Execution: A Catalytic Capability in Firm Performance

by

Robert Frank Keimer

A dissertation submitted to the Nathan M. Bisk College of Business at the Florida Institute of Technology in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of:

Doctor of Business Administration

Melbourne, Florida
July 2018
Execution: A Catalytic Capability in Firm Performance


________________________________________
Scott Benjamin, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Management
Bisk College of Business
DBA Committee Chair

________________________________________
Edward Haberek Jr., Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Management

________________________________________
Kenneth Hanko, J.D.
Associate Professor, Business

________________________________________
Ted Petersen, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Communication
School of Arts and Communication

________________________________________
Theodore R. Richardson III, Ed.D.
Dean and Professor
Bisk College of Business
Abstract

Title: “Execution: A Catalytic Capability in Firm Performance”

Author: Robert Frank Keimer

Advisor: Scott Benjamin, Ph. D.

This qualitative study explores the nature of business execution. Specifically, it seeks to understand the nature of a firm’s capability to execute, how and why some firms execute better than others, and the impact that this capability may have on firm performance and outcomes. A review of the organizational routine, organizational capability, and dynamic capabilities literature reveals a gap where no theory, model, or framework of analysis can be found for the concept of execution. The author proposes a novel definition of execution as a “catalytic capability”; that is, a
stored behavioral capability comprised of repetitive, recurrent actions, shaping principles, and guiding discipline that energizes and effectuates organizational behavior. This qualitative, grounded theory multicase study seeks to discover, identify, and explain these actions, principles, and discipline that may be at work in the firms selected for this study.
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1: Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Rationale</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions that Guide the Research</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Remainder of the Study</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2: Literature Review</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Both Routines and Capabilities?</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compelling Arguments</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format of the Review</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Routines</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Writings</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson and Winter (1982)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines: Patterns and Repetition</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Execution, Patterns, and Repetition</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines: Wide-Ranging Characteristics</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines: Performative and Ostensive Aspects</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines: Dispositions or Capabilities</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines: A Multi-Level Concept</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine Dynamics</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines to Capabilities</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Capabilities</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation, Capacity, and Performance</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontological Similarities to Routines</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Need for Fine-Grained Analysis</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Execution and Dynamic Capabilities</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of Dynamic Capabilities</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive Measuring</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive Communicating</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality People – Extensive Drive, Initiative, and Engagement</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility, and Nimbleness</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork and Collaboration</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Drivers – A Capability of Execution</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Theory</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Execution – Catalytic Capability Re-Visited</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Future Research</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A Letter of Introduction</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B Participant Informed Consent Form</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C Interview Protocol</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D Research Themes</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E Journal/Memo (JM) Form</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F Employee Case Report Template (ECR)</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G Findings Map</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G Findings Map Continued</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: Literature Gap..............................................................5
Figure 2: DSC/MAX Differences..................................................197
Figure 3: Individual Drivers of Execution.................................257
Figure 4: Execution as Capability.............................................281
List of Tables

Table 1: Findings Map DSC ........................................................................................................... 199
Table 2: Findings Map MAX ......................................................................................................... 200
Table 3: Drivers of Execution - Support in Literature ................................................................. 279
Acknowledgement

This dissertation was a larger undertaking than I had expected and seeing it through was only possible with the help and encouragement of many people. While I cannot list them all, I would like to acknowledge several people.

I first would like to thank my parents, Bob Sr. and Jeri, who continue to be a source of inspiration in so many ways. Jeri has often recounted the story of how she ordered a monthly book subscription for me when I was 7 or 8 years old. She was eager to share her passion for books and love of learning. As the story goes, that first book arrived and I promptly rejected it, showing no interest and desire in reading. Jeri’s hopes of sharing her great passion with me were dashed. It was not until college that the seed she planted came to life and I discovered the joy of reading and learning. When I was home on college breaks, we engaged in many discussions of “big ideas” from the books that I was reading – discussions that still continue today as we swap books and share good reads.
Bob Sr., ever the man of action, continues to inspire me in his approach to life. His incredible work ethic, consummate sales skills, and sustained commitment to excellence over a long entrepreneurial career are unmatched. Bob’s personal and professional credo has always been: “You have to make things happen”. In another of our memorable family stories, I am reminded of the time when he challenged me in college by asking the question: “Are you going to think about things, or are you going to do things?” So one of the greatest lessons I learned from him is that ideas and theory only have value if you can put them into practice — tomorrow; if you can turn them into concrete actions, immediately, actions that drive and improve performance.

I would also like to thank my academic mentors and colleagues. My committee chair, Dr. Scott Benjamin, provided great advice and guidance in the process of completing this dissertation. Given the expansive nature of my topic, his keen insight and valuable suggestions improved the focus and quality of the final product. Sincere thanks to all my committee members
who invested their time to review and critique my proposal and final dissertation. Dr. Martinez-Vogt provided valuable advice and guidance in conducting this qualitative research, and her support, encouragement, and outstanding management of the DBA Program made my decision to pursue this dissertation a worthwhile endeavor. I would also like to thank my fellow students from our cohort. Enduring the rigorous DBA demands and challenges together helped to make the program conquerable. I am grateful for their valuable insights and feedback on the concept of execution, and I am thankful for their friendship.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the participants who agreed to be interviewed for this study. They were generous with their time and freely shared their professional experience. Without their valuable insights and observations of how their organizations’ “get things done”, this dissertation would not exist. They are the ones “making things happen” every day — so to them, I express my sincere thanks.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my best friend and partner in life, Liz. She has supported all my endeavors – not all of them successful – and she has always demonstrated an unshakeable confidence and trust in me. We’ve been blessed; and as a team, we’ve built a fabulous life together. Liz, words cannot express how grateful and thankful I am for your ongoing love and support.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Today’s global business environment is one of rapid change (Teece, 2009), hyper competition (D’Aveni, 1994), and continual innovation and disruption (Christensen, 1997; Schumpeter, 1942). In such an environment, achieving superior performance and a competitive advantage for several quarters can be considered a major accomplishment. Maintaining such success for several years seems like a herculean challenge, and the thought of retaining such a position for decades seems incomprehensible. Yet there are examples of enduring, long-lived companies that have been able to successfully transform and adapt in the face of a constantly changing, hyper-competitive business environment (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008).
How do they do it? How and why are some organizations able to deliver superior performance and results year after year? The work on dynamic capability theory by strategy scholar David Teece is helpful in finding the answers to these questions. Dynamic capabilities are a firm’s ability to sense new opportunities, seize those opportunities, and transform the organization’s resources in support of those sensing and seizing activities and in response to an ever-changing environment (Teece, 2012). Developing dynamic capabilities is very much about selecting the right things to do and getting them done (Leih & Teece, 2013).

This study focuses on that second element of dynamic capability development; that is, an organization’s activities related to “getting things done”. Specifically, this study explores the phenomenon of business execution. I seek to discover and explain the nature of the capability of execution, and to address and answer the question as to how and why some organizations consistently execute better than
their competitors. I define “execution” as a “catalytic capability”; that is, a stored behavioral capability comprised of repetitive, recurrent actions, shaping principles, and a guiding discipline that energizes and effectuates organizational behavior. Execution is the organizational capability that makes all other capabilities possible; it is the capability behind the concrete activities of “getting things done”.

The starting point for this inquiry into the nature of business execution is a literature review of three major disciplines: organizational routines, within organizational theory, and organizational and dynamic capabilities, within strategic management theory. Routines and capabilities are well recognized as major determinants of how organizations get work done (Nelson & Winter, 1982), and how they achieve performance objectives (Dosi, Nelson, & Winter, 2001). As the literature review will demonstrate, organizational theory tends to focus more on a micro-level, organizational behavior analysis, and
organizational and dynamic capability theories tend to focus more on a macro-level strategic management analysis. The concept of execution straddles all of these disciplines. The exciting opportunity for this study is the fact that these theories fail to provide a comprehensive, systematic analysis of the concept of execution. Execution has primarily an implied and assumed presence. There is a gap in this routine and capabilities literature; a theory, model, or framework of analysis cannot be found to explain the nature of execution. Figure 1 provides a high-level representation of the current state of the literature:
My critical review of the literature will provide numerous examples of indirect references and the assumed presence of execution in the organizational routine and capabilities literature.

My study focuses on execution and its catalytic effect on performance. I identify several “drivers” of execution, and I examine key elements, i.e. actions and
principles, comprising these drivers. By way of the literature review and field research, I explore these key elements, gaining new knowledge and understanding of the concept.

In support of this effort to explore and explain the nature of execution, I conducted a qualitative, grounded theory case study of two companies: Maxcorp Distribution Inc. (MAX), a publicly traded distribution company, and Development Systems Corporation (DSC), a professional services firm. The names of both companies have been changed to assure their anonymity. These two companies represent an ideal context to study execution. Several significant differences exist between the two companies that are detailed in chapter four. Despite their differences, common findings emerged which helps build a case that these shared findings may be generalizable to other companies and contexts.

MAX maintains an entrepreneurial culture and decentralized structure where each branch operates as an independent profit center. Each branch manager and
his or her team have the freedom and pressure to determine, pursue, and implement the activities and practices that best meet their performance objectives. MAX's corporate success and its decentralized branch structure provide an exciting environment to compare and contrast branch location performances, and to search for and to identify specific branch level activities that may contribute to successful execution.

DSC is a professional services firm with a long, successful history in the field of international development. The DSC business structure consists of nine practice areas ranging from governance and accountability to peace and stability to public sector management. DSC clients consist primarily of U.S. government agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), prominent non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and foreign governments. What makes DSC an interesting and potentially valuable source of data relative to this study of execution are the challenges DSC faces in operating around the world, and its reliance on a mix
of DSC staff, sub-contractors, and NGO partnerships to complete major development projects.

The specific participants in this study included nine employees from DSC and nine employees from MAX. I employed a multicase study in order to obtain context rich data from these two organizations, which enabled me to perform an in-depth analysis of how these organizations execute. The addition of a grounded theory analysis complemented the case studies and proved valuable due to the grounded theory focus on process and actions that have distinct steps over time. Grounded theory also attempts to develop a theory or provide a framework of analysis to explain that process and those actions based upon participant observations (Creswell, 2013). This is important and beneficial for this study because, as I demonstrate in the literature review, there is no theory or framework of analysis to explain execution. The discoveries and knowledge generated by this inquiry provides insight into the presence and impact that execution has on organizational performance.
This chapter begins with a presentation of the background and the rationale for this study. This section will be followed by the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study and the accompanying list of research questions. Subsequent sections will include a definition of terms, the significance of the study and conclude with an overview of the organization of the remainder of the study.

**Background and Rationale**

Execution is a phenomenon of great concern to business practitioners. Companies today operate in a rapidly changing global business environment. They are faced with the normal day-to-day operational challenges, as well as the need to transform their businesses in response to competitive threats and potential disruptors of markets and industries (Christensen, 1997; Teece, 2009). Witness examples such as Netflix, Amazon, and UPS. Netflix was founded as a subscription service that delivered DVDs through the mail; today it is a streaming video provider and an
original studio producing shows and movies ("Streaming on Screens", 2016). Amazon, which began as an online bookseller, now operates across numerous industries that include such businesses as Amazon Web Services (AWS), Amazon Fresh grocery delivery, and a recently announced intention to open Amazon Go grocery stores (Kim, 2016). A final example, UPS, which historically has been known as a premiere package delivery business, recently announced the launch of its own 3-D printing-manufacturing network (UPS, 2016). If asked to describe these companies ten years ago, few would have imagined Netflix as a movie studio, Amazon as a grocery store chain, and UPS as a 3-D manufacturer. These companies have evolved and transformed their businesses. They seem to validate Teece’s (2012) dynamic capability theory by successfully sensing, seizing, and transforming their organizations to pursue and exploit new opportunities, and adapt to a highly competitive, rapidly changing environment.

While Netflix, Amazon, and UPS are currently succeeding in this rapidly changing environment, many
firms struggle to adapt. Though much research has been done on innovative thinking and strategic change, not much research has been done on how to implement and execute these ideas. Studies confirm the challenges and struggles of firms to adapt. A McKinsey report showed that average life expectancy of firms on the S&P 500 was ninety years in 1935, and in 2005 the average expectancy was down to just fifteen years (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Other research shows that over the last fifty years the percentage of public firms that reached the top quartile of profitability in any given year and then remained in that quartile the following year has declined from twenty-two percent to fourteen percent (Teece, 2016). The current reality is that firms are hard pressed to maintain a competitive position over the long term. They must plan, execute, and operate in an environment beset by constant disruption and innovation.

Several factors impact a firm’s ability to succeed in such an environment. Success requires that management develop and pursue the right strategy and
make good choices regarding what should be done to implement the strategy; that is, deciding and choosing what activities should be executed in support of the strategy (Teece, 2014a, 2016). Adaptation and transformation also create the need for a constantly changing mix of resources and capabilities (Helfat, 2007). Constant disruption and innovation require firms to develop dynamic capabilities: to sense changes and identify new opportunities in the marketplace; to mobilize and seize those opportunities to their advantage; and to continuously renew and reconfigure their resources and capabilities in anticipation and in response to the changing environment (Teece, 2012).

While a significant body of research has documented resources (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984), capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2012), and good strategy and strong entrepreneurial management (Teece, 2016) as critical variables to organizational performance, they are not sufficient to explain all performance and
outcomes. Management can craft the right strategy, develop the appropriate resources, and build the necessary capabilities to support the strategy, but without a capability to execute those critical variables they simply possess a set of good intentions. The capability of execution involves the hard work of identifying and enacting the concrete actions, shaping principles, and guiding discipline that energize and effectuate resource development, capability creation, and strategy implementation.

The capability to execute is vital in the practitioner world. Executives have identified and they understand the ability to get things done is critical for such adaptation and transformation. Executional excellence was cited as the number one challenge for business leaders in a survey of 400 global CEOs (Sull, Homkes, & Sull, 2015). That same survey revealed that roughly three quarters of organizations struggle to implement their strategies. Another survey of 500 executives found that 42% of those executives were “significantly concerned”
regarding strategy execution, and 55% of those executives revealed that their organizations were not focused on execution (PwC, 2014).

In addition to such surveys, writings in the business press over the last fifteen years also reflect this practitioner concern with execution. An increasing number of articles such as, “The Execution Trap” (Martin, 2010), “The Secrets to Successful Strategy Execution” (Nelson, Martin, & Powers, 2008), and books such as, “Making Strategy Work” (Hrebiniak, 2013), “Playing to Win” (Lafley & Martin, 2013), “Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done” (Bossidy & Charan, 2002), and “Purpose Meets Execution” (Efron, 2017) have been published that identify execution as the critical, practical issue for organizations seeking to achieve their strategies, goals, and objectives.

While an acknowledged critical issue for business practitioners, execution has proven to be an elusive concept in business scholarship. Strategic management and organizational theory provide valuable insights and
evidence to explain the nature and operation of firms. The literature provides a long, rich history that shows how resources (Barney, 1991), organizational capabilities (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003), and organizational routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982) contribute to and explain organizational behavior and firm performance. There is, however, a gap in this literature relative to the concept of execution. The concept of execution does indeed have a presence in the literature, but that presence is either characterized by cursory references or it is largely implicit and assumed, and rarely is it explicitly identified and addressed. Strategic management and organizational theory fail to explore and explain the specific activities, practices, and principles that constitute a firm’s capability for execution.

Cursory or indirect references to the concept of execution are numerous throughout the literature on strategic management. Some of the most influential strategic management scholars have indirectly identified execution in their writings. Wernerfelt
(1984) cites a need for structure and systems to execute firm strategies. In proposing his interlocking system of activities and arguing that organizational structures, systems, and processes need to be strategy specific, Porter (1996) assumes an ability to execute as the underlying foundation. An ability to execute relative to dynamic capabilities is assumed in much of David Teece’s early work (Teece, Pisano, & Schuen, 1997), and then explicitly referenced in much of his later work (Teece, 2009; Teece, 2016; Teece, 2017; Teece, 2018). In one such example Teece (2009) argues that management must “make the decisions and institute the disciplines to execute on the opportunity” (p. 60). Finally, Ghemewat (2002) specifically acknowledges the importance of execution to understanding strategy.

Recently, the work of a growing number of strategy scholars points to the need and importance to further explore the concept of execution. Several scholars have identified operational level strategy implementation and capability assembly as under-
researched and unexplored (Alhilou, 2015; Li, Guohi, & Eppler, 2008). In fact, a new stream of strategy research is gaining prominence with execution as a critical focus. The Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) field of research examines “strategy as doing” and focuses on the key variables of practitioners, practices, and praxis to provide valuable insights into strategic management (Chia & McKay, 2007; Jarzabowski, Balogu, & Seidl, 2007; and Jarzabowski & Spee, 2009).

Confirmation of this historical gap in the strategy literature relative to execution is evidenced by the rapid growth of S-as-P. There is a Strategy-as-Practice International Network that includes more than 3,000 scholars and practitioners in over 150 countries (SAP-IN, 2018). There has been a call by some scholars from this field to shift the strategy research agenda away from the macro-level to the micro-level with a focus on key processes and practices driven by individuals, groups, and networks of people within organizations (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003).
A similar implicit assumption regarding execution can also be found in the organizational theory literature, where execution plays an important role in understanding the nature of organizational routines. The notion of organizational routines gained prominence with the seminal work by Nelson and Winter (1982) where the authors, in proposing an evolutionary theory of economic change, analyze and explain routines as a firm’s way of doing things. Throughout their analysis, an ability to execute is assumed in the building and enacting of those organizational routines.

