaning, or delegitimizing them in the act of introducing and conferring meaning to new framing concepts. The act of making sense is also, in significant ways, a retrospective agentic process, as noted by Weick et al. (2005), particularly when strategy is under constant revision. Hence, researching the work of framing through a practice lens, as in this study, facilitates analysis of how framing practices in strategy-making processes involve retrospective and prospective agency, how socially situated practitioners mobilize them, and with what consequences. Framing practices can then be understood as operating across the past, present, future, and their mutual constitution, in the perpetual becoming of strategy (Hernes et al., 2013). We further ground the study of strategy framing in a political view that is attentive to the politics of strategy as informed by vested interests, coalition formation and struggles over resources and influence (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2014; Lê & Jarzabkowski, 2015; Pettigrew, 1977). This involves focusing on how practitioners use framing practices to build legitimacy around

strategic agendas and how they legitimize or undermine the participation of others in strategy work.

In the following sections, these theoretical and conceptual inspirations are used to inform an analysis of how strategy for digital transformation is framed as it is proposed and developed. Focusing on a global manufacturer, this study develops an empirically grounded theorization of how practitioners configure and draw on key framing concepts and framings of different versions of past strategizing episodes and proposals when strategizing amid constant, unanticipated demands for recalibration of frames of reference.

3. **Methods**

3.1 **Ethnography**

Ethnographic methodology and a practice-based analytical orientation supported our analysis of strategy processes as "fluid, indistinct collections of actors, activities and practices which need intimate and open-ended exploration" (Kohtamäki et al., forthcoming, p. 16). Ethnographic participation (Vesa & Vaara, 2014) in strategy work conducted within corporate headquarters served to capture strategizing "in flight" (Whittington et al., 2006). A conventional method for frame analysis is thematic content analysis of the co-occurrence of keywords in discourse and frames (as opposed to capturing meaning construction "up close") (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). In contrast, an ethnographic approach captures the activities of framing in strategy formation as they unfold over time (Cunliffe, 2015). It generates knowledge through a co-constitutive relationship between praxeological research and firm practice (Grand et al., 2015; Poulis & Kastanakis, 2020).

3.2 **Empirical setting**

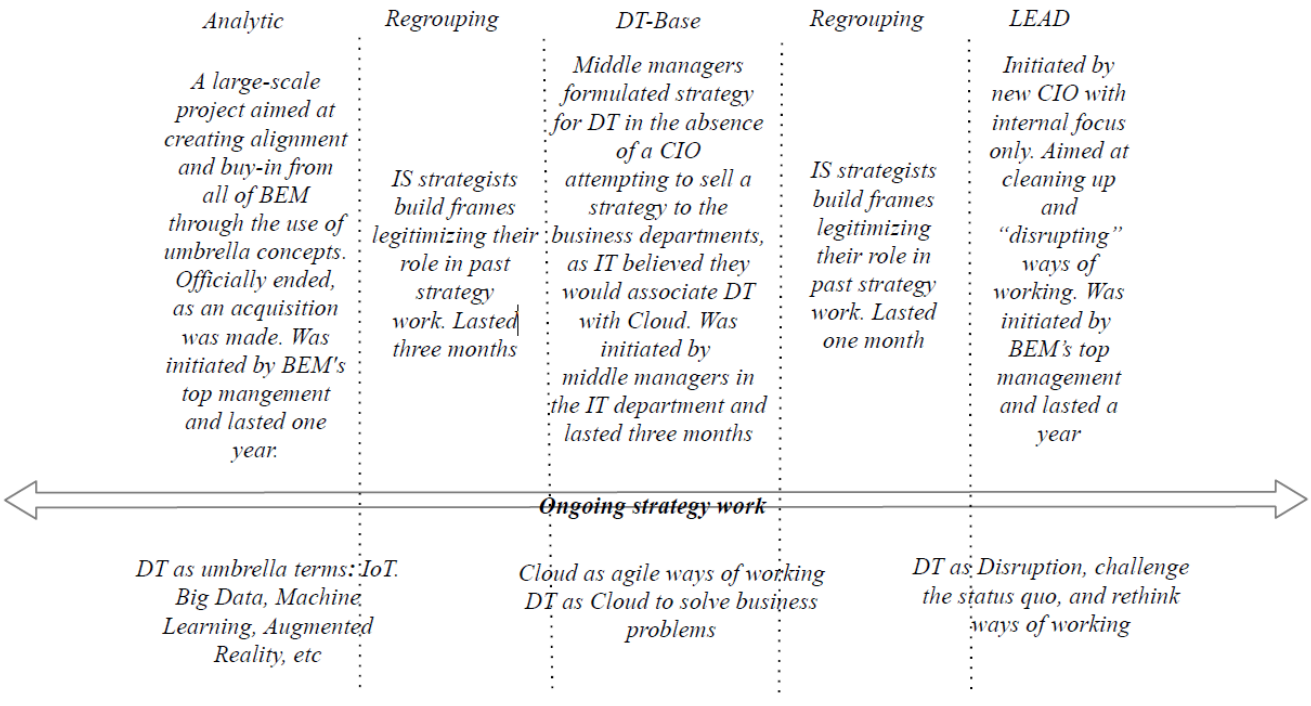
Data collection was carried out in the IT department of BEM, a global firm headquartered in Northern Europe. BEM is a leader in a highly competitive business-to-business industry characterized by fast-paced technological advances. Over the past decade, as part of its digital transformation efforts, BEM has focused on generating more revenue from aftermarket value propositions, such as maintenance contracts and predictive usage optimization through Big Data analysis. Throughout the fieldwork for this study, the IT department was working on specific strategy proposals to accommodate the ambitions of internal business divisions to

exploit digital technologies such as AI and Cloud in daily operations. They had an explicit goal of leveraging their domain-specific knowledge to influence the firm's digital transformation agenda.

3.3 **Data**

The data stem from fieldwork conducted over 18 months, and consist of 100 days or 800 hours of participatory and non-participatory ethnography. The focus is on the formation of three major strategy proposals anonymized here as Analytic, Digital Transformation Foundation, and LEAD. These proposals were formulated in terms of strategy for digital transformation, and they aimed to rethink existing ways of working rather than merely supporting existing business and processes (Hausberg et al., 2019). They were thus suitable for studying how practitioners enact framing practices in strategy formation under highly complex conditions. The data show how practitioners engage in the framing of strategy across multiple proposals and iterative cycles of reframing. Table 1 provides an overview of the three proposals; however, it should be noted that the initiatives and their demarcations were subject to constant revision.

Table 1: Overview of strategy work



Concepts and catchphrases associated with past/present strategy proposals, actors, etc.

The data consist of interviews, observations, participation at meetings, and secondary data such as PowerPoints and news articles (see Table 2). By being present in the office, the ethnographer also engaged in many informal conversations and observations. All persons, places, and date identifiers have been anonymized.

Table 2: Overview of dataset

Data	Amount
Days of fieldwork	*100*
Meetings	*76*
Semi-structured interviews	*23*
Ethnographic interviews	*28*
Emails	*1,300*
Documents	*3,000*

Participant observation enabled the ethnographer to experience and capture everyday practices of framing as they unfolded in their complex context. Examples of participant observation included writing meeting summaries and lecturing on a strategy topic for a team meeting. The 76 meetings attended were internal strategy meetings concerned with strategy reviews and strategic planning, plus strategy workshops and away days (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). The meetings were at group, department, and higher levels, ranging from one-on-one situations to auditoriums with approximately 100 participants. The majority of meetings consisted of four to eight people working on specific strategies. During all meetings, the second author made comprehensive notes in a physical log, and these notes were written up within 24 hours to condense as much detail as possible. The resulting field notes consist of verbatim quotes, contextualization, physical descriptions, and experienced sentiments of the room, as is good practice in ethnography (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). For Digital Transformation Base and LEAD, the ethnographer participated in biweekly meetings organized by the respective steering groups.

