

Strategising everyday: Using ethnography to unpack the role of front line workers in the strategic process

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Until recently, strategy was routinely studied and presented only as a top down, managerial activity, one in which strategic meaning is made by top managers and disseminated to those further down the hierarchy to implement largely unthinkingly (see, e.g., Porter, 1985; Kaplan and Norton, 1996). There was thus a sense that only top managers had any strategic agency, and that strategic thinking led to strategic activity without any real problem, creating 'marching orders' for those lower down the organisation (Kaplan and Norton, 1996).

However, a growing interest in studying strategy 'as it happens' within organisation has laid a challenge to these assumptions. Studying the 'practice, practitioners and praxis of strategy' (Jarzabkowski, 2005; et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006), has allowed the strategy as practice to reveal that the practice of strategy is not an unproblematic, top-down feature of organisational life. For example, studies of middle managers have shown the important role that this large group of workers can play in the creation, dissemination and implementation of strategy (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005).

There has, subsequent to the recognition of the role that middle managers play, been two calls for further research in this field which are of particular relevance here. Firstly, that strategy-as-practice research needs to explore the full range of 'sites' within the organisation in which strategy is happening to discover the boundaries of strategic action (Rouleau, 2012; Whittington, 2012). For example, do front-line workers count as strategic actors, and if so, how? Secondly, that a wider range of methods which allow the study of 'strategy as it happens' need to be used. At the moment, despite having an interest in 'strategy as practice', there has been a reliance on methods which require the research subjects to 'report' on their practices, for example interviews and journaling (Rouleau, 2012). If we are to study strategy as it actually happens, then we need methods which allow us to do so.

Therefore, this paper seeks to make a contribution to the strategy as practice field by using ethnography, associated ethno-methods (ethnomethodology, conversation analysis) and ethnographic interviews, to explore whether and how the workaday routines and daily 'mundane' lives of front-line workers are strategically significant to the organisation. Ethnography is ideally suited to this task as it has been used for many years to study those in front line roles. For example, we have seen studies of theme park ride operators (van Maanen, 1999), air hostesses (Hochschild, 1985), doormen (Bearman, 2005), funeral directors (Habenstein, 1954), jazz musicians (Becker, 1963b), and strip club hostesses (Allison, 1994). These may sound exciting to the ethnographer, but are often seen as 'mundane' and strategically insignificant by those outside the field. And yet, ethnographic studies of this type are able to show important institutional work is done by these people, their agency in the production of organisational character (Strauss et al., 1973).

In order to explore the work of front-line workers, we study the activities of three radically different groups which fit into this category: university lecturers, ophthalmologists and tour guides. We study

them as they go about their daily working lives and reveal, through these studies of their 'everyday doings and sayings' how they make sense of and give sense to their work. In particular, we are able to explore the ways in which their actions build upon or detract from the organisation's strategy. We will demonstrate the range of ways in which the routine practices of these front-line workers might be seen as strategic in ways which likely have implications for a much wider range of front-line occupations, including through the enactment of strategic aims and the negotiation of conflicting strategic aims.

As such, this paper not only reveals the importance of ethnography for the study and understanding of organisational strategy, but also ties into the key themes of this symposium, exploring how these workers *make sense of* and *give sense to* the organisation's objectives, through the study of their *everyday doings and sayings*.