The work of Nelson and Winter (1982) initiated a voluminous stream of research where scholars continue to engage in a robust debate regarding definitions, characteristics, and empirical evidence of the nature and role of organizational routines and their impact on firm performance. Many scholars working in this field are seeking knowledge and answers by examining task performance (Becker & Zirpoli, 2008), routine performance (Feldman, 2000), and routines as specific sequences of action (Pentland, Feldman, & Becker,
Execution is never explicitly identified and explored in this task and action level analysis of organizational routines, but as the chapter two review of the literature will demonstrate, its presence is very much assumed. Some recent scholarship, while failing to employ the word “execution”, has acknowledged the concept as an essential element of organizational routines and organizational capabilities. Eggers and Kaplan (2013) argue that what an organization “can do” is part of capability assembly. They also maintain that research on deliberate managerial action in relation to the creation of routines is underdeveloped. Helfat and Peteraf (2015) share this view by arguing for the need to examine middle manager execution efforts and the underlying routines that may involve managerial input. Other scholars argue for the need of further study into the microfoundations (Salvato & Rerup, 2011), as well as the interconnectedness of routines and capabilities (Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011).
Statement of the Problem

An ability to execute is well recognized by practitioners as a critical issue in organizational performance and for continued viability and success. Strategic management theory has long implied execution as underlying strategy implementation and capability development. Organizational theory has long assumed the presence and important role of execution in organizational routines. Despite an influential, real world presence and an acknowledgement by scholars in major disciplines, execution remains largely unexplored within strategic management and organizational theory, such that there is no academic theory, model, or framework of analysis to adequately explain the concept of execution.

This failure to explore the concept of execution may be due to several reasons. One reason may be the multi-disciplinary nature of execution. It can be found in the macro-level analysis of strategic management theory, as well as the micro-level analysis of organizational behavior in organizational theory,
specifically, in organizational routine theory. Execution maintains a presence and influence in both disciplines, and both disciplines assume its existence.

Some scholars note that strategic management theory has primarily engaged in macro level analysis (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003). Others point out the hesitancy and reluctance of scholars to pursue the necessary, granular level analysis of strategy execution (Harreld, O’Reilly, & Tushman, 2007). Still other scholars argue that the only way to achieve a better understanding of how firms operate and how they get things done, is to examine specific actions, by specific individuals, in a specific context (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), and to conduct more and better qualitative studies (Salvato & Rerup, 2011).

A thorough exploration of the concept of execution is needed, and I submit that execution may be an unidentified, catalytic capability important to both strategic management and organizational routine theories. This “catalytic capability” may be a unique set of firm characteristics that have not been
previously identified and combined. Through the literature review and the field study, I discover and identify the specific actions and shaping principles that constitute this capability. This execution as a catalytic capability proves to be a valuable framework of analysis for explaining how firms “get things done” and the impact on organizational performance and outcomes.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory, multicase study is to explore and understand how employees at DSC and MAX execute the daily operations of their businesses in an effort to achieve their desired organizational performance and outcomes. By studying their day-to-day operations, I discover and examine the activities that contribute to each organization’s capability to execute. These discoveries reveal several “drivers” of execution, an aggregation of specific actions and principles that have a dramatic impact on each organization’s overall
ability to get things done. This qualitative study also provides an opportunity to assess whether the organizational routine and capability theories reviewed are present and active in these firms, and also to evaluate their potential impact as performance indicators.

Questions that Guide the Research

A better understanding of how organizations execute will help practitioners as they pursue a sustainable competitive advantage in today’s rapidly changing business environment. This improved understanding will also prove valuable to strategic management and organizational theory scholars as they seek evidence-based research to test and confirm their theories regarding strategy implementation, organizational capabilities, and organizational routines. To further investigate this lack of knowledge regarding firm execution, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What, exactly, is execution?
2. How can execution be measured?

3. How does the ability to execute impact organizational performance?

Definition of Terms

There is a tremendous volume of literature and much continued debate regarding the definitions of the words and concepts that follow. Where applicable I cite the scholar with whom I agree relative to a specific definition; detail, discussion and justification for the choice will be found in the literature review in chapter two.


Organizational Capabilities—a firm’s ability to perform a coordinated set of tasks, utilizing organizational resources and competencies, for the
purpose of achieving an intended outcome (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003, p. 999).

Ordinary Capabilities—a firm's ability to perform administrative, operational and governance related activities necessary to run and maintain the current business. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and best practices. (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2016).

Dynamic Capabilities—an ability to engage in change related activities that enable a firm to develop, build, and reconfigure internal and external resources and competencies in response to rapidly changing business environments. (Teece, 2012).

Execution—is a catalytic capability; that is, a stored behavioral capability comprised of repetitive, recurrent actions, shaping principles, and guiding discipline that energizes and effectuates organizational behavior.
Significance of the Study

Motivation for this study stems from my experience in senior management and having had profit and loss responsibility for multiple regional operations comprised of numerous, independent business units. As part of several senior management teams, we engaged in frequent review and continual analysis to determine how and why some business units were able to achieve and maintain ongoing superior performance. We were in search of the activities, practices, and principles that made certain business units so successful in their execution, with the intent of developing a template or model that we could then apply to all locations throughout the organization. This study sheds light on several drivers of execution and provides some valuable operational insights to all managers charged with meeting and exceeding performance objectives in today’s rapidly changing environment. This study will help managers make more money; it will help them execute better, meet and exceed their performance objectives, and generate greater profit for their organizations.
This study proves significant not only for practitioners, but it also provides great value to strategic management and organizational theory scholars. By engaging in an in-depth, activity and practice level analysis of how organizations execute, this study uncovers evidence of how execution as a catalytic capability may impact organizational behavior and firm performance. For organizational theorists, organization routines have been widely recognized as playing a major role in how firms operate and how work is accomplished. This study provides an analysis of the activities, practices and principles that go into the execution of those routines. It produces a granular level analysis, a level of analysis that is under developed relative to organizational routines (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011).

This study also answers the call by a growing number of scholars in both disciplines to examine organizations at the micro-foundational and practice levels. The micro-foundational research approach focuses on individual level factors and how those
factors impact organizational capabilities (Barney & Felin, 2013; Salvato, 2003; Winter, 2013). Those arguing for greater micro-foundational research share an affinity with the Strategy-as-Practice scholars who maintain the need to examine the micro-activities, behaviors, and processes within organizations (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidle & Vaara (Eds.), 2015; Johnson et al., 2003). This study generates micro-foundational or practice level data that contributes to the strategic management and organizational theory body of knowledge.

Finally, this study is important given the nature of the problem and the challenge of the topic. There is no academic theory, model, or framework of analysis of execution within strategic management or organizational theory. The concept of execution is abstract; one that is difficult to describe and operationalize. It is hard to unpack and it may be entirely context dependent. But there is a compelling need to better understand this concept because it represents a nexus for the practitioner and academic
worlds. Knowing how and why some organizations, business units, and/or departments execute better than others will lead practitioners to better performance and higher profits, and scholars to a better, more granular understanding of organizational behavior and effective management.

**Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

With the conclusion of this overview in chapter one, I move into a review of literature in chapter two. I examine the literature for organizational routines, organizational capabilities, and dynamic capabilities. It is critical to examine these streams of literature due to the fact that: 1. Execution is a concept that shares elements from both organizational routine and organizational capabilities perspectives, and 2. The concept of execution is implicit in much of the writings for these disciplines. At the conclusion of chapter two, I propose and outline a novel concept of execution as a catalytic capability. Chapter three details and describes the qualitative, grounded theory,
case study methodologies that I employ for this study. I present my data and findings in chapter four. In chapter five, I develop and explain my conclusions, recommendations, and implications for research in the areas of organizational capabilities and organizational routines, and their practical applications to the firms and industries studied.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

Overview

Through this grounded theory case study, I seek to discover the specific actions, shaping principles, and guiding discipline that may constitute a “catalytic capability” of execution. My hope is that by researching such a phenomenon, new knowledge and insight may be gained as to how organizations get things done relative to their overall performance and results.

To carry out this study, it is necessary to complete a critical review of the current literature. I examine the literature related to organizational routines, organizational capabilities, and dynamic capabilities. As this literature review will demonstrate, these disciplines provide a valuable
framework of analysis for explaining how organizations accomplish work and achieve performance objectives.

**Why Both Routines and Capabilities?**

**Compelling Arguments**

There are several compelling reasons to search for the concept of execution in both the organizational routine and capabilities literature. One consideration, which has been confirmed by the literature, is that an examination of both routines and capabilities does much to explain what an organization is able to do and how it is able to do it. I believe that these two issues, the “what” and the “how”, of organizations getting things done are valuable focal points for researching a concept of execution.

Another reason for selecting these disciplines for critical review is in anticipation of some likely, basic questions regarding the nature of execution: Is “execution” a routine? Is it a capability? Is it both, or, something entirely different? Responding to and seeking to answer these questions necessitates a review of both organizational routines and
capabilities. Despite my assumption and proposition that execution is a catalytic capability, I remain open to the insights found in the literature. A close examination of the relevant definitions and characterizations found in the literature contributes to a rigorous, thorough analysis of the concept of execution.

As the literature demonstrates, the writings of many scholars include analyses of both routines and capabilities, and there is a substantial body of theoretical and empirical work showing the interconnectedness of routines and capabilities. Thus, a multi-discipline review affords more opportunities to identify and document the implicit and explicit references to execution as opposed to an examination of just one discipline. Reviewing the references in these disciplines also allows the comparing and contrasting of how each discipline addresses the concept of execution, which helps to answer the questions as to
whether execution is a routine, a capability, or something different.

Obviously a critical review of the literature for organizational routines and organizational and dynamic capabilities is no small undertaking. One may rightly criticize that such an attempt is too broad in scope and could only result in deficient reviews of the literature. This is true; I am not able to adequately address and review the voluminous writings found in these disciplines. Yet selecting one discipline to the exclusion of the others is not reasonable either, given the fact that there has been extensive research and writing on both routines and capabilities within each discipline. The different literature streams demonstrate a close relation and frequent intersection of routines and capabilities in explaining how organizations are able to get things done. For example, many organizational routine scholars generally agree that routines are "the building blocks" of capabilities (Becker, 2008; Becker & Lazaric, 2009; Becker, Lazaric, Nelson, & Winter, 2005; Dosi et al.,
Similarly, in reviewing the capabilities literature, and most notably the literature on dynamic capabilities, the definitions of capabilities often include direct references to routines (Teece et al., 1997; Winter, 2003), as well as a comparing and contrasting of routines and capabilities (Dosi et al., 2001).

The fact that organizational routine and capability theories focus on how organizations get things done, and that there is a frequent intersection and extensive writing on routines and capabilities within these disciplines, makes a review of the three streams of research essential to adequately examine the concept of execution. What makes this critical review interesting and valuable is the fact that the concept of execution remains largely unexplored in the organizational routine and capabilities literature. This study advances the body of knowledge in each of these disciplines because in any consideration of how organizations get things done, there is a critical need
to examine the actions, practices, and principles that drive execution.

**Format of the Review**

The format and structure of this critical review begins with an examination of the relevant literature for organizational routines, followed by a similar examination of the relevant literature for organizational and dynamic capabilities. The review proceeds chronologically within each discipline, with a focus on the leading scholars and highly cited articles. A chronological review reveals the interesting evolution of the concepts of routines and capabilities, and the rigorous debate and exchange among scholars regarding definitions, descriptions, concept extensions and position challenges. I examine this literature with the purpose of identifying all references, both explicit and implicit, to the concept of execution. Throughout the review, I attempt to point out important gaps and omissions relative to
execution in the organizational routine and capabilities literature.

Having identified several key elements from both organizational routines and capabilities, as well as gaps and omissions in the literature, I attempt to develop a conceptual theory (Rocco & Plakhotnick, 2009). I conclude chapter two by proposing a novel conceptual theory for execution as a catalytic capability. Throughout my data collection and analysis efforts, I tested my assumptions regarding this proposed catalytic capability. The results of this testing is reported in the conclusions related to the findings of this study found in chapter five.

Organizational Routines

Early Writings

An examination of the literature related to organizational routines is a valuable starting point for the search and exploration of the concept of execution. There is a long history and wide recognition among scholars that routines are crucial to accomplishing tasks within organizations (Becker et
and that much organizational work is accomplished through routines (Becker & Zirpoli, 2008; Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982). Though the notion of routinization may be identified by a variety of labels, such as “programs” (March & Simon, 1958) and “standard operating procedures” (Cyert & March, 1963), there is much agreement and a shared understanding that routinized behavior is integral to explaining how organizations get things done and that routines serve as “building blocks” of organizational capabilities (Becker, 2004; Becker et al., 2005; Dosi et al., 2000; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Salvato & Rerup, 2011). As Becker and Zirpoli (2008) correctly observe, organizational routines provide insights into task performance, the causes of behavior, and how work gets done. Given this view of the role and influence that routines have on an organization’s ability to get things done, it is logical to explore and expect to find evidence regarding how this routinized behavior is executed. How are routines enacted? What activities,
practices, and principles may be found in the execution of organizational routines? The answers to these questions may help in the development of a conceptual theory of execution.

Scholars of organizational routines often cite two seminal works in organizational theory and organizational behavior theory: "Organizations", by March and Simon (1958), and "A Behavioral Theory of the Firm", by Cyert and March (1963). Both of these works address routines, but organizational routines receive relatively minor attention within the authors’ broader focus on organizational theory and behavior.

March and Simon (1958) argue that routinized responses are developed and learned as a result of the prior history of an organization, and these responses occur in reaction to repetitive stimuli. They maintain that a telling characteristic of routinized activities is the degree to which decision-making has been simplified by the development of a fixed response to particular stimuli. March and Simon (1958) also argue that most organizational behavior is governed by
“performance programs” (p. 163), and much like routinized activities, organizations develop and employ repertoires of response programs to address recurrent situations. These programs serve two important functions within an organization: serving as part of a control system, for example by specifying standard operating procedures, and as part of a coordination system. The concept of routines receives only minor attention within March and Simon (1958); the authors’ primary focus is on choices, decision-making and how organizations respond to changes in their environment.

While Cyert and March (1963) do not explicitly employ the word “routine”, their description of standard operating procedures evokes the key characteristics identified by March and Simon (1958). Cyert and March (1963) argue that “standard operating procedures” are procedures most likely to be treated as “fixed”, and they provide direction to activities that are constantly recurring (p. 103). They are a learned set of behavior rules that: evolve from the history of the firm’s adaptive learning, serve as the focus of
control within the firm, and are used to make and implement choices (p. 113). Cyert and March’s (1963) standard operating procedures share similar characteristics of March and Simon’s (1958) routinized and program actions: an historically developed set of responses to recurring situations that guide organizational choices in the overall effort to control and coordinate the activities of an organization.

The early writings of March and Simon (1958) and Cyert and March (1963) are interesting from an historical perspective because the key elements they identified relative to routines can still be found in the definitions and characterizations of many present day organizational theory scholars. Unfortunately, the concept of execution is neither identified nor implied in these seminal writings. There is no discussion and analysis of how, exactly, those routinized responses and standard operating practices are executed. In fairness, the major focus of both works is on choice and decision making within organizations, not a
granular level analysis of how organizations get things done.

Nelson and Winter (1982)

It was not until the publication of “An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change” by Nelson and Winter (1982) that organizational routines received great attention. Some scholars have argued that this book is the single most influential work on routines (Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011). In explaining their evolutionary perspective on the economy, Nelson and Winter (1982) place routines at the forefront, using routines to explain the functioning of firms and the economy, and to provide insight into organizational and economic change (Becker, 2004). Nelson and Winter’s (1982) treatment of routines initiated a more than thirty-year rigorous discussion and debate regarding the nature, characteristics, role and effects of routines in organizations.

Nelson and Winter (1982) view routines as a reflection of the decision rules in their evolutionary theory. They offer a variety of definitions and
descriptions of routines, which include the following: a “way of doing things”; that which is regular and predictable in business behavior; a repetitive pattern of activity in an entire organization; regular predictable behavior patterns; and routines as “the skills of an organization”. Some scholars have criticized these multiple definitions as vague and unclear (Hodgson, 2003; Pentland & Reuter, 1994). What ties these various descriptions together, however, is Nelson and Winter’s (1982) position that routines define a list of firm functions that are a response to external variables, such as market conditions, and internal variables (p. 16).

They further describe routines by classifying them as operating characteristics, capital investment decisions, and “search”, i.e. change capabilities. Routines fill critical organizational functions by: operating as organizational memory; serving as truces, by limiting inter-organizational conflict and reconciling competing interests among organization members; providing a template for norms or rules of
enforcement; representing organizational skills; and operating as genes, by predicting future organizational behavior based upon the routines of the past.

Throughout their comprehensive examination of the nature of routines and their effects on organizations and the economy, Nelson and Winter (1982) do not identify and explore a concept of execution as part of routines. They never address the specific activities and practices that go into the creation and enactment of their organizational routines. Regarding execution, one may conclude that for Nelson and Winter (1982), it is assumed; that is, organizational routines are automatically executed.

Routines: Patterns and Repetition

Much of the scholarship not long after Nelson and Winter (1982) explored the concepts of patterns and repetition as key elements of organizational routines. Regarding these concepts, it is interesting to note that Becker (2005) recently concluded that after decades of research, study, and debate, “patterns” and
"repetition" are the only elements for which there is a consensus among scholars.

For Weiss and Ilgen (1985) much organizational behavior involves repetition; that is, behavior caused by habitual responses to familiar situations. They define routinization as repetitive behavior that precludes consideration of alternative courses of action by limiting exploration and attention to the external environment (pp. 57-58). Routines develop through repetition and task success (p. 59). Weiss and Ilgen (1985) argue that repetition alone, however, is not sufficient to constitute a routine; routinization also involves the reduction in environmental awareness and responsiveness. Routinization produces the benefit of efficiency; it allows individuals to devote mental energy to non-routine activities while producing quicker responses in routine situations. This benefit, however, also puts an organization at risk by reducing
its ability to adapt in response to a changing environment.

This attribute of efficiency, i.e. reliability and speed of organizational response, is expanded upon by Cohen and Bacdayan (1994). They argue that routines arise in repetitive situations where the ongoing cost of careful deliberation is high (p. 555). Cohen and Bacdayan (1994) define organizational routines as “patterned sequences of learned behavior involving multiple actors who are linked in relations of communication and/or authority” (p. 555). They explain that a routine is a complex concept due to the following attributes: its multi-actor nature; an emergent quality, due to the evolution of organizational behavior; and the difficulty participants in a routine often have articulating what they do and why they do it.