A total of 51 interviews were conducted with 23 different employees at all levels of the IT department. All the interviewees were involved, to varying degrees, in at least one of the three strategy proposals. A typical reason for arranging an interview was to follow up on something

that had been said or done in a meeting or in the office. The interviews consist of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic interviews.

The semi-structured interviews were typically carried out in meeting rooms so that they could be audio-recorded. They lasted between 25 and 90 minutes, with an average of 45 minutes. The interview guide was an emerging inquiry building on reflections from experiences in the field. It addressed how strategists within the IT department engaged in the framing of strategic issues. This focus allowed topics to emerge, but it also limited the conversation to the elements of interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The ethnographic interviews were shorter interviews where the informant was approached with a specific set of questions in mind (Spradley, 1979). They typically lasted between five and 30 minutes. Notes from these interviews were documented immediately in a physical log and elaborated as field notes at the earliest opportunity. To maximize the chance of exclusive time with an informant, the ethnographic interviews typically involved approaching the interviewee at the coffee machine, when going for lunch, or by entering a Skype meeting early.

3.4 **Analysis**

The analysis was an iterative process of cycling back and forth between data, emergent concepts, and the literature (Locke et al., forthcoming). It involved the development of empirical process narratives leading to a model (Berends & Deken, 2021), using empirically grounded concepts as well as concepts of framing in the literature, and coding of data. The analytical process did not simply replicate a standard template for analysis, which should not be conflated with trustworthiness and quality (Pratt et al., 2020). Instead, it involved multiple analytical processes, artifacts and tasks tailored to the research question and address challenges that emerged while maintaining a balance between systematicity and creativity (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021). We pursued this in different interdependent, overlapping tasks.

First, the second author acted as ethnographer, engaging in explorative analytical reflections on possible patterns and areas of interest while remaining immersed in the field (Emerson et al., 1995). The author's analytical reflections were qualified by an iterative process of revisiting field notes and interview transcripts, rereading the literature, and engaging in conversations with the first author, probing for different interpretations and possible theoretical foci such as temporality, sensemaking, and frames. From these iterations

emerged themes pivoting on (re)framing practices and their consequentiality in strategy formation. The analytical reflections were recorded in memos separate from the field notes and interview guides. They were used to further focus on (re)framing practices and to inform the data collection process. Previous literature was used at this stage, as well as during the subsequent coding, as conceptual inspiration to sensitize the researchers to different themes in the data without preempting the emergence of categories (Locke et al., forthcoming; Smets et al., 2015).

Second, NVivo 12 was used to identify and investigate practices of (re)framing strategy. Informed by in-field analytical reflections, analysis focused on central strategic actors, strategy proposals, changing concepts, and catchphrases across data sources to pinpoint who and what triggered (re)framing activity. Coding of framing activity led to the emergence of several framing practices. As provisional objects, codes evolved through analytical iterations between data and theorizing (Locke et al., forthcoming; see Table 3 for particularly salient practices.) We developed multiple descriptive process narratives, contextualizing how the various (re)framing practices unfolded in strategy formation processes (Langley, 1999).

Finally, and most importantly for the development of the analysis, the researchers organized the narratives in sequences and combined them into a single comprehensive empirical narrative. This narrative was organized around what emerged as multiple, iterative cycles of reframing strategy. The narrative composition focused on how practices in strategy framing and reframing (with iterative, practical-evaluative, and prospective dimensions) were enacted fluidly and with different consequences in shaping ongoing strategy formation in the highly complex context of digital transformation. Developing the empirical narrative involved a combination of two types of narrative process composition suggested by Berends and Deken (2021): inductive and conceptualized narrative analytical steps. New conceptual insights emerged or were refined in subsequent iterations of analysis and writing-up (Berends & Deken, 2021). As researchers, narrativizing and analyzing processes and practices of (re)framing in ongoing strategy formation (Jarzabkowski, Lê, et al., 2016), we too were engaged in framing (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). For example, a degree of tactical stylization was necessary for foregrounding and/or backgrounding practices and events (Berends & Deken, 2021) and in the use of a conjuctive style of theorizing (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). A key BEM informant has read the paper and expressed the view that it resonated highly with his own experiences.

4. Findings: Practices and dynamics of (re)framing in the ongoing becoming of strategy

BEM was under increasing pressure for digitalizing at the time of the fieldwork, when digital transformation, and particularly the commoditization of data, was a critical priority of most of its competitors. Processes, products, and value propositions were being reconfigured with digital technologies. "Data business" was the new anticipated competitive advantage; it was expected to become a crucial differentiator in what the firm's CIO, Jack Wright, referred to as the "digital battlefield" during the initial work of framing strategy for digital transformation. While the communicated ambitions for a grand transformation were high, ethnographic immersion in the global IT department unearthed how strategizing, and particularly restrategizing, for digital transformation unfolded as an ongoing accomplishment through numerous micro-processes with different directionality and tempi, with actors entering and exiting. One dimension of strategizing complexity pertained to stakeholder complexity involving the entire value chain and firm. Drawing on a whiteboard, Erik Svensson explained the pluralistic strategic landscape of the firm from his position in the IT department:

> Up here, we have this [strategy] house. And, we want to be the best in blah and blah [mission statements]. Then, we have our strategic focus areas. Then, we have our Finance area, which is Legal, it is IT, it is Finance, it is Treasury, and it is Risk and stuff like that. Then, we have Product Development, HR, and these are the more supporting functions. Then, we have [R&D], where they develop the [product]. Here, we also have Sales. Then, we have S&A, and I think we have one more […]. I am over here [points to the whiteboard]. So that's the strategy of [this department]. [Then] there's a strategy up here, and there is a strategy here, and there is a strategy here, and there is a strategy here and a strategy here. (Erik Svensson, interview)

Within this complex context, pluralistic strategizing processes occurred (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). Mr. Svensson explained his experience:

> So, if I make a strategy over here to support them [the business], then, of course, I go and look at this strategy and say, "OK how do I interpret this strategy? How do I set my team off to be able to deliver?" Then, we have a colleague over here who looks at this strategy and gets something else out of it. […] it is just the further you go down [the hierarchy] the more you just interpret it for your own best—right? So, the strategy it is […] it's difficult […]. (Erik Svensson, interview)

Framing efforts around digital transformation strategy thus involved multiple lines of cooperation, struggle, and contestation within and between departments over strategies for position and for symbolic, economic, and political resources within the firm. Furthermore, BEM was characterized by a fast-paced, volatile, and complex internal and external environment, which compelled practitioners to continually reorganize, restrategize, and reallocate resources. As an enterprise architect instructed the ethnographer, "Don't bother [to study the organizational diagram]. In two months from now, it will be totally different anyway" (Jenson Ward, ethnographic interview).

Through the following ethnographic narrative, we show how practitioners involved in processes of (re)strategizing for digital transformation at BEM continuously framed and reframed recent and emerging strategy in the face of demands for adjustments vis-à-vis other strategizing processes and to address the shifting constellations of actors. Ongoing (re)framing sought to mobilize support for new strategy processes and to advance the department's broader strategic mandate in the firm, as well as the individual legitimacy of strategy participants. (Re)framing practices involved investing previous framing concepts and catchphrases with new meaning, building them on top of or as extensions of each other, and clustering, merging, reassociating, and circumscribing them. For instance, practices in iterative reframing of strategy enabled practitioners to translate concepts of recent strategy processes into new strategy proposals, while also demarcating strategies currently under formation from previous ones.

