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Navigating the waters
Focusing on implementation for a successful strategy

Introduction

The rise of new challenges in the GCC region is driving governments and organizations to embark on new transformation journeys to keep up with the world. Some transformation agendas address political situations, while others address the efficiency of operations, but one thing they all have in common is a goal, encapsulated in a nation-wide vision. In order to achieve these visions, strategies are usually put in place with the help of professionals that help shape the pathway to meeting the established goals.

Due to the volatitly to oil price fluctuations and the geopolitical landscape of the GCC, new challenges are continually arising to become the focus of each nation. As a result, countries are being forced to change their strategic direction in order to continue striving to meet their long-term objectives, and hence the need for national visions from which emerge different focused strategies for the different sectors. One example of these focused strategies can be seen in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is directing its focus to become a global economy without depending on its oil, an increasingly scarce resource. Another example is the digital transformation journey Qatar embarked on, introducing its new e-government, Qatar Digital Government. Similarly, the United Arab Emirates, led by the Smart Dubai 2021 strategy, is trying to revolutionize the way government services are delivered to its people. These transformation agendas are key aspects of the modernization of the GCC region and are creating a lot of work to be done.

A set of interviews were conducted with several Deloitte experts with more than 10 years of experience in the public sector in the GCC region to collect their insights and experiences in relation to strategy implementation and its challenges.

With so many strategic plans now existing in the region, strategy execution is becoming increasingly important and is what will make the difference now. It is worth remembering that a poor strategy well executed is better than a good strategy poorly executed.

This issue of strategy implementation raises several questions:
· Why aren't strategies being executed?
· What are the challenges being faced vis a vis strategy implementation?
· What are the recommended actions/ steps to have a more successful strategy execution?

Challenges of successful implementation

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Based on the qualitative data that was collected through the interviews, there are several causes for failure in implementing strategies. However, four key challenges have been identified:

1. The complexity of strategies – Deliverability

Generally, organizations believe that the more complex the strategy, the better the outcome; however, observations indicate the opposite to be true. Indeed,
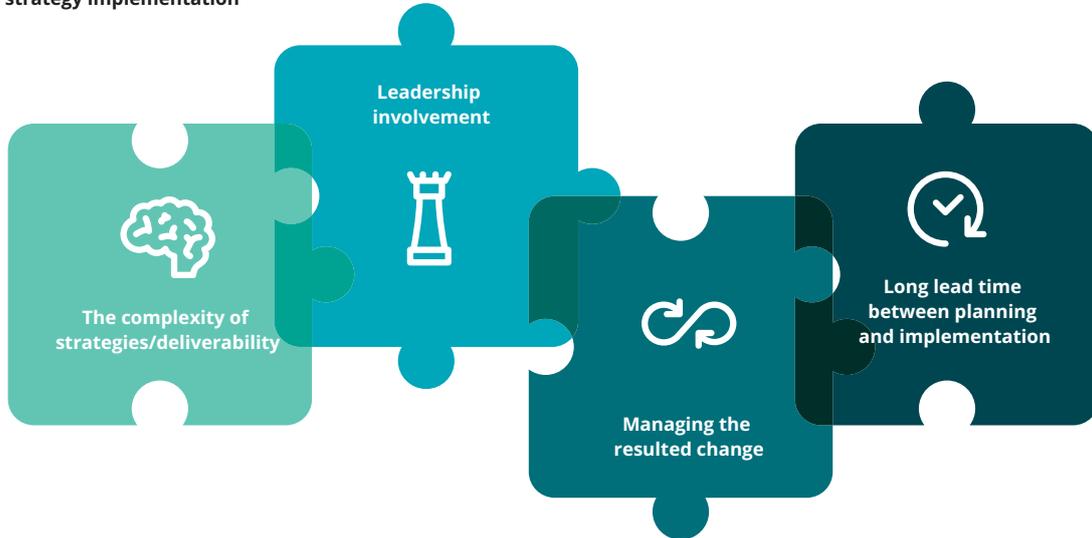
the more complex the plan is, the harder the implementation becomes. A strategy's complexity is defined by many factors - the as-is situation, the budget, the timeframe available for implementation, and several others – which then results in unclear objectives, unclear key performance indicators (KPIs), and poor monitoring. This leads to losing the most important aspect of a strategy based on our experts' opinions: its deliverability. It becomes very challenging to execute the strategy from the perspective of stakeholders and funding when the objectives and the desired benefits of the strategy are not clear, which leads to it becoming nothing more than the piece of paper it is written on.

It is very important to have a well-developed strategy with a clear vision with a well-thought schedule and ensured budget capacity. According to the experts, a proper risk assessment, as well as planning, is crucial to come up with risk mitigation practices which would help successful implementation. Also, defining a clear benefits framework helps achieve the required. When a strategy is simple, clear and well cascaded, efficiency and success are noticeable – this is the case we are witnessing in KSA. His Royal Highness Mohammed bin Salman decided to set an efficient approach to achieve KSA's Vision 2030. He shaped his vision and developed specific programs for which each ministry would be responsible. The way this is cascaded, where every program leader is an expert in his field, ensured the deliverability of the initiatives.

