

## Narrative Enquiry into Service Excellence in Uncertainty: Contributions of Business and Information Technology Strategic Alignment in Zimbabwe

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*Abstract*--Due to the evolution of knowledge, running a business in the twenty first century has significantly changed. Companies are now forced to become more competitive and creative within a context of uncertainty. Despite these challenges, these companies must still thrive and successfully deliver their products and services to their target and future customers.

Zimbabwe experienced two periods of economic crisis that threatened the survival of businesses that were operating in the country. Yet when some businesses collapsed others survived. Through a narrative enquiry research study method, the author sought to identify if the strategic alignment of business and IT strategies helped Zimbabwean companies gain a strategic advantage in this context of uncertainty, thereby helping them overcome the two periods of uncertainty. Ten, one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather the views of business leaders in Zimbabwe. Numerous aspects of the respondents narratives were revealed as the interviews were done. The respondents mentioned that a strategic alignment of IT and business strategies would help their companies overcome the current period of uncertainty. The findings also found that other factors would need to be accommodated and implemented to complement strategic alignment.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The environment within a company operates in, plays an important role that determines the overall success and failure of the company. This environment is comprised of various factors that take place at a microeconomic as well as at a macroeconomic level that interact to determine the operating climate in which businesses will operate in. Businesses compete against each other, creating a healthy operating environment within a country that can help a country occupy a good competitive position as it is rated against other countries across the world.

On a global scale, countries are rated on the way, they compete with each other. Through the use of measurement methods like the Global Competitiveness Report and the Africa Competitiveness report, the rankings of the competitiveness of countries can be observed.

The competitiveness of countries around the world is shown in the Global Competitiveness Heat map shown in Figure 1-1.

Upon analysis of the information displayed in Figure 1-1, it is seen that most of the countries that are lowly rated on the Global Competitive Index are in Africa.

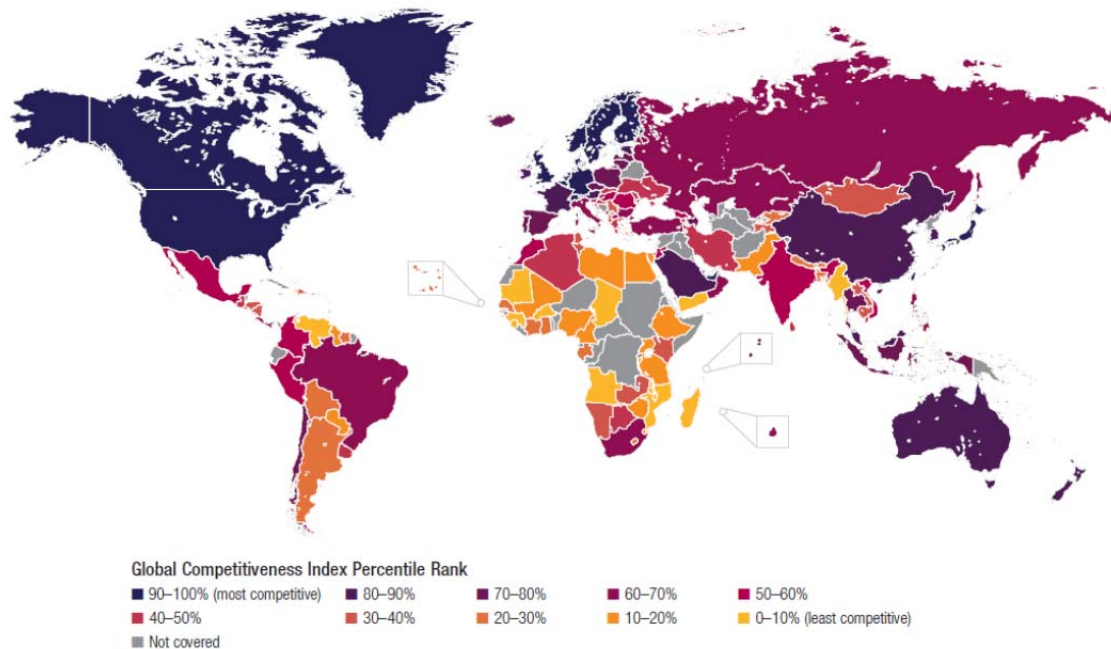


Figure 0-1 - Global Competitive Index Heat Map  
Source: World Economic Forum [31]

In Zimbabwe between 1997 and 2008, an economic crisis, characterized by hyperinflation and culminating in the collapse of the local trading currency, the Zimbabwean Dollar took place and this crisis affected the social and business aspects of life in the country [8, 18, 19].

A second economic crisis is currently being experienced in the country with it being classified as deflation [6] and its effects on business operations are being experienced [14, 17].