This study by Cohen and Bacdayan (1994) is well known for its use of a card game experiment to support their description of organizational routines. The evidence from their experiment supports their assertion
and conclusion that organizational routines are stored as distributed procedural memories. Based upon this conclusion, Cohen and Bacdayan (1994) revisit the issue and concern as to how to articulate these memories, transfer this knowledge within an organization, and account for the possibility that an "organizational unconscious" body of inarticulate know-how may serve as the basis of most of an organization’s capabilities (p. 566). They call for additional research in this area.

Cohen and Bacdayan (1994) are not alone in their belief that routines are complex phenomenon. Pentland and Reuter (1994) argue that routines are complex patterns of social action, making them difficult to study. They draw attention to a dualism that they observe in the nature of routines. Pentland and Reuter (1994) build upon prior definitions of routines as patterns of repetitive behavior, but expand the concept to include sets of possible patterns of behavior established by the structure of an organization and the individuals involved in the routines. Pentland and Reuter (1994) reject the view that routines are
exclusively fixed or automatic; instead they argue that routines are effortful accomplishments best understood by the concept of grammars in language. Just as grammar allows an individual to produce a variety of sentences, so does an organizational routine allow members to produce a variety of performances (p. 490). The introduction of the concept of grammar is a valuable insight and critical justification for Pentland and Reuter (1994) to explain how and why there can be variation in the performance of routines. Given organizational routines as sets of patterns of behavior, members can and do enact a specific performance from a large set of possibilities.

Pentland and Reuter (1994) provide evidence to support their argument of routines as grammars in the results of research they conduct for a software product firm. They study the software support group that maintains a firm’s technical phone lines. What Pentland and Reuter (1994) observe is the very non-routine nature of the group’s problem-solving work from which a set of functionally similar patterns emerge (p.
From their data and analysis, the authors conclude that despite observations of diverse software support responses, i.e., performances, there was an underlying structure that reflected their concept of a “grammar”; that is, “a repetitive, functionally similar pattern of action” (p. 504). They maintain that variability relative to routines should be understood as performances that are “functionally similar but not necessarily the same” (p. 504). In this specific study, they showed how the “call—solution—close the call” pattern could indeed be identified as a routine despite what seemed to be much non-routine behavior within this actual routine.

**Execution, Patterns, and Repetition**

This review of the preceding authors, unfortunately, revealed neither direct nor indirect reference to the concept of execution. While the definitions and descriptions advanced by Weis and Ilgen (1985), Cohen and Bacdayan (1994), and Pentland and Reuter (1994), further the exploration and development of the concept of routines within organizational
theory, the authors do not examine the execution behind these routines; that is, how routines are enacted. Whether considering them as repetitive behavior, patterned sequences of learned behavior involving multiple actors, or grammars of behavior, the authors never question the specific activities and practices behind the execution of those organizational routines. Even with Pentland and Reuter’s (1994) evidence of variance and non-routine behaviors within an organizational routine, they fail to question and explore a more granular level analysis of the activities and practices in the performance of the routines. Much like Nelson and Winter (1982), these scholars also make the ability to execute an unspoken assumption within organizational routines.

**Routines: Wide-Ranging Characteristics**

A considerable body of research followed these early definitions and descriptions of organizational routines. While it is the intention of this literature review to focus primarily on the evolution of the definition of routines within the literature, it should
be noted that there is extensive writing and numerous empirical studies that identify and explore specific characteristics attributed to organizational routines. Just a few of those researched characteristics include the following: stability and change (Becker et al., 2005; Feldman, 2000); reducing uncertainty (Becker, 2004; Becker & Knudsen, 2005; Feldman & Pentland, 2003); relatedness to habits, rules, and standard operating procedures (Becker & Zirpoli, 2008; Hodgson, 1997); innovation (Becker, Knudsen, & March, 2006); replication (Hodgson, 2003; Winter & Szulanski, 2001); and storage and transmission of knowledge (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Zollo & Winter, 2002). An extensive chronicling of organizational routine characteristics can be found in Becker (2004) and Gerard (2009), and a comprehensive documentation and review of empirical studies devoted to routines can be found in Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville (2011). While this research that focuses on the various characteristics of routines is interesting and valuable in the broader context of organizational theory, it does not prove helpful in
gaining a better understanding of how organizations execute, and how they execute those routines. This descriptive and empirical literature does not focus on the underlying actions, principles, and discipline behind organizational routines.

The scholars who focus on and engage in a definitional analysis of routines produce valuable insights and raise critical issues worth considering in an effort to develop a conceptual framework for execution. For this reason, I focus primarily on the articles and scholarly debate that have evolved regarding the definition of organizational routines. The ontological issues surrounding organizational routines hold the promise of shedding some light on to the effort to explore and better explain the nature of execution.

**Routines: Performative and Ostensive Aspects**

A significant development in the evolution of the definition of organizational routines occurs when several scholars identify and examine the dualism or multi-level nature of a routine. One of the first
scholars to raise the issue of the dual nature of organizational routines is Martha Feldman in her empirical study of routine change within a university housing operation (Feldman, 2000). In providing evidence to support her argument that the potential for change exists within the routine itself, Feldman (2000) introduces the concepts of the performative and ostensive aspects of routines. She proposes a performative model for routines that involves a cycle of plans, actions, outcomes, and ideals. Feldman (2000) argues that her performative model correctly accounts for the human agency and actions in the performance of routines, which she maintains had been neglected in previous research. While the primary focus of this article is an elaboration of this performative model, Feldman (2000) asserts the dual nature of routines by also introducing the ostensive aspect. She maintains that the ostensive aspect of a routine is the routine as it exists in “principle” (p. 622). She does not elaborate on the ostensive aspect in this article, but she does provide an extensive
explanation in a follow-on article that expands the definition of routines beyond that of a series of recurring, repetitive behaviors.

This dual nature of organizational routines receives greater development by Feldman and Pentland (2003). Organizational theory scholars frequently cite this article, and many scholars accept the Feldman and Pentland (2003) definition of organizational routines as the starting point for their own research and analysis. While concurring with what they state is a generally accepted description of routines in the literature, i.e. routines as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions carried out by multi-actors”, Feldman and Pentland (2003) argue that ontology must also be considered in any analysis of the concept. They expand and further elaborate on Feldman’s (2000) prior introduction of the dual performative and ostensive aspects of routines.

For Feldman and Pentland (2003), the performative aspect of a routine is “the routine in practice”; the specific actions, performed by specific individuals, in
a specific context (p. 101). The literature provides strong evidence to support their performative aspect. Numerous empirical studies document the specific patterns of action that organizations take in performing routines in a variety of industries and contexts. Some supportive empirical studies include: garbage collection (Turner & Fern, 2012), a board game experiment (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994), software technical support (Pentland & Reuter, 1994), vehicle packaging design in the automobile industry (Becker & Zirpoli, 2008), and decision-making (Becker & Knudsen, 2005).

The ostensive aspect is the routine in principle; that is, the ideal or “abstract, general idea of the routine”. Feldman and Pentland (2003) assert that capabilities develop from the repetitive actions of routine enactment, which they compare to the script of a play or a musical score. These scripts or scores are the ostensive aspect, and they serve as a guide and
template of behavior, providing a framework and point of reference to make sense of performative actions.

Feldman and Pentland (2003) conclude that one cannot understand the nature of a routine without recognizing and accepting this dual nature, which requires acknowledging both the idea of the routine (ostensive) and the enactment of the routine (performative). Feldman and Pentland (2003) maintain that both aspects are required for an organizational routine to exist. They also demonstrate how their new conceptualization accounts for the prior, generally accepted definitional elements of organizational routines related to repetitive, recognizable patterns of action, and multiple actors.

Several key elements in the Feldman and Pentland (2003) elaboration of this dualism provide potential insight and guidance into the concept of execution. While their "enactment" of the performative aspects of a routine is assumed, they correctly draw focus and attention to the actions of the underlying routine. In fact, it is through this action-level analysis that
they are able to build a strong case as to how routines are a source of organizational change. A similar focus on action is necessary to better understand the nature of execution. My understanding of action related to execution is very similar to Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative aspect, as certain routines or specific practices within routines will prove to be constitutive elements of execution as action. In following the Feldman and Pentland (2003) approach, I examined the specific activities taken and practices followed by specific actors when conducting my field research.

While others have identified routines as a possible template of performance (Cyert & March, 1958; Levitt & March, 1988; March & Simon, 1963; Pentland & Reuter, 1994), Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) ostensive aspect helps explain how routines guide, account for, and make sense of specific organizational activities. These are also important considerations for explaining how and why organizations are able to execute. Much like Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) ostensive aspect, I
similarly assume the existence of execution in principle; that is, some norm or template, and a framework of accountability to help explain execution in practice.

Another critical Feldman and Pentland (2003) observation that has implications and ties to organizational capabilities is their argument that performing an organizational routine “maintains the ostensive aspect of the routines by exercising the capability to enact it” (p. 148). They argue that performing a routine develops and maintains many of the capabilities required for continued performance. Thus, the exercise of their performative aspect; i.e. enacting routines, helps to build and maintain organizational capabilities. This in turn, supports and maintains their ostensive aspect; that is, the routine in principle and as template and norm. For Feldman and Pentland (2003), this dualism of organizational routines is self-reinforcing.

The Feldman and Pentland (2003) analysis of organizational routines provides several important
insights and some helpful guidance for exploring a potential conceptual framework for execution. Their analysis points to a need to: (a) address and account for execution in principle; that is, the idea, norm or template of what execution may look like, (b) identify and analyze the activities and practices that constitute the actual performance of execution, and (c) determine the role, influence, or impact of execution on organizational capabilities.

**Routines: Dispositions or Capabilities**

While the Feldman and Pentland (2003) dualism related to the definition of organizational routines gained significant acceptance (Becker, Lazaric, Nelson & Winter, 2005; Becker & Zirpoli, 2008; Felin, Foss, Heimeriks & Madsen, 2012; Miller, Pentland, & Choi, 2012; and Pentland, 2011), Hodgson (2003), and later Hodgson and Knudsen (2004), took a decidedly different approach to defining organizational routines. The Hodgson (2003) definition, while singular in nature, is relevant to this multi-level understanding of routines
because it introduces a new conception not found in the prior literature.

Hodgson’s (2003) examination of the nature of routines is a response to what he views as the confusing definitions found in Nelson and Winter (1982), where routines are characterized as behaviors, dispositions, and capabilities (p. 363). He criticizes Nelson and Winter (1982) by arguing that routines cannot be both actual behavior and the cause or principle behind that behavior. He maintains there is a necessary ontological distinction between the potential and the actual, between dispositions and outcomes, because causes are not events, and causes relate to potentialities and not necessarily to realized outcomes.

Given this view, Hodgson (2003) argues that routines should be understood as “conditional, rule-like potentialities or dispositions, rather than behavior” (p. 364). This position leads Hodgson (2003) to reject the view of those scholars who maintain the predictable nature of routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982;
Weiss & Ilgen, 1985). He argues that routines are usually conditional on other inputs and events, so the predictability of the result is not due solely to the routine itself, that predictability is based upon other factors as well. Hodgson (2003) asserts that the outcome does not make something a routine, but rather, it is the “generative rule-like structure” that causes “the enduring and persistent quality” of a routine (p. 365). Hodgson (2003) goes on to characterize routines as dispositions or capabilities; that is, stored behavioral capacities or capabilities to energize behavior within an organization.

Further development of his line of reasoning and a formal definition of routines is found in Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) where they define routines as “...organizational dispositions to energise conditional patterns of behavior within an organized group of individuals, involving sequential responses to cues” (p. 290). Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) maintain that organizational routines are stored behavioral capacities or capabilities that, when triggered, lead
to sequential behavior. They provide the example of the common business practice where managers and employees follow a five-day work week, in which numerous organizational routines are energized during that week. Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) point out that those routines do not disappear over the weekend; they are routines-as-capacities that exist, waiting to be triggered once again on Monday morning when the managers and employees return to work.

The Hodgson (2003) and Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) conception of routines as an energizing capacity or capability is much different than the performative and ostensive aspects proposed by Feldman and Pentland (2003). This ontological element of potentiality and causality is missing from Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) definition and description of organizational routines.

The contrasting approaches of Feldman and Pentland (2003) and Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) in defining and describing organizational routines raise several questions for consideration. What is the bridge or link between Feldman and Pentland’s performative and
ostensive aspects? How does one explain the movement or connection from routine as norm or template to routine as action? What are the triggers, referenced by Hodgson and Knudsen (2004), that cause the enactment of routines? Is it possible to reconcile these contrasting approaches and differing ontological elements espoused by these scholars?

**Routines: A Multi-Level Concept**

Combining the definitions of Feldman and Pentland (2003) and Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) answers these questions and resolves the ontological issues by acknowledging that organizational routines consist of three essential elements; they are: action, norm or template, and energizing causal mechanism or capability. The combination of these definitions also points and leads to a further consideration of the concept of execution. Execution is the nexus; it is at the center of these three ontological elements. Both sets of scholars assume and imply an ability to execute in their definitions. An ability to execute must exist in order for performative action to occur, and an
ability to execute must be the antecedent of any “trigger” that energizes a stored capability.

Given such a critical role in the conception of organizational routines, there is a need to further explore those assumptions regarding execution. Identifying and addressing execution explicitly, i.e. examining the activities and practices behind the concept may lead to a better, more complete understanding of organizational routines, and provide valuable insight into the possible development of a conceptual framework for execution.

Fortunately a proposed resolution to the contrasting definitions and key ontological issues discussed above can be found in Becker (2005). Like Hodgson and Knudsen (2004), Becker (2005) also recognizes the problems and limitations in various definitions that attempt to combine routine as action with routine as a representation of repetitive patterns. He maintains that the only way to adequately explain the concept is to recognize and address the
fact that routines operate on three different ontological levels.

Becker (2005) identifies those three levels as the following: (a) a “deep level” involving underlying causal mechanisms and tendencies that, once triggered, facilitate the expression of recurrent action patterns; (b) an actual level that captures regular patterns of behavior, i.e. those recurrent action patterns; and (c) an empirical level that consists of representations of the recurrent action patterns (p. 251). Becker’s (2005) three level ontological framework nicely combines and accommodates the contrasting positions of both Feldman and Pentland (2003) and Hodgson and Knudsen (2004): Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative aspect operates at Becker’s (2005) active level, while their ostensive aspect exists at Becker’s (2005) empirical level, and Hodgson and Knudsen’s (2004) routine as disposition or capability is captured
by Becker’s (2005) notion of an underlying causal mechanism found at his “deep level”.

Becker (2005) further explains how these three ontological levels are connected. They are connected by “tendencies”; these tendencies are potentialities that link the recurrent action patterns, their underlying causal mechanisms, and their representation. Becker (2005) asserts that these tendencies must be “triggered” in order to be actualized (p. 252). He also maintains that his empirical level, where rules reside, should not be viewed as a cause for the level of action. For a variety of reasons, such as subjectivity of the rule creator, a need to supplement rules with judgment, the embeddedness of rules in context, and the role of interpretation in rules, Becker (2005) concludes that one cannot deduce action from rules, nor induce rules from action. For these reasons the underlying causal mechanism found in his
deep level must be acknowledged as a third, critical element of organizational routines.

While Becker’s (2005) philosophical analysis is meaningful and valuable in its own right, the critical question for this study is how does his three-level definition of organizational routines aid in better understanding execution, and perhaps in developing a conceptual framework for execution.

First, Becker’s (2005) introduction of the three ontological levels accurately captured and responded to the definitional problems that existed in the literature up until that point in time. Recently, other scholars have also acknowledged and addressed these seemingly incompatible definitions and ontological issues related to routines. Pentland, Feldman, Becker and Lui (2012) develop a generative model that they argue also solves the problem of conflicting definitions by accommodating routines as both dispositions and patterns of behavior. While still subject to debate, I agree and accept Becker’s (2005) position that organizational routines consist of
actions, patterns of behavior, and underlying causal mechanisms or potentialities. Interestingly, these same ontological issues will emerge in the later literature review of organizational capabilities.

Second, as other scholars have argued, standard operating procedures are not the same as routines (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994), and Becker (2005) takes this position as well by maintaining that rules are not the same as routines and rules are not the cause of routines. This leads to the third, critical point related to execution. Both Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) and Becker (2005) assume an ability to execute as the basis of their definitions. For Hodgson and Knudsen (2004), execution is clearly implied when they define routines as “organizational dispositions to energise conditional patterns of behavior”. Simply replace their word “energise” with the word “execute” and their definition retains its meaning. For Becker (2005), those underlying causal mechanisms and tendencies at the deep level require a “triggering” to be actualized.
That triggering implies an ability to execute and assumes the actions necessary for execution.

While neither Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) nor Becker (2005) employ the word “execution”, the concept of execution and an underlying ability to execute is evident; it is clearly implied and assumed in their definitions and explanation of organizational routines. This understanding of organizational routines as stored behavioral dispositions or causal mechanisms and tendencies, points to a need and an opportunity to further explore the nature of execution. As the more recent literature on organizational routines will demonstrate, scholars are beginning to demand a closer examination of the actions that go into the enactment of routines; that is, they are seeking to identify and explain the activities and practices related to execution.

**Routine Dynamics**

Some of the more recent writings related to organizational routines demonstrate a welcome focus and concern for the practices and actions that go into
specific routines. Routine dynamics is a stream of research that focuses on the internal dynamics of routines. One of the key insights of this research is the connection between routines, practices, and processes (Howard-Grenville & Rerup, 2017). Scholars exploring routine dynamics accept and build upon Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) ostensive-performative definition and their original findings regarding both the stable and changing nature of routines. What is of interest and valuable for the purposes of developing a conceptual framework of execution is the prominence of the role of action in the research on routine dynamics. Action is the primary focus; the unit of observation is situated action and the unit of analysis is patterns of action (Feldman, Pentland, D’Adderio, & Lazaric, 2006). Feldman et al. (2016) best articulate the importance of action by stating:

But like the wind, routines don’t exist without being enacted. We can see the effects of a routine, we can remember enacting a routine, we can write down what we did or what we would like
to have someone do, but none of these constitute a routine without action (p. 29).

While not explicitly stated, this focus on action requires some consideration and explanation of the nature of execution. This focus, and Routine Dynamic’s granular level approach to research, is an exciting, encouraging development, and one that helps justify the need to further explore and develop a conceptual framework for execution.