Table 3: Iterative and projective practices engaged in ongoing (re)framing of strategy

Indicative first-order concepts	**Themes**	**Theoretical dimension**

-Reintroducing Cloud and AI from Analytic in a "new" way -Glorifying and reusing the past catchphrase "change the game" in LEAD	Recycling framing concepts, catchphrases, or idioms from recent strategy proposals by investing them with new meaning	Framing to actively construct continuity
- Renaming digital transformation as Cloud to strike a chord at the executive level - Arguing through incorporating multiple past and emerging understandings of digital transformation	Merging past framing concepts/catchphrases/idioms with those emerging to establish degrees of continuity and possible resonance across past and unfolding strategy work	
- Talking about digital transformation as disruption as opposed to Cloud - Adjusting wording on Cloud because of the conversation in the meeting and the people who are present	Reshaping boundaries of a (recycled) concept (expanding/narrowing its scope) to reconfigure constellations of relevant strategy actors, activities, or resources	
-Combining formulations of digital transformation from both Analytic and Digital Transformation Base in one sentence -Formulating the new Analytic strategy based on the known concepts of Cloud and AI	Clustering legitimized concepts/catchphrases/idioms from past and/or emerging strategies to transfer legitimacy	
-Hollowing past concepts related to Analytic and questioning their legitimacy -Constructing a negative understanding of digital transformation in Analytic in retrospect, and building a new formulation from this -Emphasizing how the agenda items in Digital Transformation Base are different from those of Analytic	Reinterpreting framing concepts and catchphrases of past strategizing in unfolding work with new (often negative) meaning to introduce, legitimize, and shape new framing concepts	Framing to demarcate emerging from past strategy
- It was not me, it was him, and I was not to blame for Digital Transformation Base not succeeding" - Undermining formulations of Digital Transformation Base strategy and questioning the level of ambition - "The reason we failed was because of competing understandings of what digital transformation was"	Blaming previous participants and their framing concepts while downplaying personal involvement in past strategizing and arguing for "newness" to sustain legitimacy	

Table 3 presents particularly salient framing practices and their immediate consequentiality in strategy formation processes. The following narrative provides an in-depth analysis of how these practices of (re)framing strategy were engaged in situations of high complexity and uncertainty.

4.1 Analytic strategy proposal: Framing strategy digital transformation with umbrella concepts and catchphrases

Building digital capabilities through the joint formulation of a digital transformation strategy was collectively communicated by S&A, R&D, IT, and executive management as a critical priority for BEM and as a means to capture new business opportunities in an industry undergoing global transformation. Analytic was formed as a major strategic collaboration project between these departments to "jumpstart the data business," which was supposed to transform the core value proposition and identity of BEM. Over time, department silos had emerged with exclusive ownership of different data streams. The IT department managed the enterprise resource planning system; R&D owned the data from BEM's physical product; and the S&A department had exclusivity on data concerning customers and sales. Before Analytic, this situation had led to political tensions between units, which presented difficulties for collaboration and alliance formation across departments. Therefore, the heads of departments and executive management hoped that Analytic would serve as a unifying project to overcome these tensions by jointly framing and enacting a strategy for digital transformation.

When the S&A and R&D departments began developing "blue ocean strategies," the CIO, Jack Wright, was supposed to futureproof the IT infrastructure by facilitating seamless use of new technologies and anticipating whatever "data business" requirements would arise. The solution was an overarching application programming interface (API) management tool capable of enabling service integration under the collective ownership of IT, Finance, R&D, and S&A. The API tool was an additional legitimization of the IT department's role in the project. It allowed the other parties to exploit a cluster of digital technologies such as natural language processing and predictive analytics based on Big Data. Therefore, the scope and content of the Analytic strategy under formation were being expanded to include a broad spectrum of new digitalization-related framing concepts, catchphrases, and idioms.

Previously, the IT department in BEM had acted as a cost center and played a predominantly supporting role in providing IT solutions to accommodate global business demands. However, strategists within the IT department, led by Jack Wright, regarded the growing general interest in digital transformation as an opportunity to advance the department's wider strategic influence and expand its mandate in corporate strategy conversations. This was to be achieved by building an all-encompassing digital transformation framing, clustering numerous framing concepts and technologies into a single digitalization strategy, and discursively framing digitalization concepts as a means to various strategic achievements for R&D, Finance, and S&A. This framing would facilitate a greater strategic role in the firm for the IT department. In the following excerpt from a presentation, Jack Wright frames the Analytic strategy using a cluster of concepts he expects the business to buy into:

> An example of various important areas of (Analytic)—either active, planned, or potential—across various parts of BEM's value chain are [IoT, Big Data, Analytics, Machine Learning, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Cloud Mobile, Design Thinking, LEAN, etc.]. In all of this [the digital transformation of BEM)] Analytic [...] has a very large role to play, especially within S&A, but they [the concepts above] are by no means the full scope of what our competitors are achieving with digital [transformation]. (Jack Wright, PowerPoint)

In this manner, Jack Wright sought early on to frame the digital transformation strategy through a multifaceted umbrella concept, clustering numerous concepts of digital technologies that were expected to enhance business operations. The cluster was used to frame strategic challenges and measures and expanded with additional selling points, such as the enablement of automation, robotics, and E-commerce, thereby promoting the benefits of Analytic for R&D and S&A.

Initially, this approach proved successful in that the IT department was allowed to play a key strategic role in pushing the overarching digital transformation strategy agenda in BEM. However, as R&D, S&A, and IT began executing roadmaps in their established processes, problems occurred, such as inconsistency in the quality of data. Power struggles

also resurfaced over who should have access to what data, and what digital transformation entailed in practice. In response, the IT task group discarded its ambition of gaining support for a formal digital transformation strategy proposal from top management. Instead, it proceeded informally with seemingly autonomous strategizing for digital transformation. A middle manager explained:

> It was the idea [in Analytic] that we should take this to the next level and make some products we could sell in the market, but no one really had any idea of what we were going to use it for. Therefore, it has been difficult to create commitment in executive management around what we must do and what are we targeting. (Michael Erikson, interview)

Isolated and unorchestrated digital innovation projects emerged within the different departments. Often, these projects addressed local issues only, which made them unfit for the scale required by BEM. After a period of divergent strategizing for digital transformation, S&A grew impatient and acquired a digital intelligence company with the analytical capabilities that Analytic had been intended to provide. A senior specialist explained:

> And he [Alan Perry, Head of S&A] basically said, "I don't trust anybody in this company to build anything. I'm going to buy it outside and see what can be delivered based on the data that can then be rounded up and provided." (Mike Brewer, interview)

This acquisition formally ended Analytic and led to a major round of restructuring throughout BEM, including the laying off of the Head of R&D and of Jack Wright. The position of the Head of S&A, Alan Perry, was strengthened, as he received support and funding from executive management to execute the acquisition.

The attempt by the IT department to obtain a stronger strategic mandate by advancing a broad framing of digital transformation in joint strategizing with other departments had backfired, and control went instead to S&A. Mike Brewer, a remaining member of the IT task group, explained the end of the project as a result of the inability to frame Analytic so as to bridge competing interests and understandings of digital transformation. This led to divergent strategizing and contestation:

> So, what you had was everybody in their own individual kingdoms looking at their own individual problems and trying to do the best they could […] and then, you have a history that has created a culture of mistrust, lack of collaboration, and ability to align around a common direction and even the ability to create a common direction. (Mike Brewer, interview)

All parties were trying to gain more control and expand their role in devising strategy for digital transformation, in part through competition over which concepts should frame strategy formation.