2. Leadership involvement

Senior leaders in governments and organizations are considered subject matter experts in their relevant industries and know what they want when dealing with strategies and the desired outcome. However, when it comes to project managers, they often do not understand

Key challenges of strategy implementation

The complexity of strategies/deliverability

Leadership involvement

Managing the resulted change

Long lead time between planning and implementation

what leadership wants. When this weak link in transparency emerges, senior stakeholders do not have visibility over the initiatives taking place and hence it is difficult to get the support needed from the people that have the information and knowledge. Another type of inefficient leadership involvement is when senior stakeholders reduce then stop their involvement after they have achieved quick wins, thus neglecting the strategy and letting it progress slowly, risking its implementation.

It is essential to have leadership involvement in the implementation of the strategy as they are accountable for the result of the strategy. An efficient reporting mechanism that promotes transparency and the flow of information is crucial to ensure that leadership is briefed and well informed so that they can intervene whenever needed and have control over what they are accountable for.

3. Managing the resulted change
The gap in terms of knowledge of the as-is situation and desired benefits between the planning team and the implementation team is huge. There is scant alignment

between the two, which causes a lot of difficulties during the implementation phase of the strategy. When this occurs, the implementation team does not understand the goal of the initiatives they have been completing and hence cannot align them with the overall strategy and vision. Another thing to add here is around the culture of the organizations in the GCC area, where change is not always welcome and, if not well communicated, can result in failure to achieve the required.
Change must be well communicated through the right channels in order to ensure that all stakeholders are owners of their tasks and understand the benefits realized thanks to their efforts. Proper cascading of the strategy to departments and individuals is crucial and ensures a sense of ownership. With proper change management, organizations can align with the overall strategies and vision in place and understand their role in the transformation journey taking place.

4. Long lead time between planning and implementation
There is more focus on the planning phase of the strategy than the implementation phase – and resources are exhausted

during this earlier phase. Moving from the planning phase to the implementation phase needs robust preparation and change management efforts to ensure an efficient transition and a successful implementation. A long lead time between planning and implementation affects the successful implementation for several reasons because, during this time there could be a change in stakeholders or in leadership – and when there is a change of leadership, the strategy is never adopted by the successor, and hence the need to revisit the strategy again.

Although it can be said that organizations should reduce the time between the planning phase and the implementation phase of a strategy, sometimes this is quite difficult to achieve and beyond the control of the organization. Another and more effective alternative based on the interviewed experts is to consider introducing an activation phase – which is mainly a planning phase for the implementation – during which the proper team with the right capabilities is set up, the right tools are developed, and the team has a holistic view over achieving the strategy.

Drivers of a successful strategy implementation

Based on the views of the interviewed experts who have spent years in the GCC market, we were able to identify key aspects of successful strategy implementation. As mentioned previously, the most crucial point at hand is the complexity of the strategy. The simpler the strategy, the more effective its implementation. In recent years, there has been an increase in the emergence of simpler strategies in the region due to awareness among leaders of this issue.

Effective implementation also resides in the governance of the strategy. Observations show that a centralized governance model is the most effective when developing strategies. Indeed, centralizing the decision-making process at the top and directing the lower levels helps align the direction of the strategy across all levels, facilitating its implementation. Another key driver identified is awareness and change management. The strategy needs to be effectively communicated among all levels in any organization.

The involvement and dedication of all internal stakeholders are fundamental for realizing change. Effective communication

of changes happening throughout the organization ensures that staff at all levels work towards a common objective that is the strategy put in place. The more the employee feels involved in the work being done, the better the outcome, and the better the implementation.

Nonetheless, oversight, monitoring, and performance management are all also essential to the realization of any change. Project management offices (PMO) have proved to be highly effective in supporting and overseeing projects on the ground. PMOs employ a wide range of project management tools and frameworks to successfully support and deliver projects. They also facilitate accurate reporting to leadership and ensure transparent communication among key stakeholders for better alignment.

Leveraging technology is also very helpful when implementing strategies. Today's newest ICT solutions have proved to be a major success factor in executing projects. For instance, the Ministry of Transport and Communications in Qatar has completed Qatar Digital Government Strategy 2020 with the help of its up-to-date technology solutions and a project management office on the ground.

Conclusion

Strategy implementation is facing many challenges that impact the performance and intended results of the strategies themselves. The resolution of these challenges varies from one organization to another and from one situation to another. Implementing the recommendations presented in this paper through a defined action plan will increase the efficiency and rate of success of strategy implementation. Having a simpler strategy, managing the change effectively, creating the right governance, getting the leadership involved and planning the strategy correctly are the essential steps toward having a successful strategy implementation. Technology is also an enabler that supports the implementation of all these recommendations efficiently – as with the continual digitization of the world as we know it, one cannot dismiss the use of ICT to support successful strategy implementation.

Successful strategy implementation

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Action plan based on recommendations

- Action 1
- Action 2
- ...

- Action N

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