**Routines to Capabilities**

Unfortunately the organizational routine literature reviewed failed to uncover an explicit articulation and explanation of the concept of execution. It did, however, point to the organizational capability literature as a potential source and good next step in the search to find and explore the nature of execution.

The capabilities literature is a promising, and logical, next step in the search for execution for several reasons. First, as is the case with organizational routines, many scholars view
capabilities as a significant phenomenon and
determinant in explaining how organizations get things
done and how they perform (Ansoff, 1977; Dosi et al.,
2000; Helfat & Peteraf, 2003; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008;
Teece, 2014). Additionally, some scholars see the
value and importance of capabilities beyond just the
level of the firm; they argue that capabilities are
"...fundamental to understanding how society works and
how it changes" (Dosi et al., 2000, p. 1). Given such
a focus, one may expect, and hope, that the literature
on capabilities will identify and address execution in
any attempted explanation of how firms actually operate
and perform.

Second, as the literature will demonstrate, there
is an interconnectedness between organizational
routines and organizational capabilities. From the
inclusion of routines in the actual definitions of
capabilities (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003; Salvato & Rerup,
2011; Teece & Leih, 2016; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997,
2000; Winter, 2003) to identifying routines as an
attribute or variable of capabilities (Felin, Foss,
Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012; Leih & Teece, 2016; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011; Pentland, Feldman, Becker, & Liu, 2012; Winter, 2013), many scholars maintain a strong explanatory link between routines and capabilities. To better understand the nature of routines, one must also examine capabilities; to better understand the nature of capabilities, one must also know and understand the nature of routines. Examining this interconnectedness will, hopefully, also shed more light on the nature of execution.

Organizational Capabilities

Nelson and Winter (1982) Revisited

The concept of capabilities is complex and some scholars caution that the term capabilities “...floats in the literature like an iceberg in a foggy arctic sea, one iceberg among many and not easily recognized as different from several icebergs near by” (Dosi et al., 2000, p.3). As was the case in the review of organizational routines, Nelson and Winter (1982) again prove a compelling and valuable starting point for an
analysis of organizational capabilities. They ask several fundamental questions regarding capabilities, one of which is: “What is really involved when an organization is ‘capable’ of something?” (p. 52). For Nelson and Winter (1982), routines are a determinant of what an organization is capable of doing. The repertoire of routines of organization members, as well as the possession of particular assets and resources, serve as the “ingredients” of a capability. In addition to these ingredients, an organization must also possess the “recipe” as to how the routines and assets should be utilized. Ingredients and the recipe alone are not sufficient however to constitute a capability. Nelson and Winter (1982) argue that a productive performance requires “coordination”, i.e. that the organizational members who know their jobs, correctly interpret and respond to the needs and demands of the situation (p. 104). This coordination of routines within an organization and the decision-making
and choices made by organization members are foundational to capabilities.

In further describing organizational capabilities, Nelson and Winter (1982) indirectly refer to the concept of execution. They argue that “implementation” is intimately related to choice, and they maintain that the “…ability to deliberate and implement are elements of a firm’s capabilities…” (p. 71). By choosing to employ the word “implementation”, Nelson and Winter (1982) make clear the importance of being able to execute on those capabilities; that is, in enacting those organizational routines.

Finding this early, indirect reference to the concept of execution in Nelson and Winter (1982) is encouraging, and one might expect the scholars who followed their work to further expand and elaborate on this concept of “implementation”. Unfortunately, many of the scholars who follow Nelson and Winter (1982) focus on defining and describing organizational capabilities without identifying and exploring the concept of execution as an element of capabilities.
As the literature will demonstrate, execution is, at best, implied or assumed in the description of organizational capabilities.

**Implementation, Capacity, and Performance**

Collis (1994) defines organizational capabilities as “…socially complex routines that determine the efficiency with which firms physically transform inputs into outputs” (p. 145). He attributes two important elements to capabilities: (a) capabilities are embedded in firm routines, and (b) specific to transforming inputs into outputs, capabilities enable firms to choose and implement activities required to produce and deliver products and services. Collis’ (1994) definition highlights the interconnectedness of routines and capabilities, and he echoes Nelson and Winter’s (1982) reference to implementation. The “transforming” of inputs into outputs, and the “implementation” of the activities necessary for that transformation, clearly assume execution as an important element of capabilities. Here, the word “execution” could be interchanged with
“implementation”. This identification and recognition is encouraging, however Collis (1994), like Nelson and Winter (1982), does not examine “how” organizations actually implement those necessary activities, nor does he address the nature of the specific activities themselves. Thus, the search for a more granular level analysis of execution continues.

Several scholars build on these early articulations of capabilities and Sydney Winter’s work in this area is particularly influential. For Dosi, Nelson, and Winter (2000), capabilities “fill the gap between intention and outcome”, and they are the authors who are so frequently cited for their identification of routines as the “building blocks of capabilities”. For Dosi et al. (2000), capabilities are the know-how that enables organizations to perform sets of activities, and to be “capable” means that an organization possesses a generally reliable capacity to produce a desired outcome based upon “intended actions” (p. 1). Though they do not employ the word “execution”, their references to “capacity to produce"
and “intended action” reveal their assumption that an ability to execute is at play here. Effectuation of any capacity and the realization of intended actions can only occur if an organization is able to carry out specific activities and practices in support of their execution. Their definitional elements are similar to Hodgson and Knudsen’s (2004) routine as capability or causal mechanism, and Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative aspect, i.e. routines as patterns of action.

It is also encouraging that Winter (2003) continues to refer to execution, albeit implicitly, in his later writings as well. He states that an “organizational capability is a high-level routine (or collection of routines) that, together with its implementing input flows, confers upon an organization’s management a set of decision options for producing significant outputs of a particular type” (Winter, 2003, p. 991). Other scholars highlight the importance of action in their definitions of capabilities as well. O’Reilly and Tushman (2008)
maintain that "...capabilities are discrete business level processes and associated activity systems fundamental to running a business..." (p. 189). These references to the words and phrases "implementation" and "activity systems", and the earlier reference to "capacity to produce" and "intended action", are evidence that some scholars do indeed acknowledge execution as a relevant consideration in the conceptualization of organizational capabilities and as a variable in organizational performance.

Helfat and Peteraf (2003) accept the attributes of capacity and reliability found in the Dosi et al. (2000) definition of organizational capabilities, and they expand the concept. They define an organizational capability as the "ability of an organization to perform a coordinated set of tasks, for the purpose of achieving a particular result" (p. 999). For Helfat and Peteraf (2003), to possess a capability means that the organization has attained a minimum level of functionality that "permits repeated, reliable performance of an activity"; that is, a capability
reaches some threshold level of routine activity and must work in a reliable manner (p. 999). They do not specify or provide guidelines as to how to determine this minimum level of functionality. What is noteworthy regarding their definition is the fact that by stating that it is an ability to perform, Helfat and Peteraf (2003) acknowledge, implicitly, that execution is an essential element of an organizational capability. Without the ability to execute those "coordinated tasks", there is, by their own definition, no organizational capability.

Helfat and Peteraf (2003) draw a further distinction relative to organizational capabilities by arguing that capabilities are either operational or dynamic. Operational capabilities denote those that involve repetitive patterns of activity, such as the routines to perform the individual tasks required in manufacturing. Dynamic capabilities for Helfat and Peteraf (2003) involve routines that coordinate those
individual tasks and serve to change and modify operational capabilities.

Helfat maintains this definition of organizational capabilities throughout her later writings as well (Helfat, 2007) and she provides the clearest articulation most recently in Helfat and Winter (2011) where capability is defined as “the capacity to perform a particular activity in a reliable and at least minimally satisfactory manner” (p. 1244). For Helfat and Winter (2011), there are three critical elements associated with this definition: (a) the capability has an intended purpose; (b) performance means the doing, the carrying out of the activity that involves discretionary choice; and (c) the capability enables a repeated and reliable performance of an activity. This Helfat and Winter (2011) definition and description of capabilities provide a clearer articulation of the elements first identified in the Helfat and Peteraf (2003) definition of organizational capabilities.

Over the course of several years, the concept of execution retains an implied presence in the evolving
definition of capabilities from Helfat and Peteraf (2003) to the more current Helfat and Winter (2011). The definitional element of a “capacity to perform” and an attribution of “repeated and reliable performance” imply and assume an underlying ability to execute the activities in support of that capacity and reliable performance. Once again, however, further examination and exploration of execution cannot be found in this literature. The authors fail to pursue and provide an additional analysis of the action and activities that go into the execution of their organizational capabilities.

It is interesting to note that when scholars such as Helfat and Winter (2011), along with others such as Eggers and Kaplan (2013), actually identify and acknowledge “doing” as a critical element in explaining capabilities, they then choose to direct further inquiry into the area of decision making as opposed to researching and examining the concrete actions that go into the “doing”. While decision-making is certainly important and valuable to both routine assembly and
capability development and deployment, choice and decision-making are not sufficient to explain capability utilization and task performance. It still requires one additional step of analysis; that is, examining the action that follows the choice or decision. Though I may choose or decide to enact routine A or deploy capability B, I may never actually take the actions required to enact routine A or deploy capability B. Actions taken are at once the cause and the “proof” that one has executed a decision, and they serve as the fine-grained evidence that helps explain how an organization’s routines and capabilities contribute to an overall ability to get things done.

In maintaining that a repeated and reliable performance is a “particularly important feature” of a capability, Helfat and Winter (2011) raise an issue that only a further analysis of execution can resolve. They recognize and anticipate a potential criticism of their definition by arguing in a footnote (p. 1244) that their reference to reliable performance does not make their definition of capability tautological.
Helfat and Winter (2011) define “minimally satisfactory performance” to mean that the outcome of the performance is recognizable and it functions at some minimally acceptable level.

There are two critical points to consider here. First, as Helfat and Winter (2011) admit, organizations will vary in how well they perform an activity (p. 1244). Given this variance in performance, organizational capabilities will necessarily differ from firm to firm. Assuming that Helfat and Winter’s (2011) minimum performance threshold has been met, the execution of a manufacturing capability in firm A will be different than the execution of a manufacturing capability in firm B. Therefore, to thoroughly understand the nature of capabilities, one must pursue an analysis that is context specific, i.e. firm A or firm B, and one that examines the specific activities and practices that go into the execution of the capability.

Second, though advocating “minimally satisfactory performance” as a pre-existing element of capabilities,
Helfat and Winter (2011) also readily admit that possession of the capability does not guarantee performance beyond that minimum threshold, nor does their definition address superior performance. Other scholars also maintain that possession of a capability does not guarantee a certain level of performance. Eggers and Kaplan (2013) observe that “mere possession [of a capability] does not affect performance” (p. 300), and Teece (2014b) argues that what an organization could accomplish is not necessarily what it may be currently producing (p. 329).

The fact that Helfat and Winter (2011) choose to avoid this problematic issue; i.e. a more precise definition and explanation of organizational performance, and the fact that other scholars acknowledge and maintain that there is a difference between the potential and the actual capability, makes an analysis of execution all the more critical for better understanding the nature of organizational capabilities. The only way to verify minimally satisfactory performance and to evaluate any gap
between potential and actual capability deployment, is to examine the context specific actions behind capability execution.

Understanding this gap is also critical to explaining the difference between intentions and outcomes among firms. Firms construct organizational routines and capabilities with the best intentions; that is, the intention to deliver superior performance and secure a competitive advantage in the marketplace. However, only a select few achieve this outcome. The capability to execute those actions, principles, and discipline that turn those good intentions into outstanding, measurable results is what separates the exceptional firms from all the rest.

**Ontological Similarities to Routines**

This analysis of the definitions of organizational capabilities is similar to the evolution of the definitions of organizational routines, and the literature demonstrates the interconnectedness of organizational routines and capabilities. Several scholars identify action and implementation as key
definitional elements of an organizational capability (Dosi et al., 2000; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008; Winter, 2003), and this recalls the Feldman and Pentland (2003) performative aspect of routines. Other organizational capability scholars identify capacity; i.e. the potential to perform, as another critical definitional element of a capability (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003; Helfat & Winter, 2011), and this evokes the ostensive aspect of organizational routines also found in Feldman and Pentland (2003).

These definitional similarities, however, do not extend further to the concept of an energizing causal mechanism, such as the one introduced by Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) in their analysis of organizational routines. The organizational capability scholars reviewed here do not explore the general concept of causation in their examination of capacity and action. There is an abundance of research in such areas as managerial cognition (Eggers & Kaplan, 2013; Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000), dynamic managerial capabilities (Adner & Helfat, 2003; Helfat & Martin, 2015; Helfat &
Peteraf, 2015), and ambidexterity (Birkenshaw, Zimmermann, & Raisch, 2016; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008, 2011) as critical elements in the development and deployment of capabilities, but they stop short of detailing the specific actions as the causal mechanisms of those organizational capabilities.

In this regard, the organizational capability scholars should follow the lead of the organizational routine scholars, such as Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) and Becker (2005), by acknowledging, addressing and incorporating a third ontological element to the definition of capabilities; that is, an energizing causal mechanism. Dosi et al. (2000) have called attention to the gap between “intention and outcome”; causation and action sit squarely between intentions and outcomes. Questions and issues related to causation and action reside in the gap, and they require explicit examination to better understand organizational capabilities. Such an examination will necessarily lead to a consideration of the activities
and practices related to execution. Exploring execution will help to close this gap.

A Need for Fine-Grained Analysis

A reasonable, logical question to ask is why scholars have chosen not to explore this third ontological level, i.e. organizational capability as causal mechanism, especially given the early, encouraging references made by Nelson and Winter (1982) and Collis (1994) regarding the importance of “implementation” to organizational capabilities. One reason may be due to the challenging nature of identifying and proving causation. Much like Helfat and Winter’s (2011) admission of the challenge and the context specific nature of specifying “minimally satisfactory performance” relative to a capability, so too the challenge of specifying the concrete actions and conditions that go into execution. Unpacking the elements of execution and testing hypotheses at such a granular level of analysis is difficult work and likely to be organization specific. Thus, more and better qualitative case studies will be required to adequately
capture those activities and practices behind execution. This need for a more granular level analysis must also be balanced against the risk, as Johnson et al. (2003) warn, that studies which are too fine grained may not provide insight and knowledge applicable to organizational level or general outcomes.

This challenge and difficulty should not deter research in this area. Evidence that this is indeed a neglected level of analysis may also be inferred by the recent calls from numerous scholars from a variety of disciplines who strongly advocate for more fine-grained research. While their disciplines may differ, the Strategy-as-Practice (Ambrosini, Bowman, & Burton-Taylor, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Johnson et al., 2003; Regner, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), microfoundations (Barney & Felin, 2013; Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015; Salvato & Rerup, 2011; Teece 2007; Winter, 2013), and practice theory (Feldman, 2015; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011) scholars share a common dissatisfaction with the historical macro-level
analysis found in much social science research. They maintain a need to pursue and explore a more granular level analysis, whether action based or individual specific, to better understand and explain organizational behavior and performance. Scholars advocating these approaches readily admit the context specific nature of such research and the need for more qualitative studies (Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2001; Salvato & Rerup, 2011).

As stated in the Introduction of this dissertation, identifying, defining, describing, and, hopefully, developing a conceptual framework for execution is difficult and challenging. The ubiquitous nature of execution necessitates a granular level examination of the actions, i.e. the activities and practices that firms take to enact their routines, deploy their capabilities, and achieve their performance objectives. Such challenges should not deter the search and pursuit to a better understanding of this concept of execution, and as the review of the dynamic capability literature in the next section will
demonstrate, execution finally moves from an implied and assumed presence in the literature, to an explicitly identified and explored variable relative to organizational change and performance.

**Execution and Dynamic Capabilities**

**Origins of Dynamic Capabilities**

An examination of dynamic capability theory proves valuable for gaining a better understanding of the concept of execution. While the review of organizational routine and capability literature demonstrated the implicit and assumed presence of execution, a review of the dynamic capability literature will show a similar implied and assumed presence in the early literature, then transition to an explicit identification and elaboration of the concept in the most recent writings among several scholars.

In what is widely recognized as a seminal article on the subject, “Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Management”, the authors, Teece, Pisano, and Shuen, (1997), articulated the concept of dynamic capabilities that initiated a more than twenty-year discussion and
debate of the topic. Over the course of that discussion and debate, scholars have focused considerable attention to the issues of dynamic capability definitions, identification, and strategic management theory development. As dynamic capability theory and understanding have evolved, so has the concept of execution within that theory and understanding. Execution has evolved from having no explicit role, to moving into an assumed role, and then finally, to being identified and recognized as an essential element in strategy formulation and organizational operations.

Teece et al. (1997) define dynamic capabilities as “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (p. 516). The word “dynamic” means “renewal”; that is, a firm’s ability to renew competences, and “capabilities” are the “internal and external organizational skills, resources, and functional competences” of a firm. Having established definitions, Teece et al. (1997) provide additional
explanatory detail to build and support a new framework of analysis behind those definitions. For Teece et al. (1997), management, processes, positions, paths, and a rapidly changing environment are key elements of their proposed framework. Processes are the managerial and organizational "routines" for getting things done in an organization (p. 518). Positions are firm assets and resources, both tangible and intangible, while paths represent the previous choices and investments made by a firm that serve to influence and constrain future behaviour (p. 523). Processes, positions, and paths directly impact dynamic capability development, maintenance, and reconfiguration. Management plays a crucial role here due to its control and influence over those processes, positions, and paths, as well as its responsibility for "adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring" firm resources (p. 515). A rapidly changing environment is the impetus for dynamic capabilities. The primary job of management is to develop, deploy, and protect firm resources and competences, those dynamic capabilities, in response to
a rapidly changing environment while seeking to secure a sustainable competitive advantage.