4.2 (Re)framing while reorganizing for new strategy work

Following Analytic, a high-ranking manager from Finance was appointed interim CIO. He instructed IT to carry on "business as usual" and "keep the lights on" until a new CIO was recruited (interim CIO, meeting observation). Actors previously associated with Analytic began to advance diverse reinterpretations of the turn of events and the recent process of formulating a strategy proposal for digital transformation. They did this in ways that downplayed their roles in the strategy process, investing previous key framing concepts with new meaning and assigning blame elsewhere to sustain their own legitimacy and future participation in strategy work. As Mike Brewer explained: "Analytic completely failed due to the organizational politics and lack of commitment and awareness from executive management." (Mike Brewer, interview). In parallel with an active distancing from the project and its underpinning concepts, involved actors also reframed the strategy process by reinterpreting the inherent concepts of Analytic as having less value. They downplayed its general authenticity, sincerity, and magnitude, and insisted on the "business as usual" idiom advanced by the interim CIO. As Erik Svensson explained, "It is not a big change now. I think a big change would probably more surface when a new CIO comes onboard!" (Erik Svensson, interview). Finally, some individuals reinterpreted the recent strategy process by explaining the turn of events through ex-post rationalization**.** The discussion thus often revolved around how Jack Wright had left BEM due to disagreements about the department's direction.

Following two months of retrospective rationalization and reinterpretation of Analytic, its strategy process, and its key framing concepts, IT middle managers saw an opportunity to

frame new proposals for a joint digital transformation strategy. In the absence of a permanent CIO, three middle managers, Jan Johansson, Liam Thompson, and Flemming Jorgensen, independently formulated a proposal for joint bottom-up strategizing for digital transformation. Initially, they actively sought to signal distinctiveness and distance from Analytic by discursively demarcating the new process of strategy formulation from past "failures." This was done by drawing on recent reinterpretations of Analytics' core concepts and buzzwords. Senior managers engaged in practices of reframing past strategic issues by introducing and shaping concepts such as "Agility" in ways that contrasted with Analytic. They began to invest digital transformation with new meaning, rebuilding its framing to contrast it with the framing concepts associated with the recent strategy process. Simultaneously, however, they constructed new framings by drawing on past strategy materials and framing concepts**,** translating them into work on new strategy proposals and thereby actively building continuity. Jan Johansson advanced his framing of how the new digital transformation strategy should be different by rhetorically invoking "the agile bleeding" as something to be stopped.

The senior managers craved action and continued the task they were previously given in Analytic: to build the BEM enterprise-wide digital transformation platform, this time without the support of other departments or executive management. This window of opportunity resulted in Digital Transformation Base. The hope was that the acquisition had addressed the challenges of sharing data and that stakeholders could therefore start collaborating across departments, creating a more constructive environment for a new ambitious joint strategy proposal for digital transformation. As one of the assigned enterprise architects explained, "R&D and IT have always been fighting for data. With the new acquisition, it is much clearer what we are going for, and it has given BEM the final push over the edge [in forcing them to collaborate]" (Jenson Ward, ethnographic interview). As the team started to reorganize for strategy work in the new Digital Transformation Base project, there was a general sense of optimism and impatience to get going. The senior managers sought to take advantage of this by incorporating changes in the political-corporate environment into the framing, beyond demarcation based on the content of the new initiative. Mike Brewer explained:

> The Digital Transformation Base is a way to acknowledge that now is the time and that there is a potential for synergies across the three organizations [IT, S&A, and R&D]. It is three IT organizations raising a flag, and saying that the time is now to create that BEM roadmap for BEM capabilities […] The context in the industry is different, and we are working in different directions. Let's build digital for BEM. (Mike Brewer, meeting observation)

(Re)framing practices increasingly sought to bridge and mobilize support from other departments through broad, inclusive framings similar to those of Analytic. Digital Transformation Base unfolded as a process of semi-autonomous, bottom-up strategizing to sustain leeway.

4.3 Digital Transformation Base strategy: (Re)framing digital transformation as "Cloud"

Digital Transformation Base was formalized by the senior management in the IT department through a core project team consisting of Malcolm Lynch, Mike Brewer, and James Marshall. The team's instructions were to frame a new digital transformation strategy that could bridge the other departments, achieving buy-in and launching Digital Transformation Base bottom-up. The team was tasked with developing the strategy proposal under a steering committee consisting of senior management. The project team was allowed to deploy various resources for strategizing, such as funding for external consultants and key internals involved elsewhere in the IT department. However, because resources were already fully allocated, this was unpopular within the IT department. Contestation of the team's strategy project from within the IT department was particularly problematic, because the team was working under time constraints. Malcolm Lynch invoked the concept of time pressure as he established a deadline (two months hence) for delivering a strategy proposal for digital transformation with buy-in from the entire BEM: "So the aim before the summer holidays is that outcomes should be in place and that we have a shared strategy proposal as an argument for digital transformation for all of BEM" (Malcolm Lynch, meeting observation). The project team thus set out to strategize swiftly for digital transformation while constructing notions of considerable time pressure. The steering committee perceived significant leeway in the absence of a CIO: "The

absence of Jack has given us room to talk about these things. He always wanted the business case and was not willing to take risks." (Liam Thompson, ethnographic interview)

As work commenced, the main strategy initiators from the steering committee wanted to clearly demarcate strategy formation for Digital Transformation Base from previous strategies. Malcolm Lynch engaged in framing practices that actively distinguished the content and scope of this project from previous strategy work, thus creating rhetorical distance from Analytic and building support for the new strategy and his role in it: "This is different from Analytic. We need to be focused on the old ways vs. the new ways. There has to be something new to becoming digital" (Malcolm Lynch, meeting observation). While they engaged framing practices to establish "a new start" in digital transformation strategy, the middle managers in Digital Transformation Base were actively recycling and reframing selected elements from the previous strategy formulation process under Analytic. Jan Johansson reframed the established IT setup with terms such as "slow" and "expensive" in order to demarcate "old" from "new" and to justify the ambitions of the new Digital Transformation Base. Moreover, involved practitioners began to build and shape new framing concepts to distinguish the current strategy work from the previous strategy process and proposal. Peter Flemington argued that Cloud would become a new key concept in Digital Transformation Base:

> Now that we are becoming a data company, there are some things we need to have under control. It is extremely exciting that Cloud [technology] will become a driver for Legal. Usually, it is the other way around. (Peter Flemington, meeting observation)

Effort was invested in framing practices that sought to sell and legitimize the new strategy formulation to other departments, anticipating that buy-in from them would secure support from top management. The steering committee also framed how digital transformation would enable the business to realize new opportunities through collaboration with the IT department. As in the case of Analytic, a cluster of old and new concepts and technologies to be included in Digital Transformation Base was under development. For instance, the committee framed Digital Transformation Base with arguments about how it would improve the possibility of S&A winning "governmental tenders" through better "data quality" and improved "testing

opportunities" for R&D with "digital twins." Jan Johansson set out the key selling points to be emphasized by the steering committee:

> [The] CFO, our CTO, and, ultimately, also our CEO [have to receive the strategy proposal], and we need to sell them this project—not on optimization in IT. I guess we can make optimizations for around 100 million here, which is fine. But, if we move the perspective to the rest of the organization, we are talking billions. (Jan Johansson, meeting observation)

As the strategy work progressed, the project team became concerned with the framing of the strategy proposal for Digital Transformation Base. Over the course of several revisions and meetings, members of the project team noticed increasing similarities to Analytic. They voiced fears of repeating what they considered to be past mistakes and began questioning the steering committee on how Digital Transformation Base was different from Analytic. Reviewing key concepts and formulations in relation to Big Data and increased data quality of a strategy draft for Digital Transformation Base, Mike Brewer stated: "We have done it all before! I went through the draft and highlighted all the elements that were part of Analytic. We need to be careful not to do the exact same thing again!" (Mike Brewer, meeting observation). In response to the criticism, the steering committee resorted to their initial framing that the acquisition had created a new situation for collaboration between R&D, S&A, and IT, and proceeded to revise framings focused on unifying and "accelerating" dispersed efforts. In the following example from a meeting, Jan Johansson and Liam Thompson tried to rhetorically associate new concepts of speed and evidence-based decision making with past concepts to create continuity, while clearly demarcating the old from the new:

> Jan Johansson: We should include the rhetorical questions: Should we be able to work fast? Should we be able to make decisions based on data? What then is our point of departure? This document should say that if we accelerate and join these things, we will gain from it. Instead of driving individual projects in all parts of the organization, the burning issue might as well be this. What we need is a joint plan.