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

One of the aspects that have been identified by researchers as affecting a company's ability to be competitive is Strategic Alignment. Strategic Alignment of business's corporate and IT strategies is an area of concern for IT leaders in the developed nations [16]. This has also been mentioned by [2] who cite [15] who mentions that IT executives are worried about the strategic alignment of their business and IT strategies to maintain competitiveness in their sectors of trade.

If the strategic alignment of IT and business strategies can help companies in developed nations maintain competitive advantage in developed countries, then the same question also needs to be asked for developing countries.

As a result, the research study sought to begin a process of assessing the level of awareness of strategic alignment within the context of Zimbabwean businesses operating in the service industry. Of particular focus in the study was trying to find out how strategic alignment of business and IT strategies took place in the context of uncertainty and to find out if the strategic alignment of business and IT strategies helped businesses overcome the two periods of uncertainty that Zimbabwe underwent. The main elements of the research study were:

- The research study was aimed at evaluating the strength of strategic alignment between IT and business strategies in companies that offered services in the Zimbabwean market.
- The research study was also aimed at investigating the relationship between the level of adaptive capability of business leaders and the strength of the alignment between the firm's business and their IT strategies within the service offering companies in Zimbabwe.
- The research also aimed to determine the important factors necessary for the successful planning and implementation of the alignment of a firm's business and technology strategies in the context of uncertainty in Zimbabwe.

### A. Research Questions

Based on the three objectives given in the introduction above, the following research questions made up the context around which the research study took place:

Question 1 – Do successful Zimbabwean service based companies strategically align their IT and business strategies to gain a competitive advantage in their sectors?

Question 2 – Do factors in line with strategic alignment practises, exist that when adopted can help Zimbabwean service based organisations gain a competitive advantage, in the context of the uncertainty of the Zimbabwean operating environment?

### B. Rationale and benefits of the research

The research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding strategic alignment by taking a lesson from a country that has experienced volatile economic challenges and gaining insights that can be used to facilitate strategic alignment practices in an environment experiencing uncertainty. Hyperinflationary and deflationary economic crises are complex events that produce complex interactions and the emergence of previously unknown characteristics that take a place at a social and a business level [18]. During the time of economic crisis is difficult to take time out to draw lessons from the times of trial.

It was the intent of the research study to give insight to the nature of the measures undertaken by business leaders to navigate through periods of hyperinflation and deflation and to make use of a process that could help business leaders in developing countries consider the important role that IT plays in achieving organisational competitiveness.

It is envisaged that the insights gained from the narratives from business leaders who managed to successfully lead their companies through uncertain economic challenges will be able to be used by companies that are offering services in challenging economic environments to ensure that their businesses continue to offer value at the same time are able to benefit from the hindsight expressed through the lived experiences of the business leaders who managed to successfully navigate through the double economic challenge that happened in the country.

## III. PROPOSED MODEL OR CONCEPTUAL METHOD

### A. Literature Review

#### 1) Strategic Alignment

Strategic alignment is a major area of concern for managers responsible for looking after information systems [5]. Some of the areas of concern around strategic alignment include [5]:

- (1) assuming that the IT department is fully aware of the corporate strategy,
- (2) experiencing a misunderstanding between the advantages presented by adopting strategic alignment practices and the competitive advantage associated with strategic alignment,

- (3) some leaders refuse to take on strategic alignment practises because it is felt that strategic alignment is outside the locus of control of the IT manager,
- (4) the time lag between the IT and business planning processes which cause IT interventions to become obsolete by the time they are implemented due to business environment changes.

Strategic alignment has been defined in terms of individual components however, each component must be treated in the context of the holistic view of alignment where the interactions between each of the components can be viewed and the total effect of these interactions taken into account.

The components that make up the definition of strategic alignment are the alignment dimensions, alignment levels, alignment measures and alignment models.

The alignment dimensions according to [5] are the strategic and intellectual, the structural, the social and the cultural dimensions.

The strategic and intellectual dimension, views the proximity between the planning and implementation of strategic alignment [5]. The structural dimension measures the fit in structure between the IT and business strategies [5]. The social dimension is a measure of buy in from the relevant stakeholders to the strategic alignment plans in a firm [5, 20, 24].

The Cultural Dimension of strategic alignment looks at the role of political will and political dynamics within the organisation that have a bearing on the success of a strategic alignment program [5, 28].

The alignment levels refer to the points in the organization at which alignment plans must be represented [5]. According to [5] these levels are at the Organizational level, the System level, the Project level, the individual level.

The organizational level representation takes a cross sectional view of the organization and the alignment challenge is moving the alignment plans from the executive level into the operational levels of an organisation [5]. Some methods that have been employed in effecting this movement cover aspects of knowledge, communication and trust [29, 30].

The system level representation looks at the conversion of the strategic business unit goals into individual goals of the operational staff [5].