The Teece et al. (1997) article is noteworthy for many reasons. First, and foremost, is the focus and recognition that environmental change is a major issue confronting firms today. The advances in technology, access to information, and globalization have created a rapidly changing environment in which firms must operate. Later research by O’Reilly and Tushman (2008) and Teece (2016) provide evidence showing the quickening pace by which firms have lost their leadership positions relative to profitability and life expectancy on the S & P 500 list. Success in this environment requires an organizational capacity for change. For Teece et al. (1997), dynamic capabilities represent the tools for firm change, and the identification of the importance of a firm’s management, routines, resources, and history provide the start of a theory and an effective framework of analysis to best explain the environment in which firms operate.
The major, implicit assumption underlying this definition and theory of dynamic capabilities is the concept of execution. Teece et al. (1997) do not employ the word “execution”, but all managerial effort and dynamic capability existence pre-suppose an ability to execute; that is, the ability to take the actions necessary to develop and deploy those capabilities. In this initial articulation of a definition and theory, the authors focus primarily on explaining what they mean by “capability”; that is, explaining all the issues relating to a firm’s capacity for change and the elements that go into building such a capacity. Teece et al. (1997) do not ask or address how to effectuate that capacity. Thus, early on, execution becomes the critical “how” question with regard to dynamic capabilities and strategy formulation.

**Dynamic Capability Definitions**

Many of the scholars who have joined the discussion and debate focused on the original Teece et al. (1997) definition of dynamic capabilities. While the issue of definitions is interesting and valuable in
terms of clarifying the original concept of dynamic capabilities, the review provided in this section will focus on how several scholars addressed or failed to address the ability to execute as an element of their dynamic capability definitions.

Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) are frequently cited scholars who offer a much different definition of dynamic capabilities; one that was informed by their resource based view (RBV) of competitive advantage. They argue that dynamic capabilities are a firm’s processes that use resources; that is, “the organizational and strategic routines by which firms achieve new resource configurations” as markets evolve over time (p. 1107). They reject the Teece et al. (1997) definition and theory by arguing that a firm’s resource base, not its dynamic capabilities, is the source of a firm’s competitive advantage. They liken dynamic capabilities to “best practices”; that is, operational capabilities, and their position initiated a new, robust debate regarding the definition of
"dynamic capabilities", "operational capabilities", and "ordinary capabilities".

In the course of providing an alternative dynamic capability definition, Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) do not refer to the concept of execution. They do, however, demonstrate the interconnected nature of capabilities and routines by identifying organizational routines as a core element of their definition. Despite using routines and applying the term "best practices" to help explain their conception of dynamic capabilities, they fail to consider the actions and activities that constitute those organizational routines and best practices. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) maintain an organizational level analysis, which assumes an ability to execute those organizational routines that are intended to change a firm's resource configurations.

Several other scholars also define dynamic capabilities in terms of routines and change. Winter and Szulanski (2001) define dynamic capabilities as the "...partly routinized activities that are carried on to
expand or change the capabilities that directly affect revenue generation...” (p. 734). In responding to the Teece et al. (1997) requirement for a rapidly changing environment, Zollo and Winter (2002) propose that a dynamic capability is a “...learned and stable pattern of collective activity through which the organization systematically generates and modifies its operating routines in pursuit of improved effectiveness” (p. 340). A Nelson and Winter (1982) influence is evident in both of these definitions due to the important role of routines and the interconnectedness of routines and capabilities in explaining organizational performance, and organizational change.

What is noteworthy in a search for execution in this literature, however, is that despite the identification of “change” as a core element of dynamic capabilities, these scholars choose not to take the next, logical step of proposing a theory or providing a framework of analysis regarding how that change actually comes about. They do not directly address how organizations execute the activities intended to bring
about this desired change; and execution therefore remains an implicit, assumed variable in their definitions of dynamic capabilities.

Other scholars identify and place dynamic capabilities within a larger, broader conception of "organizational capabilities". In a later writing, Winter (2003) refines his notion of dynamic capabilities, labelling them as "first-order capabilities" that act upon and influence other firm capabilities, thereby causing change within a firm (p. 992). He identifies changes to product, production processes, and a firm's customer base as examples of dynamic capabilities. Helfat and Peteraf (2003) share Winter's approach of contextualizing dynamic capabilities within a larger organizational capability framework. They define an organizational capability as "the ability of an organization to perform a coordinated set of tasks, utilizing organizational resources, for the purpose of achieving an end result" (p. 999). Helfat and Peteraf (2003) break down organizational capabilities further into "operational"
and "dynamic" capabilities, where they accept the Teece et al. (1997) definition of dynamic capabilities as those that integrate and reconfigure operational capabilities (p. 999). Helfat and Winter (2011) also accept and maintain the view that organizational capabilities consist of both dynamic and operational capabilities.

Helfat and Peteraf (2003) also introduce a new element relative to a broader understanding and explanation of capabilities. They propose a "capability life cycle" model to explain how organizational capabilities develop and evolve within a firm. Sharing the view of Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), Helfat and Peteraf (2003) argue that the resource base underlying the organizational capabilities is the true source of change within firms; there is no special role for dynamic capabilities within this process.

In re-visiting the Helfat and Peteraf (2003) article from the dynamic capabilities perspective, there is a welcome development regarding the concept of
execution. Whereas consideration and reference to the issue of execution are absent from the Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) and Winter (2003) analyses, Helfat and Peteraf (2003) specifically address execution in their definition and supporting explanation. However, their definition and explanation of a “capability” proves problematic. They argue that a firm possessing a capability has, by definition, been able to attain some “minimum level of functionality” that results in a “repeated, reliable performance of an activity” (p. 999). Capability is not simply a “potential” for performance; it also includes a certain minimum level of demonstrated performance; that is, actual execution of the performance is an assumed element of their definition.

Helfat (2007) re-visits this issue in a later definition of dynamic capabilities. A dynamic capability “is the capacity of an organization to purposely create, extend, or modify its resource base” (Helfat, 2007, p. 2). What proves interesting is how Helfat (2007) defines “capacity”. A “capacity”
involves: (a) identifying the need and opportunity for change; (b) developing a response to that need or opportunity; and (c) implementing that response (p. 2). While continuing the thinking introduced in Helfat and Peteraf (2003), Helfat (2007) now explicitly identifies what has been assumed in much of the dynamic capability literature; that is, implementing action is critical to a capability. While Helfat (2007) chooses to use the word “implementing”, she is clearly expressing the idea and concept of execution.

While the Helfat (2007) identification and reference to execution within the conception of capabilities is a tremendous advance, attributing execution as a definitional element of the word “capacity” is odd and problematic. Reminiscent of the Helfat and Peteraf (2003) definition of “capability”, capacity is not just a potential to implement or execute; it also conveys the understanding that action is part of the definition. This notion of capability or capacity as a definition encompassing both the potential for action and the action itself has not been
observed in any of the dynamic capability literature reviewed for this paper. The dynamic capability literature reviewed does not offer any definitions of “capability” or “capacity” in which a minimum level of performance is assumed as part of that definition. The traditional definition and understanding of the words “capability” and “capacity” convey a meaning that encompasses an “ability” to perform, the potential to act or perform; it does not include the action itself.

This Helfat (2007) definition appears to be an effort in “mental gymnastics” and it proves the underlying failure of the strategy literature to properly identify and explore the role and importance of execution in an analysis of strategy and organizational capabilities. Helfat (2007) recognizes this problem and attempts to solve it by awkwardly building execution “as action and performance” into the definition of capacity. This is reminiscent of the ontological issues reviewed in the organizational routine literature, where several scholars defined and described organizational routines on multiple levels:
routine as actual repetitive action; routine as patterns of activities, i.e. as a template or principle; and routines as a potential or causal energizing mechanism (Becker, 2005; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Hodgson & Knudsen, 2004). While Helfat (2007) makes an important and valuable contribution by recognizing and addressing this issue, her solution of building the act of executing into a definition of capacity avoids the difficult challenge and hard work of developing and explaining a broader conceptual framework for execution.

Departing from the resource based view approach of Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), Peteraf and Helfat (2003), and Helfat (2007), Barreto (2010) introduces a new perspective on dynamic capabilities, and he proposes a definition that he claims succeeds in consolidating all prior definitions of dynamic capabilities: “A dynamic capability is the firm’s potential to systematically solve problems formed by its propensity to sense opportunities and threats, to make timely market oriented decisions, and to change
the resource base” (p. 271). This new perspective identifies “problem solving” as the foundation and starting point for dynamic capabilities. This approach is much different than the original Teece et al. (1997) focus on a firm’s ability to renew, integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences. While Barreto (2010) does make a strong argument to justify the four dimensions of his definition, he fails to address and explain why he chose “potential to solve problems” as the starting point for his definition of dynamic capabilities. He also fails to address how an ability to execute would be important and essential to the four dimensions of his definition. Barreto (2010) states that his capability represents the “potential” to implement those four dimensions, but he does not address how that implementation can and will occur. Execution is once again relegated to an assumption within a definition of dynamic capabilities.

Aside from the position of Helfat (2007), reference to the concept of execution cannot be found in the early dynamic capability literature. Perhaps
scholars consider an ability to execute too minor of an issue, or they may consider the concept of execution so self-evident as to not merit attention. Or perhaps it is unreasonable to expect examination of such a ubiquitous concept within the dynamic capability literature when the concept of dynamic capabilities itself has proven to be a “moving target” for the past twenty years. As Barreto (2010) correctly observes, despite the tremendous volume of writing on the subject, the definition of dynamic capability is far from consolidated. Settling on a definition has proven to be a difficult task, and the development of a theory for dynamic capabilities has proven even more difficult. Helfat and Peteraf (2009) correctly observe that these “deficiencies” are a “tell tale sign of early stage development of an area of inquiry” (p. 92) and they argue that dynamic capability is not yet a theory (p. 99). Given these challenges, the thought of introducing a variable, such as the concept of execution, may be viewed as tangential or disruptive in the pursuit of greater clarity for an unsettled area of
inquiry. Fortunately, the later writings of David Teece prove valuable in providing greater clarity as to the definition and theory of dynamic capability, and his writings also explicitly identify the concept of execution and reveal its importance to dynamic capability theory.

**Dynamic Capabilities, Teece, and Execution**

The explicit identification of execution and its role and importance within dynamic capabilities emerges in the more recent writings of David Teece. Teece replies to those scholars who responded to Teece et al. (1997) by revising his definition of dynamic capabilities and expanding the theory behind the revised definition. The ability to execute emerges as an element of his expanded theory.

Teece (2009) modifies the original definition of dynamic capabilities by replacing the word “competences” with the word “assets”. Dynamic capabilities are a firm’s capacity to “shape, reshape, configure, and reconfigure assets” in response to rapidly changing markets (p. 87). Assets were
previously addressed as part of "positions" in the original definition and for Teece (2009) they now are part of the foundational definition of dynamic capabilities. Teece (2009) also maintains that assets are firm specific and difficult for competitors to imitate. One may speculate that the contribution of the RBV scholars to the dynamic capability discussion helped influence Teece's new definition. Once again, however, the notion of execution is not specifically addressed in this definition. The ability to execute; that is, to have the capacity and to engage in the necessary shaping, reshaping, configuring and reconfiguring of assets is simply assumed.

Teece (2009, 2014a, 2014b) broadens his theory of dynamic capability by adding and emphasizing the entrepreneurial environment in which firms operate and in which dynamic capabilities develop and evolve. Firms continuously develop, modify, and renew their dynamic capabilities in pursuit of new opportunities and as a response to a rapidly changing environment. According to Teece (2009), a dynamic capability is a
“meta-competence” that enables firms to invent and innovate profitably (p. 54). Firms accomplish this by the entrepreneurial activities and processes of sensing, seizing, and transforming. Sensing as a general concept is new market opportunity and need identification, and it involves systems and capacities to learn, filter, and shape those opportunities (Teece, 2009, p. 17). Seizing is a firm’s capability to act, and it includes such things as structure, procedures, decision-making and developing new business models to capture those new opportunities (Teece, 2009, p. 26).

Note the difference between Teece’s definition of “capability” as opposed to the one promoted by Helfat and Peteraf (2003) and Helfat (2007). Helfat and Peteraf (2003) argue that the action or performance, the act of utilizing a dynamic capability, is integral to the definition of a capability. Teece (2009), as well as many other scholars previously reviewed in the organizational capability literature (Collis, 1994; Dosi et al., 2000; Nelson & Winter, 1982), view “capability” as the potential to act or execute a
dynamic capability. The transforming activities of a firm are those that change, modify, and adapt a firm’s resources in order to “reconfigure dynamic capabilities to better support those sensing and seizing activities” (Feiler and Teece, 2014, p. 15).

Successful sensing, seizing and transforming of dynamic capabilities require strong, entrepreneurial management. Teece (2009, 2012) identifies this management as “entrepreneurial managerial capitalism” and he argues that it “involves recognizing problems and trends, directing (and redirecting) resources, and reshaping organizational structures and systems so they create alignment with customer needs” (Teece, 2009, p. 59). Teece (2012) also maintains that the entrepreneurial and leadership skills of an organization’s top management are critical for sustaining dynamic capabilities (p. 1398). Much like his new definition, this further elaboration of the theory for dynamic capabilities rests and relies upon a major, unspoken assumption: that such an entrepreneurial management team can execute the
requisite sensing, seizing, and transforming activities to create customer value and build a sustainable competitive advantage in a rapidly changing environment. Teece (2009) makes one cursory reference to the concept of execution when he states that once an opportunity is identified, management must “make the decisions and institute the disciplines to execute on the opportunity” (p. 60). This brief reference finally makes explicit what has been implicit all along; that an ability to execute is indeed a key element of Teece’s (2009) dynamic capability theory.

Increased, explicit references to the concept of execution begin to emerge in Teece’s more recent writings where he further explains the nature of dynamic capabilities, the need and role of entrepreneurial management, and organizational change. Building upon his previous definitions, Teece (2012) argues that dynamic capabilities are “higher-level competences that determine the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external resources/competences to address, and possibly shape,
rapidly changing business environments” (p. 1395).

Dynamic capabilities fall into three general categories: sensing, which involves the identification of opportunities; seizing, which requires the mobilization of resources to exploit those opportunities; and transforming, which consists of the constant renewal of a firm’s resources in response to a continually changing business environment. Teece (2012) argues that the entrepreneurial and leadership skills of the top management are critical to determining the effectiveness of dynamic capabilities relative to this sensing, seizing, and transforming (p. 1398).

It is this identification of the changing business environment and the functions of resource mobilization and transformation that requires Teece to explicitly refer to the concept of execution. He states that in an organization’s response to or instigation of change, “the dynamic capabilities that make it possible to succeed in this endeavour involve good strategizing as well as good execution” (p. 1397). In his description
of entrepreneurial management he cites "getting things started" as one of the important activities in dynamic capability development and deployment (p. 1398). These two references are a stated acknowledgement and explicit reference to the concept of execution. Teece (2012) does not detail and explain what he means by "good execution", but this explicit reference is an exciting, next step in better understanding the role and importance of execution in this literature.

Leih and Teece (2013) build upon these observations by further exploring the role of management, and specifically middle managers, in developing and deploying dynamic capabilities to effectuate change. The authors emphasize the reality and significance of fast moving environments as part of a dynamic capability framework of analysis (p. 3). While they acknowledge that organizational routines are a basis for most organizational capabilities, they also argue that dynamic capabilities often depend upon the non-routinized activities of a firm’s top management (p. 13). It is in their analysis of the role and
importance of management that Leih and Teece (2013) make several direct and indirect references to the concept of execution. For Leih and Teece (2013) “dynamic capabilities are about selecting the right things to do…and getting them done” (p. 10), they determine whether an organization is able to “implement” good strategies (p. 12), and dynamic capabilities govern “…how new business models are created and implemented” (p. 14). Top management plays a critical role in the dynamic capabilities framework due to their “ability to get the right things done” (p. 11) and the fact that the nature of their role is strategic; that is, one that requires “engagement and enactment”.

Leigh and Teece’s (2013) repeated use of the words “implement”, “engagement”, and “enactment”, as well as the use of the specific phrase “ability to get things done” is evidence and explicit acknowledgement that the concept of execution is at work here and that it is an essential element in their dynamic capability framework. What is also noteworthy in Leih and Teece’s
(2013) discussion, is the importance and value of middle management relative to firm execution and the deployment of dynamic capabilities. They argue that middle managers, those situated two or three levels below the CEO, “…assist with dynamic capabilities too because, without enactment, dynamic capabilities are unlikely to be realized” (p. 18). Probing this Leih and Teece (2013) characterization of middle management may be helpful in my effort to develop a conceptual framework for execution and point to an area worth testing in my field research. Interviewing middle managers may provide helpful data relative to determining what it actually means to execute, i.e. in specifically identifying the activities and practices performed by middle managers.

Explicit identification and references to execution as a key element of dynamic capability theory continues in an oil and gas industry analysis conducted by Shuen, Feiler, and Teece (2014). The authors examine the dynamic capability of human resources and its impact on a firm operating within the oil and gas
industry. Deciding where and what to drill represents a major industry investment decision, and the authors find that such a decision must be connected to the "current organizational capability" of the human resources. Shuen et al. (2014) observe that a strategy may call for the pursuit of a high value project, but it may not be achievable given the available talent; they state: "Many firms do not ask the 'doability' question when making strategic decisions about investments" (p. 10). This analysis and prescription to consider "doability" in the strategy formulation is an explicit acknowledgement that the ability to execute plays, and should play, a critical role in strategy assessment and formulation.

The importance of execution to strategy formulation and dynamic capability development is again identified and examined in a follow-on case study of a large oil and gas company by Feiler and Teece (2014). Through this case study of EXP, a large oil and gas company, Feiler and Teece (2014) document how the ability or inability to execute influenced senior
management in their strategy formulation and decision-making. The authors explain that when oil and gas companies engage in sensing activities, simply identifying those opportunities that will create the most value is not acceptable; management must also identify those high value opportunities that are also "doable" given existing resources (Feiler & Teece, 2014, p. 15). EXP maintained a decision-making criterion that the investment decision process for proposed projects must address the "strength and availability of capability for venture execution" (p. 16).

This Feiler and Teece (2014) case study documents the ability to execute as a defined criterion used by a senior management team in business strategy formulation. The ability to execute is not simply assumed, nor is it viewed as a separate consideration independent of strategy formulation and firm performance. The senior management in this case went one step further by designating execution as one of the company's ten critical dynamic capabilities: "The
establishment of Capability as a strategic and cultural imperative throughout Exploration” (p. 16). As Feiler and Teece (2014) detail, EXP senior management understood the term “Capability” to mean the ability to execute, the ability to get things done throughout the EXP organization.