> James Marshall: Yes, because I wondered what was different compared to what we have done previously […] But—it is the fact that we are collectively […]
>
> Jan Johansson: Yes! If we can do it collectively, we have better bargaining power; we can clean up our application stack and do an overall cost reduction and so on […]
>
> Liam Thompson: The work done previously is not bad. The political arena is just different now.
>
> Jan Johansson: The climate […] to make things grow has not been in place.
>
> Liam Thompson: But don't throw away the old—use what you can!

They combined demarcating and association framing practices to balance continuity and differentiation, thereby building on previous work while maintaining the notion of doing things differently in the highly complex and uncertain context of digital transformation. This required ongoing adjustment of frames of reference for strategy. They were, therefore, able to refine their temporary framings, and they sought to prevent the possible adverse effects of relying on just one practice. As initial opposition to the strategy proposal waned, work progressed and the formulation of a written strategy took form. The document framed digital transformation to resonate with the interests of R&D and S&A in exploiting Cloud technology by merging digital transformation with Cloud technology. Jan Johansson explained his intention:

> So, how can we look at the fact that the business is using the word Cloud about something that is more than just, what should I say, the technical Cloud? […] To a large extent, they use it as a synonym for that [agile ways of working], and that is what I would like to piggyback on. (Jan Johansson, interview)

However, in merging framings of digital transformation with framings of Cloud, the project group from IT became uncertain about what Digital Transformation Base was turning into, now that it had become heavily associated with Cloud. Martin Hughes addressed the issue

during a meeting: “Currently, there are different perspectives on what digital transformation is” (Martin Hughes, meeting observation). The project group and the steering group responded to diverging digital transformation framings by arguing that “we need a common language” (Martin Hughes, meeting observation.). Nevertheless, struggles over what this language should be continued. The conflict caused confusion and affected the framings, with some parties associating frames of digital transformation with past rhetorical resources in pursuit of continuity and common ground. This is demonstrated in the following interaction:

> Stewart Fisher: What is the scope for it [Digital Transformation Base]? Is it IT migrating to the Cloud or is it IT and R&D—what is it?
>
> Liam Thompson: It is a transformation and not Cloud!

Common ground was not established, however, and a tension emerged between the project team’s work and the instructions they had been given by the steering committee. The project team tried to push the strategy forward and concretize deals with other departments to evolve the digital transformation strategy. They began to doubt the instructions from the steering group. Tensions deepened, and the project team became unsure of how to progress. The following vignette, based on field notes, illustrates the competing interests and framings of how to move forward:

> Malcolm Lynch: [mumbling] I just feel that things are a bit loose […]
>
> Jan Johansson: Then you should ask questions! If you have something, then put it on the table.
>
> Malcolm Lynch: [sounding a little baffled while clearing his throat] Is it correct that we are going for the digital transformation to gain speed, and that we see Cloud as the solution to get services?
>
> Jan Johansson: This [Digital Transformation Base] is an explorative base. It is a process of analysis we are in now, meaning that the frame is not set yet. You should also contribute—you have to chip in. Concerns are welcome, but they have to be grounded!

> Liam Thompson: We need to have a digital transformation within the next few years anyway, [and] you can see Cloud as a synonym for digital transformation.

Over time, the tensions between the project team and the steering committee resulted in the sense of urgency giving way to hesitation. The team started to lose confidence in the progress of Digital Transformation Base. Eventually, they began to disassociate themselves from the strategy proposal and to rearrange their work priorities. The tensions brought the project to a standstill; this was cemented by an email from the steering committee stating that the series of weekly Digital Transformation Base meetings was terminated because the steering group would instead prioritize a more precise constellation of relevant people. This email brought Digital Transformation Base to a formal conclusion.

4.4 (Re)framing while reorganizing for new strategy work

As BEM prepared for the summer break, which had been the deadline for Digital Transformation Base, the office became increasingly deserted and the previous sense of urgency and opportunity disappeared. Managers and IT specialists directed their attention to other projects while retrospectively reinterpreting the previous strategy episode and its framings of digital transformation strategy. Therefore, multiple reinterpretations of the past strategy process were subsequently made by ex-participants in Digital Transformation Base to transition into and justify their participation in upcoming strategy processes. Within the project team, Malcolm Lynch built a framing that retrospectively downplayed his role and blamed James Marshall:

> We had a Skype meeting on the Digital Transformation Base just before we went on vacation, and the meeting was basically concerning the fact that James, well […] It was James who did it […] The involvement of the stakeholders had gone haywire. (Malcolm Lynch, interview)

As Malcolm Lynch had been part of the project group, he was under fire and motivated to deflect blame elsewhere. However, James Marshall did not share Malcolm's view and invoked other explanations for why the strategy process had stalled:

> Well, it is because we have the new CIO who just started. [He has] the first 100 days of the presidential office opportunity, where he wants to get in and see what the strategy for the whole of IT is, and what it should be moving ahead for the next 1 to 3 years. […] So, our job is to play our work into his, and that means that our digital focus—it is not on hold, but still in somewhat of a waiting position […]. (James Marshall, interview)

Mike Brewer presented another active reinterpretation of Digital Transformation Base and the IT department's role in it, repeating the message from the steering group. In spite of the previous discussions within the steering group and project team on how to expand their strategic influence in the organization, he retrospectively constructed a version in which it was not the role of the IT department to dictate how the rest of the firm should work with digital transformation processes:

> We are entering areas where we simply do not have any mandate in the business. Digital transformation from the business perspective must be driven by the business itself. We simply cannot do that for them. We can help and inspire, as we have done for a period now. (Mike Brewer, interview)

Subsequently, the management secretariat announced a new CIO, Stanley Cox, and the constitution of a new team that would work across departments solely within IT. Detached from existing units, this team would ensure that the IT department once again became relevant to digital transformation strategizing, eventually re-entering corporate strategy conversations on digital transformation. A new framing was built with an emphasis on challenging and rethinking ways of working, as well as on increasing value-driven IT by focusing on customer needs. Stanley Cox avoided people from the senior management layer and chose a middle manager, Erik Svensson, who had not been involved in Digital Transformation Base, to lead the team. Erik Svensson explained that his team would work with digitalization, albeit the word "digital" did not appear in the project title:

> One could feel that it is on purpose that we have steered clear of the word "digital" […] it was on the table before I was involved. There, it was digital transformation of IT. But people were concerned that some might think that "digital" has become a diluted word, and it says so much without saying anything really. […] The purpose is to digitalize. Or, well, the purpose is to disrupt some of the ways we work today. It is to disrupt and to be critical toward existing structures and seeing if we can do it differently. (Erik Svensson, interview)

Digital transformation was actively invested with new meaning to differentiate it from past work on Analytic and Digital Transformation Base. The framing catchphrases now constructed digital transformation as disruption of existing ways of working, while adding distance from concepts containing the idea of "digital."