The project level representation looks at the measure of the state of level at which the project deliverables of an Information System are matched to the organisation's project goals [11].

The individual level representation looks at the level of alignment at the line level of the organisation and covers areas that look at within line units and across line units [32].

Alignment has been measured along qualitative methods and also based on typologies and taxonomies.

Typologies and Taxonomies largely deal with alignment assessment using quantitative means and through empirical analysis based on survey instruments [5, 23].

Qualitative alignment measures have focused on the use of subjective methods of analysis to get the in depth perspective of respondents on the various aspects of alignment. Studies conducted based on a qualitative approach include work done by [1, 9, 10, 21, 22, 26, 27].

Alignment Models are classified under static and process models [5]. Some of the static models that look at strategic alignment at a single instant in time include the MIT90s Framework, Strategic Alignment Model (SAM), Extended Strategic Alignment Model, MacDonald Model, Baets Model [5]. Strategic alignment models that view the nature of strategic alignment over a period of time and take into account the dynamic nature of the operating environment of a company are called Process Models [12]. Some of the process models documented in literature include the Stages of Growth model, the Lead-lag model and the punctuated equilibrium model [4, 5, 23].

Strategic Alignment in an organisation taking note of the complex interactions in the internal functions of an organization is dealt with using the Co-evolutionary Model of alignment [3]. In this model, strategic alignment is adjusted at three levels of analysis: the individual, operational and strategic level [3]. At the individual level, the focus is to achieve alignment between the user of the Information System and the Information System's infrastructure [3]. At the operational level, the focus is to achieve alignment between the framework that determines how the organization functions and the framework that determines how the Information Systems functions [3]. At the strategic level, the aim is to achieve alignment between the strategy controlling the entire business and the strategy controlling the whole information system plan [3].

Enabling conditions that help these interactions take place are the centred around theories surrounding the principles of adaptation and the scale free dynamics [3].

After considering the use of strategic alignment in a complex environment, the discussion focuses on the use of complexity theory studies and in this particular instance, the Cynefin Framework formed the basis of the study.

## 2) Uncertainty and the Cynefin Framework

The Cynefin framework is the brainchild of David Snowden. It is a sense making framework that helps users of the framework make decisions. The framework is shown in Figure 3-1 below:

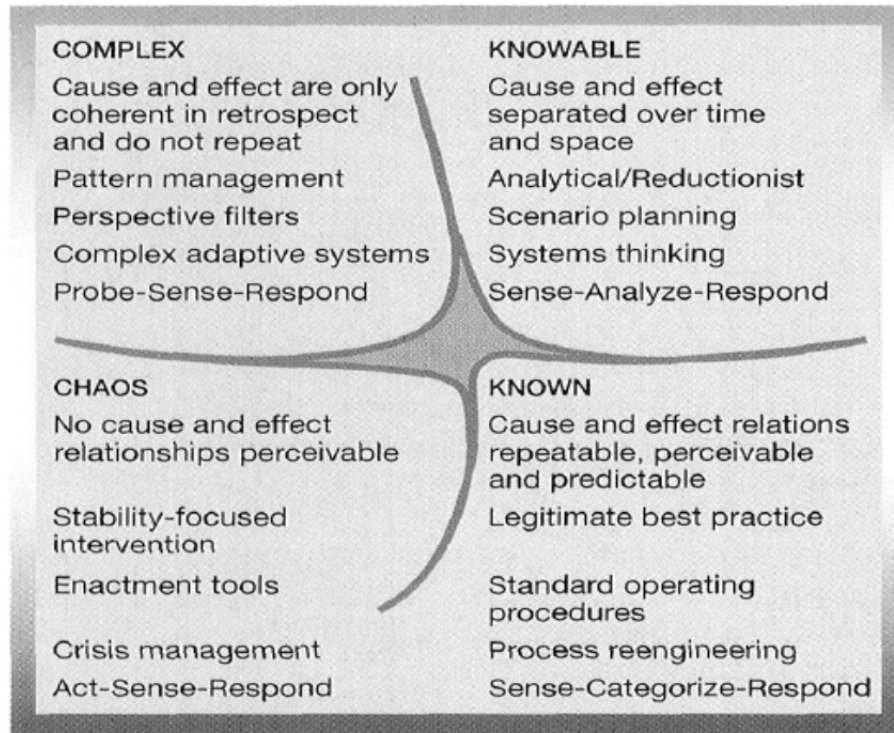


Figure 0-1 - The Cynefin Framework  
Source: Kurtz & Snowden [13]

The framework is comprised of five domains that are broken down into four domains of order and one domain of disorder. These domains of order are called the Known, Knowable, Complex and Chaos Domains [13].