An increased acceptance and continued expression of the importance of execution can be found in the most recent work by Teece and colleagues, who have begun to share language and repeated references to the role and function of execution in dynamic capability theory. Teece (2016), in re-visiting the dynamic capabilities of sensing and seizing, emphasizes the need for a firm to “undertake actions” to generate desired outcomes, and that one of the primary responsibilities of top management is the “implementation” of corporate strategy (p. 209). In addressing how organizations manage risk and uncertainty in an innovation economy, Teece, Peteraf, and Leih (2016) argue that an “ability to quickly implement a new business model or other required changes” is a critical determinant of the
strength of a firm’s dynamic capabilities (p. 12), and they specifically state that “seizing” is about implementation and “getting things done” (p. 22).

The best evidence of execution as having secured a permanent presence in the dynamic capabilities framework comes from two of the most recent Teece articles. In one article, Teece (2016) argues that “the ability to quickly implement a new business model or other changes” is one of the key elements, along with values and culture, that constitute a “pillar” of dynamic capabilities (p. 211). In a follow on article further explaining his concept of business models, Teece (2018) points out that a firm might be good at developing new business models yet be mediocre at implementing them, in which case the dynamic capability of seizing new opportunities would be negatively impacted. Thus, for Teece, execution has become a major, explicit element in his dynamic capability theory.

From an original assumed presence (Teece et al., 1997), to a first explicit reference (Teece, 2012), to
a determinant found in two case studies, and finally, to an explicit articulation that implementation and getting things done are critical to dynamic capabilities, the concept of execution emerges as important consideration in Teece’s dynamic capability theory.

Execution – A More Granular Level Analysis

While the increased references and the acknowledged importance of execution to dynamic capabilities theory is an exciting, welcome development, Teece and colleagues fall short relative to detailing and explaining the specific activities and practices that go into “implementation” and that “ability to get things done”. Fortunately, recent case studies conducted by other dynamic capabilities scholars do venture toward this next, necessary step in seeking a better understanding of the nature of execution. In their case study of the Valve Corporation, Felin and Powell (2016) develop a series of questions that each organization should ask related to the dynamic capabilities of sensing, shaping, and
seizing. Some examples of these questions include: "How can we encourage people to share new ideas with others?"; "Do we have mechanisms for testing new ideas—e.g. pilot tests, experiments?"; "What rules do we use for project investment decisions?" (pp. 91-92). What is valuable and noteworthy about these questions relative to execution is the fact that finding the answers requires the identification of specific activity and actions within an organization. A great benefit of these questions is that they direct dynamic capability inquiry to a more granular level analysis; one focused on the activities and practices that cause those capabilities.

A similar focus on specific activities and practices can be found in the work of scholars examining the dynamic capability of ambidexterity. In a detailed case study of executive management at IBM, Harreld, O'Reilly, and Tushman (2007) explicitly address execution and explain its importance to strategic thinking and ambidexterity. For Harreld et al. (2007), ambidexterity is a dynamic capability
whereby a firm is able to simultaneously exploit existing business opportunities and explore new business opportunities. Regarding execution, they argue that strategy is not simply about making quality decisions; strategy also requires “executing well on those decisions” (p. 22). Harreld et al. (2007) clearly place execution at the center of the issue of a firm’s intentions versus its outcomes. A firm may intend, and succeed, in developing a winning strategy and making the right decision in support of that strategy, but execution ultimately determines the outcomes; that is, actual performance and results. The authors use this case study analysis to demonstrate and describe how implementation, execution, and exceptional capabilities enabled IBM to develop and retain the dynamic capability of ambidexterity and achieve its desired outcomes.

Another major contribution of this study is how Harreld et al. (2007) engage in a deeper, more fine-grained analysis by documenting the specific activities that go into IBM’s strategic execution efforts.
Examples of concrete activity include: the monthly meetings of their Technology and Strategy teams, and the hosting of Strategic Leadership Forums. In citing the former CEO, Lou Gerstner’s statement that “in the new IBM, we’ve always believed that our ability to execute is as important as the strength of our strategies” (p. 40), Harreld et al. (2007) focus attention on just how important execution is to strategic management. They view “the ability of a firm to sense new opportunities and seize them” (p. 40) as the foundation of dynamic capabilities. This focus on action and activity, and the repeated references to execution and its importance for ambidexterity is a welcome development for a better understanding of the concept of execution.

O’Reilly and Tushman (2008, 2011) build and expand upon the Harreld et al. (2007) findings regarding execution and the dynamic capability of ambidexterity. In a theoretical study, O’Reilly and Tushman (2008) argue that a clear articulation of specific management actions related to ambidexterity have been missing from
the literature; an omission they seek to address by developing a set of guiding propositions. Their propositions specify five conditions necessary for the successful development and deployment of the dynamic capability of ambidexterity. These propositions include the following: a strategic intent that justifies the importance of both the exploration and exploitation of business opportunities; the vision and values that ensure a common identity despite the very different nature of explore and exploit efforts; a senior management team that “owns” the ambidextrous strategy, which is supported by a common reward system and constant communication of the strategy; the separate but aligned organizational structures necessary to support the different explore and exploit activities, but integrated at both the senior and tactical levels; and an ability of senior leadership to accept and resolve conflicts that may arise from the too very different explore and exploit alignments (p. 9). For O’Reilly and Tushman (2008) these propositions describe and prescribe five conditions that are “...the
foundational elements for ambidexterity as a dynamic capability” (p. 199).

What is noteworthy regarding the O’Reilly and Tushman (2008) propositions and their relevance to execution is that they mirror the shift found in Felin and Powell (2016) to a more granular, activity-based level of analysis. Where Felin and Powell (2016) pose a series of action related questions that firms should address, O’Reilly and Tushman (2008) identify specific categories of management activities and practices that firms must pursue in order to develop and deploy a dynamic capability of ambidexterity. While O’Reilly and Tushman (2008) do not venture to offer a specific list of actions for each category, for example the specific actions that would constitute “constant communication” or “conflict resolution”, they clearly focus on a greater tactical level analysis. They do not simply refer to the general concepts of “implementation”, “engagement”, or “enactment”; they address categories of actual activity and practices
that help to explain how a firm executes to bring about their five desired conditions.

O'Reilly and Tushman (2008) also identify principles as supportive elements of the activities and practices prescribed in their five propositions. For example, an organization’s values and a senior management team’s acceptance of conflict help shape and guide several of their desired conditions. O'Reilly and Tushman’s (2008) introduction of principles as part of their conditions seems to lend support for my proposition that execution as a catalytic capability must include shaping principles in addition to specific actions.

In a follow-on empirical study, O’Reilly and Tushman (2011) apply their five propositions and test these conditions in a fifteen firm case study. The concept of execution is at the forefront of their analysis as evidenced by their statement that “the focus in these interviews was on understanding in some detail what actions had been taken and how these had been implemented” (p. 10). While O’Reilly and
Tushman’s (2011) findings regarding their propositions are interesting, for example strategic intent proved not to be a determinant of ambidexterity, the value and benefit for a better understanding of execution comes from the approach and focus of their study. They engage in a more fine-grained, tactical level analysis, and their five propositions guide their inquiry into specific categories of firm activities and supporting principles. O’Reilly and Tushman (2011) intentionally seek to discover the specific actions and explain how those actions are implemented in the efforts of these fifteen firms to develop and deploy the dynamic capability of ambidexterity. Their subsequent analysis involves evaluating how each of the fifteen firms execute their five propositions.

These case studies and the O’Reilly and Tushman (2008, 2011) propositions make a significant contribution to furthering the understanding of execution. Within several broad categories and conditions, these authors identify specific actions and principles that characterize execution, and they
explore the impact that execution has on capability development and firm outcomes. Felin and Powell (2016) and O’Reilly and Tushman (2008, 2011) arrive at these valuable insights by venturing into a micro, tactic-level analysis of firm operations. I embrace this level of analysis and I seek to build upon and extend their research efforts by exploring the actions, shaping principles, and guiding discipline that my research participants may demonstrate in the execution of their businesses. Discoveries at this level of analysis may reveal commonalities across firms and real world practices that may help further explain the concept of execution. Such findings may also confirm and support the macro level concepts found in much of the organizational and dynamic capability literature.

**Insights from the Literature**

The impetus for this critical review of the literature arose from my awareness of just how important the capability of execution is to practitioners, and from the numerous, indirect
references to the concept that I found in strategic management theory. My early research efforts also led to the discovery of organizational routine theory as a potentially valuable framework for better understanding the concept of execution. These disciplines, organizational routines, organizational capabilities, and dynamic capabilities provided a valuable context and lens to explore the nature of execution because routines and capabilities are widely recognized as significant phenomenon for explaining how organizations get things done and how they perform.

One major conclusion from this review is that most of the literature fails to explicitly identify and examine the concept of execution as it relates to routines and capabilities. Execution is largely an implied and assumed element of organizational routines and capabilities. This failure to explicitly examine the role of execution represents a gap in the literature and an exciting opportunity to pursue new knowledge by researching the activities and practices
that help to explain how organizations execute their routines and capabilities.

One of the key insights of the organizational routine literature, and the only one for which there is agreement among scholars in this discipline (Becker, 2005), is that “repetitive patterns of activity” prove to be a key characteristic of a routine (Nelson & Winter, 1982). The early definitions and descriptions of routines focused on task accomplishment, patterns of behaviour, and getting things done in a repetitive, reliable manner (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Dosi et al., 2000; Weis & Ilgen, 1985). However, for all the focus on the explaining of “getting things done”, there was no direct reference to the concept of execution; no analysis of the specific activities and practices that explain the “how” behind getting things done. Despite the failure to address the concept of execution directly, these early definitions of routines did introduce an attribute that merits consideration in the development of a conceptual framework for execution;
that is, the attribute of recurrent, repetitive activity.

The organizational routine literature advanced and scholars soon pointed out that the early definitions failed to account for the ontological complexity of organizational routines. Feldman and Pentland (2003) introduced their performative and ostensive aspects of routines. The performative aspect represented the routine in practice, while the ostensive aspect represented the routine in principle. Hodgson (2003) introduced a different, third ontological element for consideration by asserting that a routine is an energizing, causal capability. Efforts to resolve these conflicting definitions and disparate ontological elements came from Becker (2005) and Pentland et al. (2012) whereby these scholars combined all three elements within a single definition of a routine. They argued that one could only understand the nature of a routine by recognizing and accepting its multi-level nature. Though a direct and explicit analysis of execution is absent from this debate, these scholars
raise an important consideration for developing a conceptual framework for execution; that is, ontology and the potential multi-level nature of execution.

As was the case with the organizational routine literature, Nelson and Winter (1982) proved a compelling starting point for a review of the organizational capability literature. Nelson and Winter (1982) tied routines to capabilities by arguing that routines were a major determinant of capabilities. They also indirectly refer to execution in their analysis by identifying “implementation” as a critical element of capabilities. In much of the literature following Nelson and Winter (1982) there is an increase in the frequency of indirect references to the concept of execution. In describing capabilities, scholars employ words and phrases such as, “implementation”, “enactment”, “engagement”, “activity systems”, and “intended action” (Collis, 1994; Dosi et al., 2000, O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008; Winter, 2003). These indirect references represent a welcome development in the literature because they indicate a recognition that
the “how” behind capability development and deployment cannot be ignored.

This issue is further advanced by Helfat and Peteraf (2003) and Helfat and Winter (2011) in the definitions they propose for organizational capabilities. Helfat and Peteraf (2003) define a capability as the “ability to perform a coordinated set of tasks for the purpose of achieving a particular result” (p. 999). Though still an indirect reference, the “ability to perform” clearly introduces the concept of execution as part of the definition. The importance of execution to organizational capabilities is again evident when Helfat and Winter (2011) identify “performance as doing” as one of the three critical elements to their definition of organizational capabilities. While their argument that possession of a capability ensures a minimum level of reliable performance is suspect, their analysis addresses the issue of ontology, and Helfat and Peteraf (2003) attribute a multi-level nature to organizational capabilities.
Though these references to execution remain indirect and implicit, they represent an exciting development in the organizational capability literature. Identifying and articulating an ability to perform and performance as doing, along with the introduction of the multi-level nature of organizational capabilities, points to execution as the critical concept to better understand capabilities going forward. This literature reveals the need to further examine the “how” behind capabilities, which will necessarily lead to a consideration of the nature of execution.

This proves to be the case with the emergence of the dynamic capability literature. The Teece et al. (1997) definition of dynamic capabilities as “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (p. 516) initiated more than twenty years of extensive research and debate regarding the concept and the theory. A major focus of dynamic capability theory is change; a firm’s capacity for
change and the rapidly changing external environment in
which the firm operates (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000;
Teece, 2016; Zollo & Winter, 2002). This focus on
change naturally lends itself to an inquiry regarding
the activities and practices that firms must execute to
achieve that change. The early dynamic capability
literature does not pursue this line of inquiry,
however, and it does not identify and explore the
nature of execution. Execution is simply implied and
assumed in the integrating, building, and reconfiguring
of firm competences.

In the more recent literature, indirect references
to execution begin to emerge. Helfat (2007) identifies
"implementing responses to opportunities" as a critical
element of her dynamic capability definition. Teece
(2009, 2014a, 2014b) broadens his theory of dynamic
capabilities by introducing entrepreneurial management
as an important variable in the development and
deployment of dynamic capabilities. Management engages
in the key activities of sensing and seizing new
opportunities, and in transforming firm resources in
order to respond and adapt to the changing environment. Whether the Helfat (2007) indirect reference to implementing, or the sensing, seizing, and transforming activities proposed by Teece (2009), execution is the underlying assumption for all these activities.

Frequent, explicit references related to execution finally emerge in the most recent dynamic capability literature. Teece (2012) states that dynamic capabilities require “good execution”. Leih and Teece (2013) argue that dynamic capabilities are very much about “getting things done”. In a case study of an oil and gas exploration company, Shuen et al. (2014) document that project “doability” proved to be a critical criterion in strategy formulation. Feiler and Teece (2014) document how “doability” became a critical criterion in project investment decision making for a large oil and gas exploration company.

The case studies of both Felin and Powell (2016) and O’Reilly and Tushman (2011) move from an identification of broad descriptors of execution, i.e. “doability” cited in the Teece case studies, to a
consideration of categories of activities that constitute an ability to execute. Felin and Powell’s (2016) series of questions related to dynamic capabilities require answers that detail specific organizational activities and practices. O’Reilly and Tushman (2008, 2011) develop five propositions prescribing key activities and principles necessary for a firm to develop the dynamic capability of ambidexterity. These most recent case studies represent a welcome shift to a more granular level analysis of the actions and activities involved in dynamic capability development and deployment.

The current state of the dynamic capability literature makes the concept of execution explicit; it is identified as a critical element in dynamic capability development and deployment. These recent case studies also point to a promising trend where scholars are seeking and pursuing a more granular level analysis of the actions and activities that firms employ to execute their dynamic capabilities.
This trend coincides with a recent, growing call by numerous scholars across multiple disciplines to engage in more and better fine-grained analysis to explain organizational behaviour. Scholars exploring Strategy-as-Practice, routine dynamics, microfoundations, and practice theory share a common dissatisfaction with the historical macro level analysis found in much of the social science research. As Eriksson (2014) observes, most studies focus on organizational level issues and neglect the role of managers and other individuals. This is a view shared by many microfoundations scholars (Barney & Felin, 2013; Salvato & Rerup, 2011; Teece, 2007). Numerous Strategy-as-practice and practice theory scholars argue for the need of research to focus on actions and situated activity (Ambrosini et al., 2007; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003).

Regardless of the differing foci, individuals or actions, the common message from these scholars is that future research should entail a more granular level analysis of organizational behaviour. Such an approach
must lead to and involve the concept of execution; that is, research into the activities and practices that constitute an organization’s capability to execute.

What remains now is to see if the insights gained from this review of the organizational routine, organizational capabilities, and dynamic capabilities literature can be used to refine and improve the definition of execution, and to develop a potential conceptual framework for execution.

A Conceptual Framework of Execution

Execution - A Definition

Execution is a catalytic capability; that is, a stored behavioural capability comprised of repetitive, recurrent actions, shaping principles, and a guiding discipline that energizes and effectuates organizational behaviour. Actions are the fundamental activities and practices intended to achieve and maintain an organization’s performance objectives, and principles influence and shape the nature and quality of those actions. The combination of actions and principles creates a discipline, a recognized structure
or system that serves as a template and framework of accountability to guide and direct organizational behaviour.

A valuable insight from the literature review is the need to consider different ontological elements and the potential multi-level nature of execution. The analyses of Feldman and Pentland (2003), Hodgson and Knudsen (2004), and Becker (2005) relative to routines, and Helfat and Peteraf (2003) relative to capabilities, prove helpful in making sense of my proposed definition for execution. Execution as actions, principles, discipline, and energizing capability represent different ontological elements that must be examined and explained.

**Execution as Action**

To understand the concept of execution, one must start with action. I draw from Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative aspect and the early writings on organizational routines. For Feldman and Pentland (2003), the performative aspect of a routine is the “routine in practice”. Similarly, to understand
execution as action, one must acknowledge its performative aspect; that is, execution in practice. In the early writings on organizational routines, scholars attributed “recurrent, repetitive activity” to the concept of a routine (Collis, 1994; Nelson & Winter, 1982). I accept this characterization and combine it with a performative aspect, such that “execution as action” is execution in practice that is recurrent and repetitive. The importance of action in the conceptualization of routines is best expressed by Feldman et al. (2016) when they state, “Without action, there is no routine” (p. 506). I share this view relative to execution: without action, there is no execution.

**Execution as Principles**

Action alone, however, is not sufficient to completely explain execution; and though I characterize action as recurrent and repetitive, execution is not a routine. Principles are a required element in the conceptual framework for execution. Principles
influence and shape the nature and the quality of actions.

Consider the role of principles in the following scenario: We determine that having a team meeting every Monday morning is one of the recurrent, repetitive actions that will contribute to the execution of our performance objectives. We initiate and conduct those weekly meetings. The specific action, a weekly team meeting, does indeed occur. The action alone, however, is not enough to constitute the capability of execution. The action of meeting, by itself, does not address the quality of those meetings. Are the meetings productive and effective? Are they intense and results driven? Do they create a sense of urgency among the team? Meeting weekly would satisfy the repetitive, recurrent characteristic of "execution as action", and if the analysis stopped there, these meetings could be viewed simply as an organizational routine.