4.5 LEAD strategy: (Re)framing digital transformation as "disruption"

Stanley Cox named the emerging strategy process LEAD. He explained that it would comprise a semi-autonomous task force with financial, managerial, and product-specific competencies that could aid existing projects from the sideline and drive new initiatives. Stanley Cox selected three employees in IT—Jacob Corneliussen, Laurel Flemington, and Dennis Olson—to join Erik Svensson. In contrast to previous efforts to sell strategy to S&A and R&D, LEAD was to focus exclusively on the IT department. The framings of digital transformation with umbrella concepts or digital transformation as a business-oriented translation and pitching of Cloud were discarded. These were now actively invoked in a way that created distance between the previous process and the current process: "All (team members) have broader generic profiles and not specific technological foci" (Erik Svensson, meeting observation)

Top management, having appointed Stanley Cox as CIO, were eager to promote him as the right choice and to ensure that he had the resources necessary for success. This was evident from the fact that he was immediately allowed to speak at board meetings, something the former CIO, Jack Wright, had not usually done. Mike Brewer explained:

> IT had its first-ever board presentation—BOARD! I mean not executive management, but board presentation. […] Stanley Cox pitched. […] And he got concrete support from some of the other board members on a few of the agenda items. (Mike Brewer, interview)

With this top management support, Stanley Cox had a mandate and could confidently initiate strategizing under LEAD to challenge established ways of working.

The team invited the rest of the IT department to three meetings that served as a platform for questions from the established branches and as a way for the LEAD team to gain input for concretizing their work. During the meetings, participants voiced skepticism and asked critical questions. Comments and questions showed that most of the IT department were unnerved by this new independent group reporting directly to the management layer above them. The team had support, funding, projects, and novelty; therefore, its members did not initially take much notice of the opposition, although dissatisfaction in the IT department was growing regarding the extraordinary resources available to the team. Standing in line for the coffee machine, Otis Jensen gave the ethnographer his view on the LEAD team:

> The LEAD team!?—That's not really … well, I should learn to keep my mouth shut. What they do are a lot of small changes. I mean, where is the transformation? Why would you let yourself be limited by how the situation is? Instead, you should wipe the slate clean and rethink it all. That is transformation! (Otis Jensen, ethnographic interview)

Seemingly unaffected by the resistance, Stanley Cox communicated the significance of the new strategic team's role in guiding other departments and contributing advice, talking down the previous work on digital transformation in BEM:

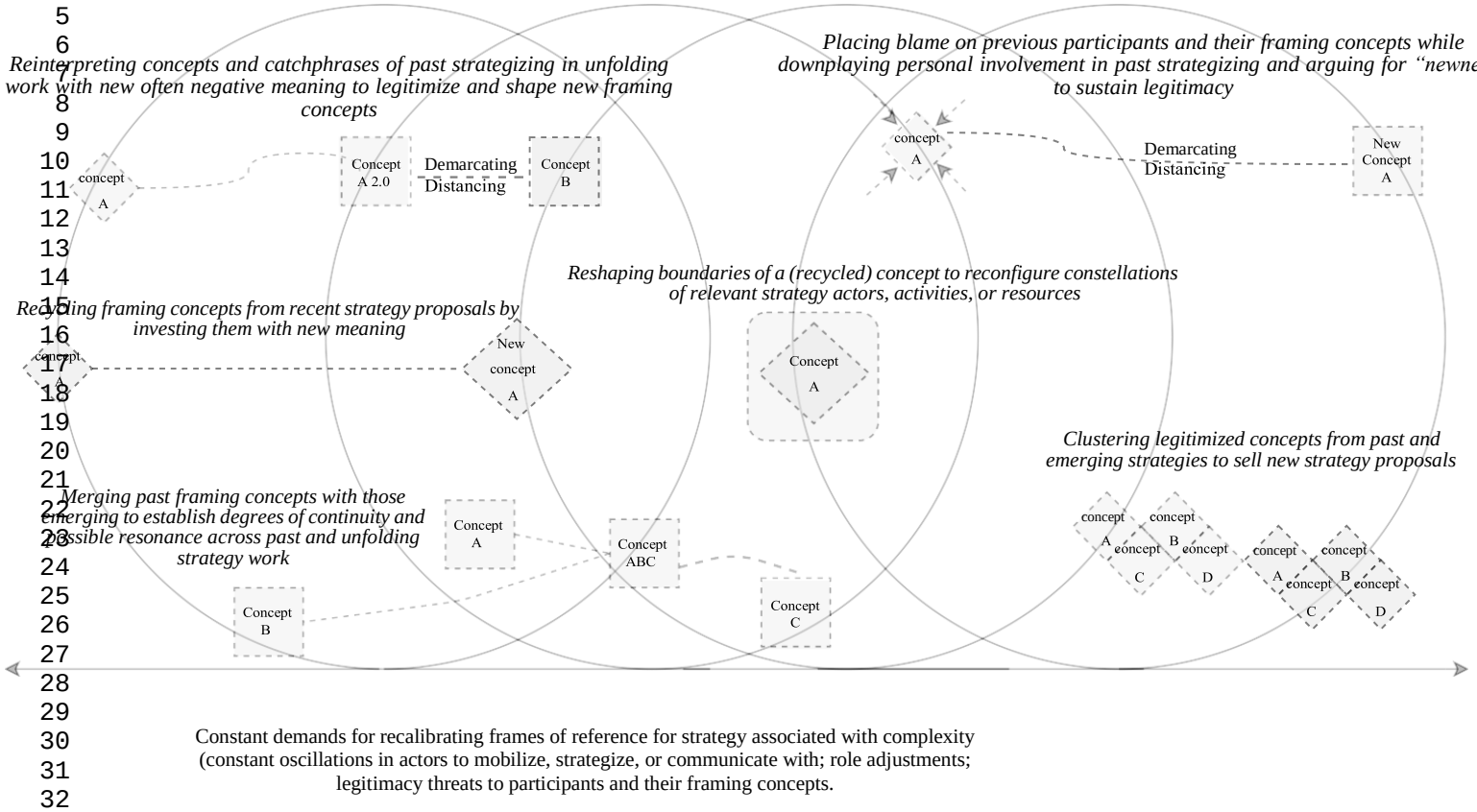
> That is also one of my main points about digitalization. You have to be aware of what you call digital […]. BEM talks a lot about digital transformation, but if we are talking about transforming something, then someone will have to tell me what we are transforming into! (Stanley Cox, interview)

The LEAD strategy team eventually became an established element of the IT department's strategy processes. It worked on disrupting the rest of BEM's IT department for a year until the team was dissolved. Erik Svensson was promoted to become a member of the IT department's management, and other team members were tasked with finishing and supporting a project they had initiated by structuring BEM's data in shared Cloud technology. Enterprise architect Jacob Corneliussen expressed what it was like to work under ongoing strategic framing and reframing of what digital transformation should entail, in terms of problems, solutions, and strategic choices being constructed:

> I have basically been doing the same thing out here for the past three years […]. The thing is with this and when you are talking about "digital transformation"—if we want to call it that—is that it is a blue ocean. You never know when you are done. The other guys are working on a thing, and when that thing—that looks like another thing we have already built—is finished, we move on. (Jacob Corneliussen, ethnographic interview)

These findings show how strategizing in the highly complex context of digital transformation unfolds as an ongoing process of (re)framing recent and emergent strategies. Strategists are faced with constant demands to recalibrate frames of reference to address shifting constellations of actors and to renew the legitimacy of their own strategy participation and contributions. Strategists enter and exit the ongoing process of strategizing, fluidly combining (re)framing practices. They advance specific elements, and reframe them in the face of constant threats to legitimacy, in order to mobilize support while negotiating individual and departmental roles. These practices of reweaving strategy frames reach into the past, present, future, in their mutual constitution, by operating across multiple past and present iterative cycles of restrategizing, recycling, and adding distance to framing resources, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Processes and practices of (re)framing ongoing strategy formation under high complexity



Constant demands for recalibrating frames of reference for strategy associated with complexity (constant oscillations in actors to mobilize, strategize, or communicate with; role adjustments; legitimacy threats to participants and their framing concepts.