The Known Domain is a domain in which simple cause and effect relationships take place. Solutions to problems that occur in this domain are easy to find and are commonly available. Decisions are made by **sensing** the problems faced, **categorising** the information received that surrounds the problems faced and **responding** to the problems using a readily available predetermined solution that can be found in an operational catalogue [13].

The Knowable Domain also contains cause and effect relationships but the solution to problems that reside in this domain are only known by a few experts [13]. Decisions made in this domain are arrived at by **sensing** the problems faced, **analyzing** the information associated with the problem and then **responding** to deal with the problem using the advice given from expert knowledge [13].

The Complex Domain relies on waiting for emergent patterns to be displayed before making a decision to make an intervention. The decision making method in this domain involves releasing **probes** that cause patterns to emerge and thereby revealing their properties, **sensing** the patterns that have been created and **responding** to the emergent patterns

by stabilizing the desired patterns and destabilizing the undesired patterns [13].

The chaotic domain has no identifiable cause and effect relationships. Turbulence is commonplace in this domain. Decisions are made in this domain by quickly **acting** to stop the bleeding, **sensing** methods that quickly help to resolve the turbulence and **responding** in a manner that will bring in an end to the turbulence [13].

The domain takes into account the fact that different people in an organization view the domains from different perspectives and there are cases where a consensus will not be reached.

### B. Conceptual Framework

The study follows the conceptual framework as shown in Figure 3-2. The area of concern the study seeks to address is around the gap in Zimbabwean narratives detailing the application of strategic alignment in the context of complexity and uncertainty. The literature review in the previous section views the theories surrounding uncertainty, and Strategic Alignment from the view of the information gathered from countries in stable operating environments. It is important to be able to test the theory in a third world country and generate perspectives from business leaders seeking to gain a competitive advantage in a complex operating environment.