Principles serve as an underlying "rule" or belief that gives meaning and potential measurability to the
nature of the action; in this case, what it means to be “productive and effective”, “intense”, and “results driven”. For example, the rule or belief that a meeting must be “productive and effective” may mean that all team members do the following during a meeting: address important organizational issues, make decisions, assign tasks to specific individuals, and set deadlines for task completion. Productivity and effectiveness may be assessed through simple, activity-based measures: Were the critical issues addressed? Yes or no? Did the team make the necessary decisions? Yes or no? Were follow on tasks assigned to specific individuals? Yes or no? Were deadlines established for all assigned tasks? Yes or no? For each shaping principle a set of underlying rules or beliefs can be identified and measured in order to determine the presence and influence of the principle on specific actions.

**Execution As Discipline**

The combining of execution as action and execution as principles creates execution as a discipline. In
describing this “discipline”, I rely on Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) ostensive aspect of routines. Their ostensive aspect is the routine in principle; the ideal of a routine which emerges from their performative routine as practice. This ostensive aspect also serves as a framework of accountability to make sense of routines in practice. I attribute an ostensive aspect as an element of execution as a discipline. Repetitive, recurring action, i.e. execution as action, creates the phenomenon of execution as an ideal and as a framework of accountability.

This ostensive aspect alone, however, is not sufficient to create this discipline. The element of “execution as principles” must also be considered. Principles are instrumental in influencing and shaping the nature and quality of action. The combination of both execution as actions and principles produces an obvious and easily recognized ideal and framework, a “discipline” that serves to guide organizational behaviour. Pentland and Rueter’s (1994) use of the concept of “grammars” is helpful here. They argue
that, much like grammar in language, there is an underlying structure or framework that reflects and guides the enactment of routines. This can also be applied to execution as discipline. The combination of execution as actions and principles produce a well-recognized "grammar" that directs, guides, and explains organizational behaviour.

In returning to the scenario of the weekly team meetings: a new member joining the team will recognize the existence of a discipline that informs the team meetings. The actions combined with the shaping principles create a structure whereby the new team member quickly comes to know such things as: never arrive late to a meeting, extensively prepare and be ready to report performance results, contribute meaningful feedback on firm operations, and provide suggestions for business improvements. Execution as a discipline is this structure or "grammar" that guides and informs team behaviour within the meeting.
Execution – A Catalytic Capability

The combination of all three elements; that is, execution as actions, principles, and discipline, together, create a catalytic capability of execution. The capability is catalytic due to the fact that organizations cannot, and will not, achieve their performance objectives without an ability to execute. Routines will not be enacted unless an organization can, and does, perform the necessary activities and practices to carry out the routines. Capabilities will not be utilized unless an organization can, and does, perform the necessary activities and practices to develop and deploy those capabilities. Executives typically have the best intentions; they develop strategies, create plans, and make decisions on particular courses of action, but the outcomes, the realization of those strategies, plans, and decisions, depend entirely on possession of the catalytic capability of execution.

In drawing from Hodgson (2003) and Hodgson and Knudsen (2004), the catalytic capability of execution
can best be described as a stored, energizing capability comprised of repetitive, recurrent actions, shaping principles, and guiding discipline that, when triggered, causes the activities and practices that drive organizational performance and results.

Execution in Practice

What might execution in practice look like? Are there common actions and principles that can be identified as evidence of a capability of execution? The following, speculative lists are an attempt to identify some actions and principles that may contribute to an organization’s capability to execute.

Specific Actions in Practice

One question that I will consider and explore when conducting my field study is whether the proposed list of actions below may contribute to an organization’s capability to execute. One goal for the field study is to explore and discover the best individual actions for execution; that is, those actions that make it possible to execute:
Managers are “working managers” who devote a significant percentage of their time working in their business, interacting directly with customers and employees.

The organization measures and monitors a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) related to customers, revenue, operations and finances.

Management teams confer weekly in intense face-to-face meetings to review business performance results and question ongoing business assumptions.

Management teams review real-time performance information and they communicate daily in reviewing that performance, addressing issues that require attention.

Senior management issues constant, frequent communication throughout the entire organization via email, phone, and face-to-face meetings.

Priorities are identified, established and clearly communicated throughout the organization. Each priority has assigned accountability, timetable, and key performance indicators associated with it.

There is anecdotal and empirical evidence in support of these activities as important and valuable actions of execution. An outstanding example foreshadowing this approach to execution in terms of action and principles can be found in Eisenhardt’s (1989) empirical study of decision-making in large companies. In this study, the CEO of Zap best captures
the spirit and approach when an organization possesses the catalytic capability of execution: “We have very strong controls. We over M.B.A it” (p. 554).

Additional support can be found for the specific actions of: frequent, organization-wide communication (Mankins and Steele, 2005; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008; O’Reilly, Harreld, & Tushman, 2009); senior managers engaging in the details of the day to day business (Bossidy & Charan, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989); intense, weekly management review meetings (Bossidy and Charan, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989; Lafley & Martin, 2013); pursuing and hiring “A players” (Bossidy & Charan, 2002; Mankins and Steele, 2005); and an organizational predisposition and focus on taking action, that is “doing something” (Rumelt, 2011, p. 87).

**Shaping Principles in Practice**

There are a series of critical principles that may act as guideposts for execution as actions. These principles include:

- A pre-disposition to act, and act with a sense of urgency
“Grounded” decision-making; that is, decisions tied to operational plans

- Frequent, organization-wide communication
- Uncompromising belief in and commitment to measurement and monitoring
- Management engaged and active in the day-to-day details of the business
- Management embraces direct, honest and open communication on all issues
- A commitment to constant improvement and accountability for results

Individuals and organizations committed to developing a capability of execution must be pre-disposed to action. “Getting things done” requires action, and in this case those individuals and organizations that embrace this principle act with a sense of urgency. Action is intense, purposeful, and people respond and react quickly. When answering the question: “When is this due?”, the mantra for individuals and organizations that embrace this principle is, “Yesterday”.

In addition to making decisions with speed and a sense of urgency, that decision-making must also be
firmly “grounded”; it must be linked to the operational plan of the organization. In this case, good decisions require a review and assessment of the organization’s overall capabilities. Does the organization have the necessary talent, resources, and processes in place to carry out a specific decision? While the proposition here is that the catalytic capability of execution causes the deployment of other organizational capabilities, it must be noted that the effectiveness of the execution will be influenced by the absence and/or the level of development of those other organizational capabilities. As expressed in the Introduction to this dissertation proposal, I share Teece’s (2012) view that good strategy, hard to imitate resources, dynamic capabilities, and entrepreneurial management are critical variables for explaining firm performance. While the focus of this study is on exploring and explaining the capability of execution, I acknowledge the importance and potential influence those variables and other firm capabilities may have on actual execution.
Good communication is another important principle related to execution. As part of the decision-making process, management must be committed to open, direct and honest dialogue. Bossidy and Charan (2002) identify this as “truth over harmony”, where members of management must be willing to aggressively challenge business assumptions and be comfortable with disagreement and potential conflict. Frequent company wide communication is also a critical principle for execution. If employees are not fully aware of the goals and objectives for the organization, it may reduce the speed of action or result in incorrect action being taken.

Regarding the principle of active management engagement within the business, the Eisenhardt (1989) study documents the positive effects of this principle in several large companies (p. 551). The principle of accurate, real time information supports the speed of action and grounded decision-making within a firm. Mankins and Steele (2005) document how measurement and monitoring were essential to Dow Chemical’s leadership
154

team execution (p. 9).

In their study of IBM and its

Emerging Business Opportunity (EBO) Division, O’Reilly
et al., (2009) identify how frequent communication,
milestone measurement, and active senior management
were essential in executing these new business
opportunities.
Finally, a commitment to constant improvement and
accountability for results must serve as an overarching
guide for all execution.

This principle ensures an

organization and a team will live up to their purpose
of delivering customer value and securing a sustainable
competitive advantage.

Guiding Discipline in Practice
The guiding principles of execution combined with
these specific actions create an overall “discipline”,
much like Pentland and Reuter’s (1994) “grammars”, that
creates a recognizable structure to help guide
employees as to how to perform within the organization.
This guiding discipline helps establish and enforce the
standards for the actual execution, i.e. “take these
specific actions”, “follow these specific principles”,


and "utilize this framework" to evaluate organizational activity. This discipline of execution helps to drive the achievement of goals and objectives, the reaching of milestones, and the meeting of deadlines.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Worldview – Interpretive Framework

Whether specifically acknowledged, certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions underlie one’s research and a close connection exists between those assumptions and how one pursues and conducts that research (Creswell, 2013). My approach to this study is one of critical realism. I embrace what Maxwell (2013) identifies as two “common sense” perspectives; one of ontological realism, where a real world exists independent of our perceptions and theories, and one of epistemological constructivism, where knowledge is viewed as a social construction rather than an objective perception of reality (p. 43). Critical realism’s focus on “mechanisms, processes, and structures that account for patterns...” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13) is particularly relevant for this study where I seek to identify the actions, principles, and discipline that constitute a capability to execute.
I submit the following specific principles articulated by Van de Ven (2013) as the interpretive framework and guide for my field research (pp. 37-38):

- A real world exists, but our understanding is limited
- In general, physical material things are easier to understand than processes
- All facts, observations, and data are theory laden, and therefore there are no absolute truths in social science
- No form of inquiry is value free and impartial; appropriateness of the method depends upon the phenomenon
- A complex reality requires the use of multiple perspectives
- Robust knowledge is an outcome of theoretical and methodological triangulation
- There is no guarantee that evidence will converge; it might be inconsistent or contradictory
- Important to select the models that better fit the problems they were intended to solve; this allows the evolutionary growth of knowledge

Given this interpretive framework, the research conducted in this study attempts to discover and understand the elements that comprise the capability of execution and how such a capability influences organizational performance and outcomes.
A Qualitative Research Approach

Given the nature and purpose of this research, a qualitative approach to the research is appropriate and it proved most beneficial for achieving the goals of this study for several reasons. First, as Creswell (2013) maintains, qualitative research is appropriate where a problem or issue needs to be explored, the variables of the issue cannot be easily measured, and the nature of the issue requires a complex understanding. As the literature review demonstrated, recent dynamic capability research has only just begun to identify categories of activities related to execution, and an agreed upon set of variables and measurements related to execution can not be found in the literature. Further, as the literature review also demonstrated, execution is a ubiquitous, complex concept. Second, as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue, qualitative research attempts to answer how social experience is created, and the qualitative researcher seeks to get closer to the actor’s perspective and examine the “world in action”. I explore how DSC and
MAX get things done by gathering information from their employees regarding specific actions and principles that contribute to their individual and organizational capability to execute. Third, qualitative research lends itself to developing models or theories (Smith, Bekker, & Cheater, 2011), which is valuable for assessing execution as a potential, catalytic capability. Finally, a qualitative approach also allowed for flexibility during the research process (James, Slater, & Buckman, 2012), which was important for this study given the lack of previous research on execution and the nature of my speculative propositions.

Further support and justification for pursuing a qualitative approach for this study can be found in the literature related to routine dynamics, microfoundations, strategy-as-practice, and practice theory. Numerous scholars across these disciplines argue for the need of more granular level research, whether focused on the individual or actions, and for more qualitative studies. Some examples include Chia
and MacKay (2007) who chronicle how scholars from these disciplines are focused on “...the actual activities performed by individuals within organized contexts” (p. 233). In their examination of dynamic capabilities, Ambrosini and Bowman (2009) point out that quantitative studies far outnumber qualitative studies in strategic management, but those quantitative studies fail to “...delve into the detailed, micro mechanisms of how these capabilities are deployed and how they work” (p. 37). They argue that qualitative studies are likely to be more appropriate for a fine-grained investigation and for obtaining rich and contextualized data. Salvato and Rerup (2011) argue that qualitative research designs are particularly suitable to study the complexity of routines and capabilities, and appropriate for developing nascent theories (p. 483).

**Research Design**

For purposes of my field research, grounded theory through a multiple case study method was the best approach to investigate and explore the phenomenon of
execution. Grounded theory, according to Creswell (2013), is a research approach designed to generate "a general explanation of a process, action, or an interaction shaped by the view of a large number of participants" (p. 83), and it should be used when a theory is not available to explain or understand a process.

Charmaz (2014) maintains that a theory identifies the relationship between abstract concepts for the purposes of explanation or understanding, and she argues that grounded theory attempts to answer the "why" questions in addition to "what" and "how" relative to situated action (p. 228). Charmaz (2014) identifies nine key activities that are integral to grounded theory analysis (p. 15):

- Data collection and analysis conducted simultaneously in an iterative process
- Actions and processes analyzed rather than themes and structure
- Use of comparative methods
- Data used to develop new conceptual categories
- Systematic data analysis leads to inductive abstract categories
Theory construction as opposed to description or application of current theory

Theoretical sampling

Developing categories as opposed to explaining a specific empirical topic

Grounded theory proved an ideal research approach for this study because, as the literature review demonstrated, a theory of execution could not be found in the organizational routine and capabilities literature. The activities outlined and advocated by Charmaz (2014) were beneficial in my efforts to discover, identify, and evaluate my participants’ specific actions and activities related to how they execute and measure their performance.

A case study approach to research explores a specific, real-life “…bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases), over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). One of the goals of case or multicase studies is to attain a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied. According to Stake (2006), case researchers focus on
relationships that potentially connect ordinary practice in the context of a specific case to broader, more general issues. In multicase research, the individual cases are bound together by a Quintain, i.e. a common object, phenomenon, or condition, which is the main focus of the inquiry. Researchers study the individual cases to determine the differences and similarities in the effort to better understand the Quintain (Stake, 2006). Stake (2006) also argues that a critical reason for engaging in multicase research is to examine how the Quintain performs in different environments, and it is this study of various situations and contexts that reveals experiential knowledge (p. 12).

A multicase research approach was ideal for this study. As the gap in the literature revealed, there is a lack of detailed, in-depth analysis of execution in the organizational routine and capabilities literature. The case study method presented an opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the participants’ capability of execution and the actual execution of their daily
operations. A multicase study was better suited than a single case approach given the fact that I was also conducting grounded theory analysis in an effort to discover and develop a theory for execution. An emergent theory and/or my proposition that execution is a catalytic capability comprised of actions, principles, and discipline was intended as the common phenomenon or condition, i.e. the Quintain, to be studied across the multiple cases. Also a multicase study enabled the search for common themes that transcend the individual cases, which supported my grounded theory approach to develop a theory of execution.

Two organizations, MAX and DSC, were identified as valuable and beneficial participants for this grounded theory, multicase research study. MAX is a publicly traded distribution company with more than three hundred branch locations throughout the world. The company maintains an entrepreneurial culture and decentralized structure in which each branch operates as an independent profit center. DSC is a division of
a publicly traded engineering and professional services company. DSC provides training, consulting, and various professional services to the international development industry.

The fact that both MAX and DSC have been highly successful in their respective industries is one reason for their selection as case studies. Examining why and how they are able to execute their daily operations generated valuable insight and knowledge on execution as a capability and a process. Another reason for the selection of MAX and DSC for this study is the nature of their differences and the opportunity that affords for comparative analysis of how they both execute. MAX is a hard goods distributor with an extensive network of physical locations. DSC is a professional services provider delivering training and consulting through a mix of employees, sub-contractors, and NGO partnerships all over the world. The choice of MAX and DSC provide an additional opportunity to explore intra-company differences. Interview participants at multiple MAX branches and divisions shared valuable information as
to how and why some branches outperform others. Probing those similarities and differences, as recommended by Stake (2006), created a better understanding of the concept of execution. In addition to obtaining context rich data and a deeper understanding of how MAX and DSC execute in each individual case, the multicase study also provided an opportunity to test my propositions and determine whether, indeed, there are common and perhaps generalizable elements related to execution across these very different businesses.

**Population and Sample**

The populations being studied are the wholesale distribution industry (MAX) and the international development industry (DSC). Both industries are competitive. According to the National Association of Wholesale Distributors (NAW), wholesale trade in the United States was $5.3 trillion in 2016 representing approximately 28% of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). Distributors typically operate as re-sellers of hard
goods connecting manufacturers to retailers, professional contractors, and other consumer-based resellers. They provide a variety of business services to both their suppliers and customers, including the primary service of the storage, management, and timely delivery of inventory. Barriers to entry are typically low in the wholesale distribution industry.

The international development industry is difficult to accurately define and quantify given the broad scope of practice areas and the variety of firms and organizations engaged in the sale and delivery of services. Services are typically directed toward and provided to developing countries, and these services range from general economic development efforts to public sector management to childhood education. Firms operating in this industry typically contract with governments directly, or major departments within governments, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and with large non-governmental organizations (NGOs). What makes quantification of this industry so challenging is that,
in addition to companies dedicated exclusively to international development such as DAI and Chemonics, much of the international development work is performed by large, global management consulting companies such as Accenture, Deloitte, and PricewaterhouseCoopers. This international development work represents just a small portion of the total revenue for these large, multinational consulting companies.

These populations, the wholesale distribution and international development industries, while interesting, are not the main driver for the inquiry of this study. This study is focused upon the specific actions, principles, and discipline that may be at work at both MAX and DSC. Although this study does not assume the results gathered from these industries will be generalizable, further research may demonstrate generalizability, especially among other wholesale distributors in various industries.

A multicase study approach was utilized with multiple branch locations and departments from MAX, and the Washington, DC based headquarters for DSC, serving
as the sample. The MAX branches operate as independent profit centers. Within each branch a variety of individuals have significant influence over daily operations and the branch’s ability to execute its performance objectives. Those individuals have positions and responsibilities related to the following: branch management, operations, customer service, warehousing, delivery and administration. DSC operates and manages nine practice areas. A variety of DSC executives, managers, administrators, and technical and operations team members have responsibility and influence for the delivery of services in each practice area.