Discussion

This article asked how framing practices interact in ongoing strategy formation processes as they unfold iteratively under conditions of high complexity. Strategic framing research tends to take stability to be the normal state of frames. For example, interpretive strategy research has often addressed how strategic framing wins support and creates legitimacy for implementation of a singular, episodic change (Cornelissen et al., 2011; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). We refine understanding by grounding the study of framing in strategy formation in an ontology of ongoing becoming (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). The study operationalizes this orientation in the empirical context of a firm and industry undergoing digital transformation, with all the complexity and uncertainty that implies. Drawing on the strong process ontological turn in SAP research (Kohtamäki et al., forthcoming), it brings to light processual dynamics and practices of framing that are different than those uncovered in previous strategy research. The contributions of this study are threefold.

First, it provides novel insight into the work of strategy framing by revealing different practices of ongoing framing and reframing, how they are engaged and interact, and their consequentiality as strategy formation processes iteratively unfold. As practitioners progress in their strategizing, the high levels of complexity and uncertainty in the emergence of unanticipated demands for adjustment induces continual reframing of strategy. Previous research has shown that when strategists communicate a frame of reference for an episodic strategic change, this allows employees to add to the form and meaning of the strategists' framing of the change (Logemann et al., 2019). Hence, it provides employees with an open form and way of making sense to win acceptance (Logemann et al., 2019). Interpretive framing research has thus captured how stakeholders subsequently add to strategy framing in the process of implementation, characterizing the impact of framing on organizational sensemaking as a nonlinear process (Logemann et al., 2019). However, less attention has been dedicated to how strategists constantly work on reframing, recalibrating framings of catchphrases, idioms, and keywords to meet demands for the continual revision of strategy. This study shows that strategists continuously mobilize (re)framing practices that work with framings and framing resources of the past, present, future, in their mutual constitution, as they reframe strategy iteratively under conditions of high complexity (see Figure 1).

Within research that accounts for the social and political dynamics of the meaning construction involved in strategy framing, the passage of frames from past to present strategy work has been regarded as a relatively unproblematic process. An assumption has been that experience accumulates in frames that are carried into current strategy work, and then frames (if not resonant) are subject to frame alignment practices (Kaplan, 2008). The present study answers calls (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013) for a more nuanced understanding of how past strategizing and its framing resources are brought into and reframed in the present. It demonstrates how strategists seek constantly to demarcate strategy formation through a host of reframing practices that rework past framing materials, such as key concepts and catchphrases. Often, practitioners combine practices of recycling (framing concepts from recent strategy processes into new strategies) with distancing practices (retrospectively constructing past framing resources in contrast to strategy currently under formation). In this way, they may counteract some of the adverse effects of resorting to a single type of practice.

In work on new strategy proposals, framing resources involved in work on previous strategies are constantly mobilized and reinterpreted, delegitimized and relegitimized. This is done in an effort to shape and justify new framing concepts and catchphrases in order to build common ground and generate stakeholder support for strategy processes, to (de)legitimize strategy participants, and to expand the strategic mandate in the firm. In this process, the scope of framing is continuously recalibrated to encompass ongoing requirements for reframing in a highly complex and uncertain context, including changes in the range of actors involved. Skilled participants combine framing practices fluidly according to situational exigencies whereby iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective forms of agency interact fluidly in the ongoing process of reframing strategy. This dynamic engagement allows practitioners to sustain legitimacy in the face of unanticipated events and threats to their mandate. One implication of these insights is that even frames of reference for past strategizing cannot be considered stable. Another implication is that, although research has focused on the diagnostic and prognostic features of frames (Kaplan, 2008), the retrospective dimension emphasized in the present study is at least as significant for practitioners, and is itself subject to (re)framing practices.

Second, previous research on specific strategy initiatives has suggested that framing practices lead to either a settled decision or a deferred decision, depending on the level of congruence between frames (Kaplan, 2008). The present analysis across multiple iterative cycles of framing and reframing strategies advances understanding of practices through which even seemingly deferred framings and decisions may resurface and be taken up in later strategy processes. Practitioners revisit framings of past strategy formulations, rework them in novel strategy proposals, and momentarily shift their status from deferred to actual framing and legitimated decisions. This finding provides a perspective on framing dynamics that goes beyond the framing contests model (Kaplan, 2008). It shows that iterative cycles of (re)framing may take their point of departure from the seemingly failed, non-prevailing framings that were discarded in previous cycles of (re)framing strategy. In terms of the present study, most of the framing resources from Analytic were reworked to recalibrate frames of reference for subsequent strategies. They were engaged either as educational reminders of what to avoid or as resources for IS strategists with organizational knowledge to tap into while recycling framing resources. The present study thus contributes insights into the processual dynamics through which interrelationships between preserved and new meanings

are continually re-established (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). One implication of this finding is that framing efforts during a seemingly distinct strategy episode in the process of ongoing restrategizing are not best understood in isolation (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski & Kavas, forthcoming). Indeed, we find that practitioners, when engaged in strategic (re)framing practices that reach back and forth in time, instantiate what on the surface appear to be distinct episodes, although such processes cannot be reduced to stable categories (Hernes, 2014, p. 853).

Third, this study contributes empirical insights into how a specific type of specialists works on framing strategy in a highly complex context. Thus, it responds to calls for up-close observation of how IS specialists perform and exert influence in strategy praxis (Whittington, 2014). Because diverse professional communities work with strategy in large complex firms, these strategizing contexts are pluralistic (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). Scholars of SAP encourage us to pay more attention to the less 'usual suspects' doing strategy who might not always be fluent in its conventional language, yet whose practices nevertheless may be highly consequential for strategy (Jarzabkowski & Kavas, forthcoming). IT specialists have often not received substantial formal education and training in strategy work. They are often situated at the outskirts of core business strategizing as relatively marginalized actors in organizations (Whittington, 2014), for example as service providers (Gerth & Peppard, 2016). Much IS research has, in contrast, focused on the ostensive aspects of IS strategy, deflecting attention away from how it is actually performed: 'the real work' of how practitioners do IS strategy in practice and its iterative micro-processes (Peppard et al., 2014).

The present study contributes empirical insights into how IS strategists actually exert strategic influence through framing practices (Whittington, 2014). These practices for example involve using IS concepts as strategic discursive resources in conversations with shifting constellations of stakeholders. In a different professional context, Faure and Rouleau (2011) detailed the micro-practices through which accountants review mutual understandings of a new role for accountants as strategic advisors and exert strategic influence in conversations with middle managers. The present study shows that IS specialists exploit the polysemy of technological concepts to piggyback on prevailing meanings of strategic relevance to professional communities in different parts of the firm. We also find that swift adjustment of framing practices in making their domain-specific knowledge strategic is key to how IS specialists frame strategy in ways that enhance their legitimacy and influence in

strategic conversations. This is particularly the case given their unsettled, often ambiguous roles amid a diversity of stakeholders. In contrast to research on how practitioners in the traditionally recognized, full professions approach the complexities of their work (Smets et al., 2012), the IS strategists under study here were less involved in the calibration of institutionalized complexity and roles. They were instead involved in constant efforts to relegitimize and exert strategic influence by (re)framing and pitching strategic ideas in the absence of any clear or predetermined role vis-à-vis other specialists or professionals in the firm, yet often from a relatively marginalized position.