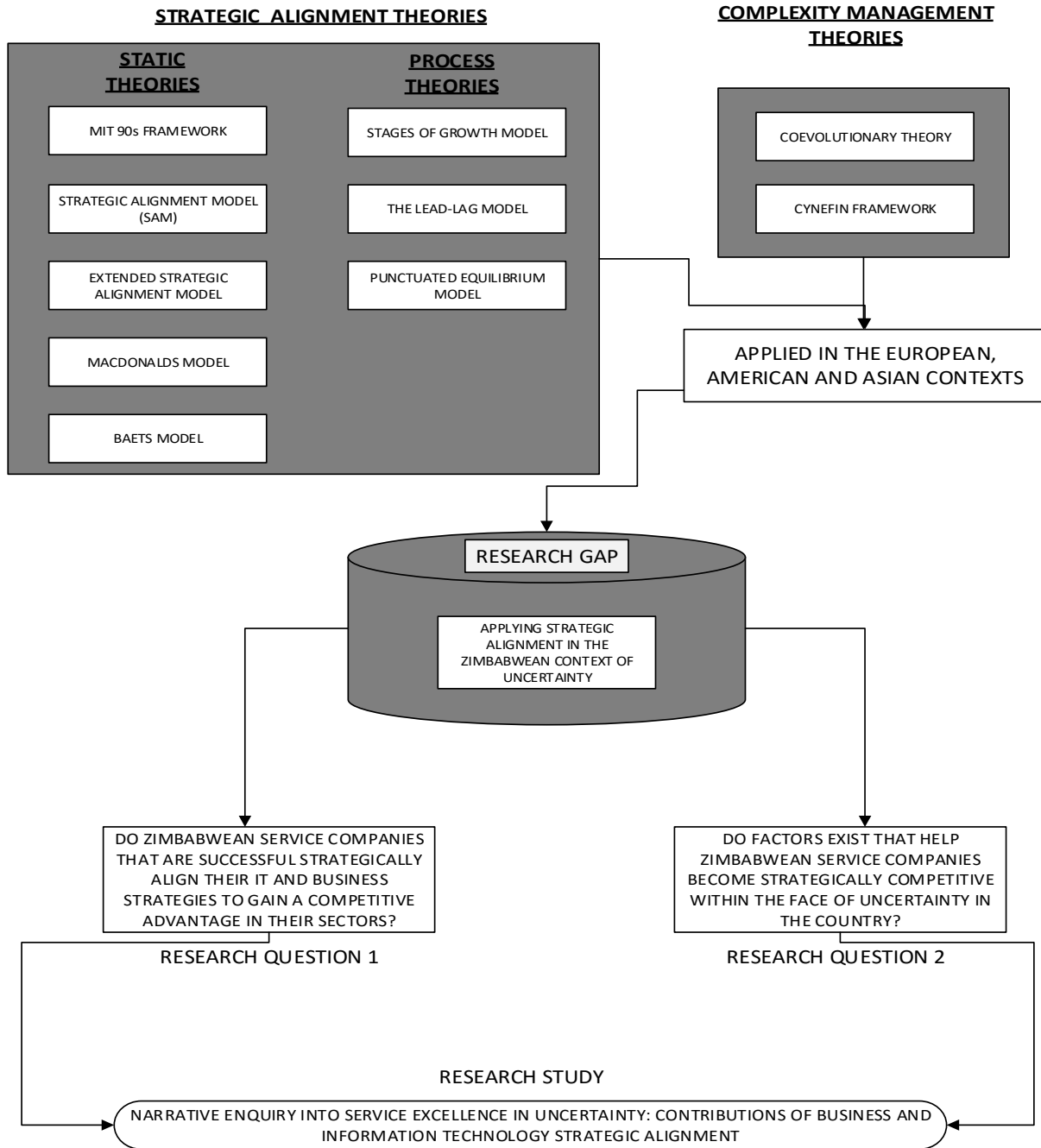


Figure 0-2 - Conceptual Model of study

#### IV. RESEARCH METHOD

The research study was a narrative inquiry based on structured interviews. A sample size of 10 respondents was selected purposefully and one-on-one interviews were carried out.

The respondents represented companies that operated in the ICT, Manufacturing, Audit, Payments, Media and banking sectors.

The details of the respondents and the companies they represented are detailed in Table 4-1 below:

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TABLE 0.1 - BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS

<u>Company ID</u>	<u>Industry of Operation</u>	<u>No. of Employees</u>	<u>Annual Revenue, US\$</u>	<u>Company Operational Reach</u>	<u>Job Title of respondent</u>	<u>No. of years of experience of respondent</u>
A	ICT Sector	100	US\$74 million	Countrywide	Chief Technology Officer	4 years in current role
B	Media Sector	150	US\$12 million	Countrywide	Digital Manager	2 years in current role
C	ICT Sector	83	US\$3 million	Countrywide	Finance and Admin Director	15 years overall
D	Payroll Sector	60	US\$5 million	Countrywide	Technical Analyst	5 years in current role, 6 years in previous role
E	ICT Sector	25	Respondent would not disclose	Countrywide	Managing Director/Founder	18 years overall
F	Audit, Financial Advisory Sector	300	US\$6.9 million	Countrywide	IT Advisory Manager	2 years in current role, 5 years in previous
G	Manufacturing Sector	50	US\$2.5 million	Regional	Managing Director/Founder	10 years in current role
H	Media Sector	770	US\$40 million	Countrywide	Chief Technology Officer	3 years in current role; 18 years overall experience
I	ICT Sector	10	US\$1.6 million	Harare Urban	Managing Director/Founder	10 years overall
J	Banking Sector	200	US\$24 million	Countrywide	Head of Finance	3 years in current, 2.5 years in previous, 5 years before that

The interview questions covered the areas of strategic alignment and its awareness and application in the Zimbabwean business market as well as the areas of uncertainty thereby testing the knowledge of the Cynefin Framework's implementation. The following interview questions were asked and the responses made were recorded on a voice recorder:-

### Strategic Alignment section

**Question 1.** Please may you give me a short introduction to your company and the main services it provides?

**Question 2.** Please may you tell me if you feel that the use of your IT systems have helped your company gain an advantage over your competitors.

**Question 3.** Have you heard the term, "strategic alignment" before?

When you hear that term what comes to your mind and what do you think it means in respect to your company's IT and business strategies?

**Question 4.** Do you believe strategic alignment of your business and IT strategies will help you ensure your company keeps its competitive advantage against other competitors?

### Uncertainty section

In [25] the Cynefin framework is used to group levels of uncertainty into four domains. These are:

**Known domain** – in this domain, when faced with a problem, a solution found in a manual or textbook can be used to solve a problem.

**Knowable domain** – in this domain, solutions to problems in this case are harder to find but usually there is at least one right way of resolving the challenges, an expert is sought to provide a solution to a problem in this domain.

**Complex domain** – in this domain, it is much harder to obtain a solution to problems in this case as there are many root causes. One must step back and wait for the challenges to unravel before stepping in with an attempt at a solution.

**Chaotic domain** – in this domain, events happen randomly as they happen, no immediate solutions can be found. Solutions can only be proposed to prevent future repetitions of the event taking place e.g. The September 11, terrorist attacks.

**Question 5.** Zimbabwe faced and still faces economic challenges. During the time of the fall of the Zim Dollar, a lot of us would have classified that phase of uncertainty as chaotic. What would you classify that period we went through between 1997 and 2008 under based on the four definitions I have given above?

**Question 6.** Zimbabwe is currently facing another economic crisis. What would you classify this challenging period of uncertainty under again based on the four definitions I have given above?

**Question 7.** How did you and your company survive the first economic crisis in Zimbabwe?

**Question 8.** How have you and your company planned to ride through the current wave of challenges gripping the nation?