The study thus adds to a research conversation revolving around the role of IS strategizing in relation to corporate (digital transformation) strategizing. This conversation spans between a view of IS strategizing as merely aligned with digital transformation strategy and an understanding of IS strategists as part of, shaping, and even potentially driving corporate (digital transformation) strategy (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). The roles of CIO and other IS strategists tend to be ambiguous and unsettled (Gerth & Peppard, 2016), potentially combining relationship-building, strategic thinking, and diplomacy (Peppard, 2010). This study contributes empirical insights into how ongoing strategic role configuration occurs and is legitimized through (re)framing practices. It finds a variety of transitory roles: marginalized and subjugated positions; positions as strategic partners in strategizing for digital transformation; semi-autonomous positions of informal drafting emergent strategy; and internal departmental IS strategizing in support of digital transformation with strategic contributions at the board level. This suggests that the key to understanding how these specialists actually perform in IS strategy work is not necessarily the specific role that the IT department has (or should have) in relation to corporate strategizing. Instead, it hinges on how IS specialists are capable of swiftly combining and switching between strategic practices to facilitate processes of repeated reorganizing, restrategizing and reconfiguring roles amid a range of stakeholders, particularly in complex processes such as digital transformation.

5. Conclusion

This article sheds new light on how practitioners continuously engage and combine (re)framing practices to shape ongoing strategy formation in a highly complex context that demands adjustment to frames of reference. For students and practitioners of strategy, we have shown how framing is less a matter of constructing once-resonant or congruent frames

for strategy to facilitate subsequent implementation, and more a matter of mastering the ongoing, repeated work of discursively and rhetorically reframing strategy. This is particularly the case in situations of high complexity, uncertainty, or volatility. In terms of IS strategy praxis, our practice-based analysis furthers understanding of the range of consequential practices in strategizing work (Whittington et al., 2006). An SAP-inspired approach is particularly useful for practitioners and students of IS because of its conceptual relevance for their work situation (Kieser et al., 2015). It may thus widen understanding of the situation in which IS specialists work and the strategic consequentiality of their practices, even opening up alternative courses of action (Kieser et al., 2015). This study provides a point of reference for further research that refocuses attention away from frames and their organizational consequences and toward framing as a constantly unfolding process.

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Table 1: Overview of strategy work

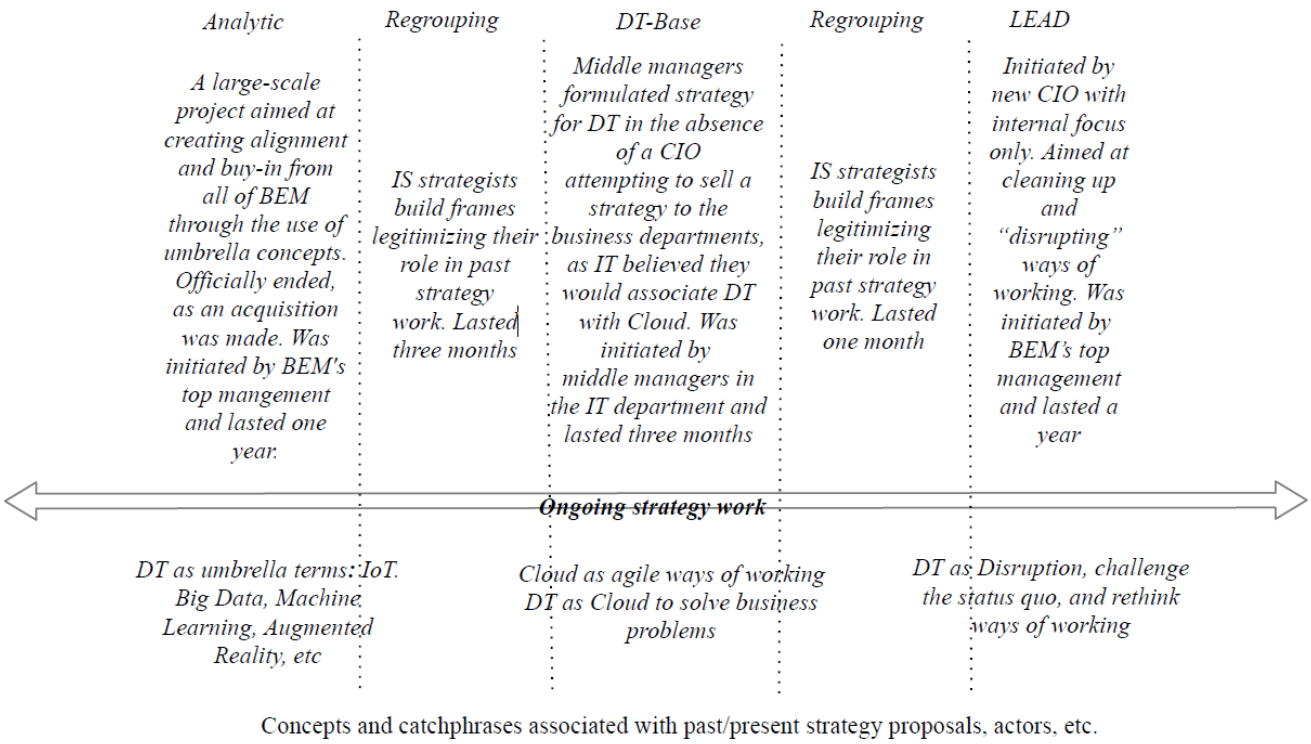

Table 2: Overview of dataset

Data	Amount
Days of fieldwork	*100*
Meetings	*76*
Semi-structured interviews	*23*
Ethnographic interviews	*28*
Emails	*1,300*
Documents	*3,000*

Table 3: Iterative and projective practices engaged in ongoing (re)framing of strategy

Indicative first-order concepts	**Themes**	**Theoretical dimension**
-Reintroducing Cloud and AI from Analytic in a "new" way -Glorifying and reusing the past catchphrase "change the game" in LEAD	Recycling framing concepts, catchphrases, or idioms from recent strategy proposals by investing them with new meaning	Framing to actively construct continuity
- Renaming digital transformation as Cloud to strike a chord at the executive level - Arguing through incorporating multiple past and emerging understandings of digital transformation	Merging past framing concepts/ catchphrases/idioms with those emerging to establish degrees of continuity and possible resonance across past and unfolding strategy work	
- Talking about digital transformation as disruption as opposed to Cloud - Adjusting wording on Cloud because of the conversation in the meeting and the people who are present	Reshaping boundaries of a (recycled) concept (expanding/narrowing its scope) to reconfigure constellations of relevant strategy actors, activities, or resources	
-Combining formulations of digital transformation from both Analytic and Digital Transformation Base in one sentence -Formulating the new Analytic strategy based on the known concepts of Cloud and AI	Clustering legitimized concepts/ catchphrases/idioms from past and/or emerging strategies to transfer legitimacy	
-Hollowing past concepts related to Analytic and questioning their legitimacy -Constructing a negative understanding of digital transformation in Analytic in retrospect, and building a new formulation from this -Emphasizing how the agenda items in Digital Transformation Base are different from those of Analytic	Reinterpreting framing concepts and catchphrases of past strategizing in unfolding work with new (often negative) meaning to introduce, legitimize, and shape new framing concepts	Framing to demarcate emerging from past strategy
- It was not me, it was him, and I was not to blame for Digital Transformation Base not succeeding" - Undermining formulations of Digital Transformation Base strategy and questioning the level of ambition - "The reason we failed was because of competing understandings of what digital transformation was"	Blaming previous participants and their framing concepts while downplaying personal involvement in past strategizing and arguing for "newness" to sustain legitimacy	

Figure 1: Processes and practices of (re)framing strategy under extreme complexity