**Question 9.** Do you feel that your IT strategy helped and will help you overcome both periods of uncertainty that have gripped and are gripping the country. On an ascending scale of 1 to 10, how much do you believe this to be the case?

**Question10.** This is a space in the interview where you can add any comments you have to share.

## V. RESULTS

The interview responses were transcribed using Microsoft Word and the transcriptions were coded and analyzed in Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software.

The process of transcription and tagging of common themes took place over 3 rounds which resulted in the identification of common tags and after final analysis 67 codes were found.

This article will focus on the responses to Question No. 4, 5, 6 and 9.

Question 4 and its responses is detailed in Table 5-1.

Question 5 and Question 6, sought to ask the respondents to classify the first and second periods of

economic crisis based on the Cynefin Framework Domains. The results from the questions are summarised in Table 5-2 and Figure 5-1.

To summarize the contents of Table 5-2 above, the crisis that took place between 1997 and 2008, was viewed from a social and business perspective. From a social perspective the first economic crisis between 1997 and 2008 resided in the chaotic space. However from the business perspective the crisis was viewed as residing in the complex domain.

One of the respondents from a business perspective viewed the crisis as lying within the known and knowable domain where hyper-inflation was viewed as a continuous decline rather than an abrupt, sudden fall.

It was also found that the current economic crisis was viewed as largely as a mix lying between the knowable and the complex domains of the Cynefin Framework. In justifying this, respondents mentioned that they could turn to documented experiences of countries that went through deflation and help manage their businesses through the current crisis.

The responses to questions 5 and 6 are also depicted pictorially in Figure 5-1 below:

Figure 5-1 below shows the responses of the interviewees to questions 5 and 6 superimposed on the domains of the Cynefin Framework described in Section 3.

TABLE 0.1 - RESULTS OF QUESTION 4

Question 4	Summary of Responses
Do you believe that strategic alignment of your business and IT strategies will help you ensure your company keeps its competitive advantage against other competitors?	<p>The majority of the respondents positively agreed that the strategic alignment would help their businesses remain competitive. Some Conditions had to be met first. These conditions were:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A strong IT system is required to serve as the backbone of the company's operations.</li> <li>• The IT departmental staff had to be aware of the direction the business was taking.</li> <li>• A solid implementation plan is required ensuring the plans are realised in practice.</li> </ul>

TABLE 0.2 - RESULTS OF QUESTIONS 5 AND 6

Question Number	Summary of Responses
<p><b>Question 5</b> Zimbabwe faced and still faces economic challenges. What would you classify that period we went through between 1997 and 2008 under based on the four definitions (of the Cynefin Framework)?</p>	<p><b>Social Perspective</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It mainly resided in the Chaotic Domain.</li> </ul> <p><b>Business Perspective</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It mainly resided in the complex domain</li> <li>• One respondent felt that this period of time resided between the known and knowable domains.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Question 6</b> Zimbabwe is currently facing another economic crisis. What would you classify this challenging period of uncertainty under based on the four definitions (of the Cynefin Framework)?</p>	<p>From both a business and social perspective the current crisis mainly resided in between the knowable and complex domains.</p>

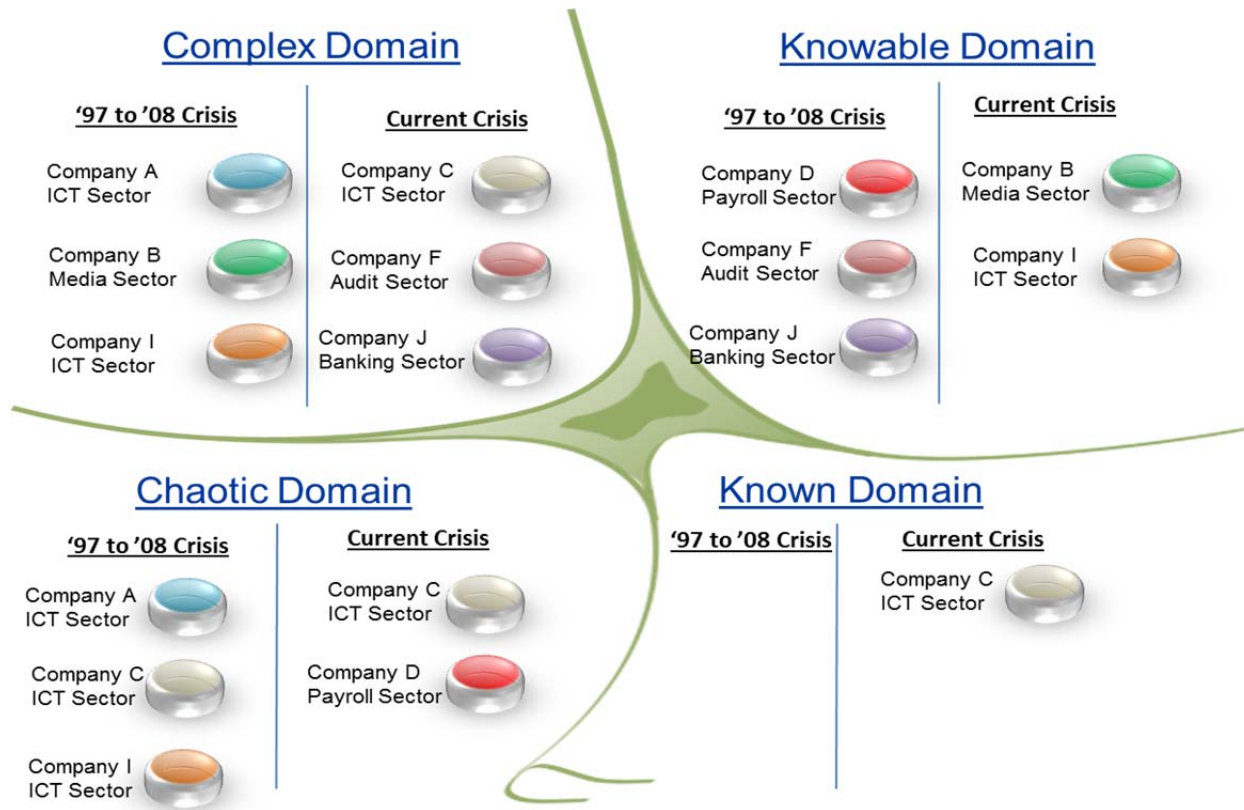


Figure 0-1 - Summary of the responses matching the Cynefin Framework Domains to the responses from the respondents  
Adapted from Kurtz & Snowden [13]

Question 9 sought to highlight from the respondents, the levels of their belief that an aligned IT and business strategy would help their organisations overcome economic uncertainty. A numerical rating between 1 and 10 given by

the respondents based on their subjective assessment from the question measured this belief. The summary of the respondents' responses is shown in Figure 5-2 below.

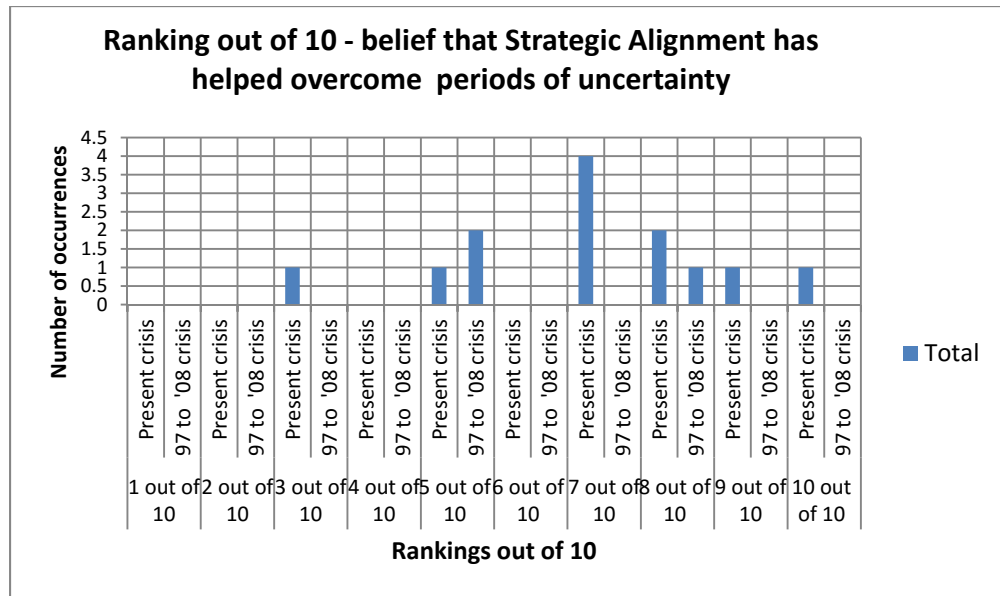


Figure 0-2 - Ranking out of 10 belief that Strategic Alignment has helped overcome periods of uncertainty



From the results shown above, ninety percent of the respondents felt the strategic alignment of their organisations' business and IT strategies would help their organisations overcome the current period of uncertainty.

The respondent that had a belief that was ranked at 3 out of 10 reiterated that the competitive advantage of their organisation would be brought about by efforts to increase the skill level of their human resources and not by the strategic alignment of the IT and business strategies.

Some of these efforts highlighted by the respondent included training interventions that would equip the staff members with skills such as deeper critical thinking, heightened awareness and use of emotional intelligence and development of creative 'out of the box' methods of doing their work.

From the responses depicted in Figure 5-2 above, there is a strong case argued for the importance of strategic alignment of IT and business strategies in overcoming uncertainty as evidenced by the affirmative response by the majority of the interviewees.

#### *Discussion*

As a mitigating method against the complex nature of the crisis that happened between 199 and 2008, the respondents mentioned that strategies included carrying out barter trading where services could be fixed at an agreed price and exchanged between the two entities doing business with each other.

Small companies overcame the complex nature of the crisis by making agile decisions on an hourly basis in response to the changing nature of the operational environment. Mitigating the uncertainty also centred on the formation of strategic partnerships and alliances. These alliances were formed with a company with a good business model and a partner with access to foreign currency and also lots of hard cash. These cash rich partners would then help fund the operations of their partners. Other resources possessed included personnel skills, access to logistics resources and access to raw materials.

Other measures employed to steer companies during both periods of uncertainty included staff rationalisation in the context of cost containment. It has been seen that this process of staff rationalisation has helped industry in general shed off excess weight although the challenge to increase revenue still remains.

Another measure that was employed to overcome the economic crisis of 1997 and 2008 was to ensure the products and services produced by the organisation were of such good quality that they could be exported to regional and international clients. These exported goods and services would then generate foreign currency. This foreign currency earned could then be used to cater for the organization's day to day operations.

A key policy intervention recorded was that all of the respondents mentioned that they had modified their business strategies to reach out to a new target market located in the

informal sector. Due to the collapse of a large number of formal businesses during the two economic challenges, a number of emerging entrepreneurs have begun to operate from the informal sector. The respondents interviewed all mentioned that they had embarked on a number of strategies to reach out to the informal sector. Some of these strategies involved creating a package of offerings that would encourage possible clients in this sector to part ways with the money they had at the disposal whilst other strategies involved reducing the barrier to entry when a possible client in the informal sector wanted to engage the services offered by the service provider.

As a result the IT aspect of the business had to be modified to suit the organisation's drive to obtain revenue from the new income stream from the informal sector.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Limitations*

The purpose of this study was not to identify a particular Strategic Alignment Theory being used by organisations in Zimbabwe during the period of uncertainty. That research study could be done as a follow up to this study by using a quantitative research methodology such as a survey. Further research can be carried out on an increased sample size and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of research can be employed to obtain further insight into the topic of strategic alignment within uncertainty in the Zimbabwean business environment.

Interviews were also limited to the vicinity of companies located in the capital city of Zimbabwe, Harare. One of the effects of the economic crises was that to survive, a large number of organisations moved the centre of their operations to the capital city. As a result to get the opportunity to capture the views from as many leaders of organisations responsible for the strategic drive in the organisation as possible, the author sort the business leaders of companies headquartered in Harare, Zimbabwe.

### *External Validity*

The study sort to obtain the views of technology dependent organizations in Zimbabwe. Some of the organizations were large blue chip organizations and others were Small businesses. Representatives from ten organisations were interviewed, therefore external validity is valid. The author sort to obtain an in depth understanding of the effects of the two periods of crisis thereby setting a foundation for further research work.

### *A. Conclusions*

As was stated in section 2 by [5], Strategic Alignment is a matter of concern among executives in Information System dependent organizations that operate in developed countries. Based on the study, this was also the case for the respondents based in a developing country, Zimbabwe. It was established that a majority of the respondents interviewed felt that

strategic alignment would help their companies gain a competitive advantage in their business sectors.

It was discovered that the strategic alignment of the organisation's IT and business strategies contributed to improved firm performance.

The study also highlighted that strategic alignment had to be placed in the context of the overall business operation and other factors had to be in place to ensure that the strategic alignment process would be successful.

It was also noted from the study that the companies had shifted their business strategies to target the low income earning market that make up the majority of the population in Zimbabwe. This would be done through taking risks in the chaotic domain of the Cynefin Framework, so as to ensure that complex and knowable domain practices could be carried out thereby sustaining the viability of the business. [7] defines the low income earning market as the Base of the Pyramid. This market consist of people who have to make purchases but live on less than US\$2 a day [7]. The Base of pyramid consumers make up 65% of the consumers in Zimbabwe [7]. This is a large market and so the businesses interviewed had devised methods on offering their goods and services to this market.

To remain relevant during the period of uncertainty requires the leaders of companies to innovatively make use of a combination of technology and sense making skills to ensure that they effectively deal with uncertainty in their organisations. This is necessary in the developed world and from the discussions conducted in the preceding sections, there is evidence that this is also to be applied in the developing world.

### B. Recommendations for further research

The research topic gives room for further investigations to take place, these can be of a quantitative nature through a mass survey instrument that can be extended to other service based industries such as tourism, banking and insurance. In conjunction with the work done in the quantitative study and the responses in this research study, a document covering the aspects of strategic alignment within the face of uncertainty can be created to help organizations realise increased value from their Information Systems.

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