Selection of Participants

This study gathered primary data through structured interviews with the goal of obtaining information related to: interviewees’ opinions and perceptions regarding how their organizations get things done; identification and understanding of the specific actions they perform in order to execute their
daily operations and drive performance; opinions and identification of guiding principles that may influence the nature of their actions; and opinions regarding the existence and potential influence of a discipline, i.e. the combination of actions and principles that create a system to help guide employee behavior in executing performance objectives.

Study participants were chosen based upon the guidance of Karl, President at DSC, and Tim, Regional Manager at MAX. Employees were selected based upon their employment and assignment to a specific, individual branch or regional responsibility at MAX, and from various teams and departments at DSC. The participants hold a variety of positions and possess differing responsibilities, including senior management, middle management, administration, and functional and technical specialists.

Another selection criterion in the case of MAX involved geographic considerations. The branches selected for this study were based in Florida in order to minimize travel time and logistical expenses. DSC
headquarters and operating offices are located in Washington, DC, so interviewing DSC participants required travel to this site of operations.

Instrumentation, Procedures, Data Collection

This study employed intensive interviewing as the primary means of exploring the research participants’ opinions, perceptions, and personal experience relative to their organization’s capability to execute. As Charmaz (2014) argues, intensive interviewing is an ideal research instrument for a grounded theory study due to its focused, in-depth and open-ended nature. Intensive interviewing explores an area in which the interviewee has substantial experience and provides the flexibility to discover and pursue ideas and issues that emerge during the interview (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). The purpose of the interview is to gather enough information to fully explore and develop the theory; that is, to saturate the topic.

While Charmaz (2014) does not prescribe how many interviews should be conducted, she recommends
increasing the number of interviews if attempting to construct a complex conceptual analysis. The results of the literature review indicated that discovering and developing a theory of execution was likely to involve a complex conceptual analysis. I conducted a total of eighteen interviews; consisting of nine participants from DSC and nine participants from MAX. I am confident that this number of interviews proved sufficient to saturate the topic.

The interviews were semi-structured and flexible, with the intent of creating an “open and interactional space in which the participant can relate his or her experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 57). The questions were open-ended, probing the interview participants for their thoughts on how their organizations get things done; that is, how their organizations execute their performance objectives.

I began each interview with the broad based question asking the interviewees to explain “how things got done” within their organizations. It was important to lead with this broad, general question in order to
address a potential issue raised in the literature review. Cohen and Bacdayan (1994) found instances of participants to a routine who were unable to articulate and explain the nature of the routine in which they were engaged. Prior to directing my line of questioning toward the variables of actions, principles, and discipline, it was important to assess, on an unprompted basis, whether the interviewees perceived and could describe a capability of execution at work in their organizations.

In-person interview was the primary method of interviewing, but I conducted one phone interview as well. Interviews were recorded and transcribed only with the full knowledge and explicit consent of the interview subjects.

Given the rigorous demands of the participants’ businesses and my own travel and time constraints, I was unable to conduct additional field observations at both DSC and MAX. Additionally, actual internal financial and performance reports were not provided by Karl, President of DSC, or Tim, Regional Manager at
MAX. I engaged in several, general discussions regarding the overall performance of DSC and MAX, but I was not provided, nor did I expect, internal company reports detailing those performance metrics and capturing organizational performance. Thus, the intensive, semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data for this study.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed and coded with a focus on identifying and defining elements associated with each organization’s capability to execute. I followed Creswell’s (2013) approach of “lean coding”, using actions, principles, and discipline as initial codes for analyzing the data, supplemented by additional codes that emerged during data collection. Recognizing that I was introducing these a priori categories into the data analysis, I remained mindful of Charmaz’s (2014) assertion and guidance that initial coding is “provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” and that the
researcher must remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by the data (p. 114). Given that this is a grounded theory study, I sought to analyze and code information gathered that was related to processes, actions, or interactions (Creswell, 2013). Given also that this is a multicase study as well, I looked for evidence from the individual case studies to show how uniformity or disparity characterized the Quintain (Stake, 2006); that is, evidence corroborating the presence and influence of a capability of execution. Through a careful review of the details of each case and a cross case analysis, I combined the relevant findings to develop a set of assertions and conclusions related execution. Any and all assertions and conclusions were based entirely upon the evidence (Stake, 2006).

**Ethical Considerations**

The President of DSC and the CEO of MAX granted formal written permission to interview their employees. A copy of the interview questions for this study was
provided prior to the granting of that permission. The companies are not specifically identified in this study; “DSC” and “MAX” are pseudonyms allowing both companies to retain their anonymity. The only descriptors of these organizations are that MAX is a publicly traded wholesale distribution company, and DSC is a professional services company operating in the international development industry.

The employees of each organization also remain anonymous; pseudonyms were used for all employee participants and they are identified only by a general description of their position and/or responsibilities. Employees were provided a consent letter expressing: their voluntary participation, the nature of the study, the steps taken to assure their anonymity, and the safeguards enacted to ensure that firm management and fellow employees do not have access to their interview responses. Additional explicit, written consent was obtained from employees for the recording of individual interviews. The audio recording consent form details the handling, storage, and procedures taken to ensure
interviewee anonymity and to prevent access to these recordings by members of MAX and DSC. All consent forms employed with this study clearly communicate that an employee’s agreement to participate was entirely voluntary, and that he or she had the ability to withdraw participation at any time. I also verbally communicated that participation was voluntary prior to the start of each interview. Every effort has been made to ensure employee anonymity, and to protect employees from any adverse effects from participating in this study.

**Researcher Positionality**

I have enjoyed a more than thirty-year career working in a variety of companies, both private and public. The nature of these businesses included consumer based, business-to-business, retail, distribution, service and manufacturing. The industries in which these companies operated included residential construction, recreation and leisure products, and industrial goods. I have also held a
variety of positions and responsibilities throughout my career in the areas of management, sales, marketing, and operations; and I have founded a small construction company and a manufacturing start-up. Most of my positions were executive or senior level management where I had direct profit and loss responsibility for one or several business units.

Throughout my career and in all the businesses in which I have worked, I have continually examined and assessed how my companies, divisions, branches, departments and various teams were able or unable to execute, and the impact that ability or lack of ability had on performance outcomes. Thus, as indicated in the literature review, I have been one of those practitioners very much concerned with execution, and this has motivated my search for answers from the strategic management and organizational routine scholars. By studying their theories, data, and analysis, in combination with this field research, it was my desire to make a valuable contribution to the
base of knowledge in these disciplines relative to the concept of execution.

**Validity**

The goal of this study is to better understand why and how organizations execute their daily operations and the impact that execution has on organizational performance and outcomes. In an effort to validate this qualitative research I followed several validation strategies advocated by Creswell (2013). I share Creswell’s view that validation should be an attempt to assess the “accuracy” of research findings, as described by the researcher and the participants, and the acknowledgement that the final research report is my own representation; that is, a representation by the author (pp. 249-250).

Several of the Creswell (2013) validation strategies that I employed include: triangulation, negative case analysis, researcher bias identification and clarification, member checking, and rich thick description.
As part of triangulation, I pursued multiple and different sources, methods, and theories to corroborate the data and evidence collected. Stake (2006) is helpful here in describing triangulation as "...a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning..." (p. 37). By following Stake’s (2006) cross case analysis guidelines, I obtained redundant information from the individual cases leading to several cross case assertions that contributed toward validation.

I also challenged my assumptions by employing negative case analysis as a validation strategy, and regarding researcher bias, I was mindful of the need to explicitly acknowledge and clarify my own positions throughout this study. I have already demonstrated this sensitivity by way of the conceptual framework proposed at the conclusion of the literature review, and the details provided regarding my career in the researcher positionality section of this dissertation proposal.

Finally, I provide rich, thick description in this study that will allow readers to consider the
applicability of the information to other potential settings. As a grounded theory study, I present detailed descriptions of the processes, actions, and interactions that were revealed during the interview process. As a multicase study, I also provide detailed descriptions of the individual cases; that is, the individual employees who hold a variety of positions and responsibilities for both DSC and MAX.

By combining and employing these validation strategies, I discover and articulate a theory that provides explanatory value as to how MAX and DSC execute their performance objectives, and also a theory that may be generalizable to other organizations in a variety of industries.
Chapter 4
Findings

Overview

The purpose of this study is to understand the concept of execution; that is, an organization’s abilities and activities related to “getting things done”. This study also seeks to find evidence regarding how execution may be measured and to assess the potential impact that an ability to execute may have on organizational performance. The research findings detailed in this chapter contribute to a better and more thorough understanding of execution by identifying certain drivers, i.e. actions and principles, which emerged from the participant interviews. The data demonstrates how these drivers function within the two organizations studied, and their influence on organizational performance and outcomes.

The findings comprised of nine interviews from Development Systems Corporation (DSC) and nine
interviews from Maxcorp Distributors Inc. (MAX), provide evidence and support for five key drivers as the source and cause of much of their organizational activities and guiding principles for getting things done. These five drivers are: measurement; communication; quality people; autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness; and teamwork and collaboration (see Appendix G).

This chapter is divided into several sections. The first section presents a brief re-examination of the two companies, DSC and MAX. When I initiated this study, I was well aware of some significant differences between the two companies, but in the course of the participant interviews additional differences emerged, and the previously identified differences proved even more pronounced. On the surface, DSC and MAX could not be any more different. The reason and the value in further examining these differences is the fact that the shared findings become more interesting and striking. The common drivers of execution exist in dramatically different organizations and operating
environments. This discovery will perhaps lend support to the generalizability of these findings to other companies across different industries. The next section reviews each of the major findings in detail, examining each individual driver and then the five drivers combined. This chapter concludes with a brief analysis of an important “Other Finding”; that is, “customer needs” and its relation to getting things done within DSC and MAX.

Company Contexts

Organization

Development Systems Corporation (DSC) is a professional services firm providing consulting and project management services to the international development industry. With a U.S. based headquarters, DSC has operated in more than 100 countries and maintains 35 project offices around the world. The firm’s largest customer is the U.S. Federal Government, primarily the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but DSC also provides services to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some foreign
governments. DSC was founded in the early 1980s by Liam and Mary, a husband and wife team. Together, they led, grew, and managed the firm for approximately 30 years. DSC was recently acquired by a multi-billion dollar, publicly traded engineering products and services company (Global Corporation). DSC currently operates within the international development division of this public company. Mary has retired; Liam remains active in the business in the role of President Emeritus.

Substantial DSC activity and effort is driven by the "client project", what Liam called their "unit of implementation". DSC's organizational structure was best described by Al, Executive Vice President (VP), who likened it to a "three-legged stool", consisting of: an in-country "Field" leader and team, a Technical team (U.S. headquarters), and an Operations team (U.S. headquarters). No one individual has singular profit and loss (P&L) responsibility for a project; different teams and individuals within each team possess and carry out different responsibilities. For example, a
Senior Project Manager is responsible and accountable for managing expenses to budget, but does not have overall P&L responsibility for the project. Profit and loss is the responsibility of certain members of the Executive Management Team (EMT). In the course of interviewing the DSC participants, aside from DSC’s Executive VP, Al, none of the interviewees referred to specific sales and profit goals for the overall company or their individual projects.

In terms of the organization of the personnel at its U.S. headquarters, the separation of the Technical Team and the Operations Team is a major, structural, defining characteristic of DSC. The two teams are independent and they have separate responsibilities. This organizational design was an intentional choice made by the founders, Liam and Mary, and it continues to shape DSC activities today. The founders also desired little or no hierarchy; they wanted a flat organization with minimal management layers and a high level of individual autonomy. Liam shared that he liked the fact that if you asked members of the
Technical team who their supervisor was, most "...would have no answer whatsoever to that question". He also commented that he and Mary had wanted to create a home for creative people, as well as for talented individuals who may have been "organizationally dysfunctional". Much of this thinking and organizational legacy remain a strong influence on the DSC culture and operations today.

In great contrast to DSC, Maxcorp Distributors Inc. (MAX), has a clearly defined structure and hierarchy. Each MAX branch location operates as an independent profit center that is led by a Branch Manager. Each branch is typically organized by major function or department that includes: warehouse (inventory management), drivers (delivery), and showroom and counter (sales and customer service). Depending upon the sales volume of a given location, a Branch Manager may have additional managers reporting to him or her: Assistant Manager, Operations Manager, Warehouse Manager, and Customer Service Manager. The Branch Manager has P&L responsibility for the location,
as well as responsibility for servicing and further
developing a defined local market. Each branch is
typically supported by several "regional" employees who
work in the following areas: accounts receivable,
business development, and operations. These regional
employees are assigned to multiple branches. Also a
regionally designated Customer Call Center, or CSA,
fields inbound customer sales calls for multiple
branches. A MAX branch belongs to a geographical
Region, and a Region belongs to a MAX Division.
Several Branch Managers report to a MAX Regional
Manager; Regional Managers report to a General or
Divisional Manager; and General or Divisional Managers,
few in number, report to a Senior Executive. Regional,
General and Divisional Managers also have P&L
responsibility; their regions and divisions are simply
a "roll-up" of the profit and loss of the specified
number of branches in those regions and divisions.

The MAX organization operates through a clearly
defined hierarchy, with well-defined positions and
clear reporting responsibilities. During the MAX
interviews, several participants referred to a "chain of command" when explaining how they operate. Gerry, a Business Development Representative (BDR), communicated well the hierarchy active at MAX by stating: "[We’re] structured kind of from top to bottom so our manager dictates how we proceed...on the operational side, the sales side, ultimately the decision comes from top to bottom".

The findings of this study revealed a dramatic difference in organizational style and hierarchies between DSC and MAX. This difference was a major reason for selecting these two organizations for this study. As part of my grounded theory research, and given the use of semi-structured interviews, I sought to determine if a specific organizational style or hierarchy might have an effect on execution. My belief was that the discovery of evidence supporting common elements of execution across such dissimilar organizations, would, perhaps, make a strong case for the generalizability of these findings to other companies.
Products, Services and Customers

DSC is in the business of selling its technical and project management expertise primarily to USAID, but also to NGOs and some foreign governments. Executive VP, Al, related that DSC is known as an analytical firm within the industry; he stated, “...in terms of reputation, we’re known as the smart organization, the smart people, the ‘eggheads’”. With USAID and other U.S. federal agencies as its primary customers, DSC activities and operations are very much shaped and constrained by the extensive, formal requirements involved in federal government contracting. Liam, President Emeritus, explained that DSC operates in a very “compliance-oriented industry” and that “...rule compliance has to be done in a relatively central and consistent way”. Satisfying these extensive compliance requirements is a non-negotiable reality within their industry. The federal government issues annual evaluations, Contractor Performance Assessment Reports (CPARs), for companies with whom it does business. Achieving high scores on
the CPARs is essential for success and future business. Liam labelled these requirements “hygiene factors”, and he explained, “…if that ever falls, you’re toast” and any firm that does not fulfil the requirements “…will have a very unhappy future”. His conclusion regarding the hygiene factors was the following: “I don’t think those things win for us but they would certainly lose for us”.

Given the nature of the federal government, the sales cycle for DSC is usually long, ranging from several months (quick) to several years. Once a sale is made, a government contract typically produces a long term, multi-year, multi-million dollar, international project for DSC. Though in sharing some of the challenges related to staffing these projects, the Director of Contracts, Kevin, indicated that DSC also works on smaller projects, i.e. several hundreds of thousands of dollars. Kevin said that, “…it’s funny, you could have a project that’s ninety-four million dollars that almost runs itself…but then you
have something that’s two hundred thousand dollars that could probably take twice as much of your time”.

The nature of MAX products and customers could not be more different than those of DSC. MAX distributes hard goods; MAX inventories, manages, and re-sells more than 150,000 products into the leisure, recreational, and construction industries primarily in the U.S. The typical branch location maintains an inventory of 3,000 to 4,000 products to service its local market. The vast majority of MAX customers are commercial contractors, retailers, and service companies. The sales cycle for MAX is short; customers order and receive product on a daily basis through pick-ups at the local MAX branch or via MAX delivery to the customer’s location or job site. Order values range from a few dollars to several thousand dollars. Large orders, i.e. hundreds of thousands of dollars, are uncommon. Unlike the long term, multi-year nature of DSC projects, MAX branches are subject to the urgency and pressure of fulfilling immediate customer orders on a daily basis. Customers evaluate MAX branches and
personnel on a daily basis through their purchasing decisions and buying habits. The majority of products sold by MAX are easily and readily found through many different outlets, and each local market will have several competing distributors selling the same products from the same suppliers as MAX.

Financial Incentives

The two companies also have vastly different views and approaches relative to employee financial incentives. Though a few interviewees indicated that the recent acquisition of DSC by Global Corporation may bring some changes in this area, DSC has historically not offered individual employee incentives. In keeping with their desire to build a company with little or no hierarchy, autonomy for individual employees, and a supportive environment for talented, creative people, Liam and Mary viewed their business as a “collective enterprise”. As Liam shared, if DSC had a good year, “...we increased the contributions to the profit sharing plan that was distributed to everybody”. In discussing this issue, Liam stated that Global Corporation was now
attempting to introduce “external motivators”, with which he strongly disagreed. He passionately communicated his position, by stating:

I hate bonuses. I hate them because you end up with a few winners and a shitload of losers. And even the winners, then next year they don’t win again, yeah, so all you do is create a problem...you asked me how things got done. I never believed in it and I don’t now, individual credit. I think that we either rise or fall together. And even if somebody is not carrying their weight, then it’s either individually or collectively our job to either get them to do it, or help them find another job somewhere else. But it’s not our job to pat someone on the head or kick someone in the butt. That’s not our job. If they’re not good enough to be here, they shouldn’t be here. But if they’re good enough to be here, they’re as good as everybody else.

MAX, in direct contrast, utilizes an extensive employee incentive plan system for numerous positions within the organization. At the branch level, potential bonuses are available to the Branch Managers, Operations Managers, and Business Development Representatives (BDRs). The incentive pay-outs are contingent upon the P&L performance of the branch, and each individual has specific performance metrics tied to his or her position. Similarly, bonus plans are in
place for regional positions, such as the Accounts Receivable and the Call Center (CSA) Representatives (Reps). Incentive opportunities extend up the management chain to Regional, Divisional, and General Manager positions, with bonus potentials increasing with the increasing level of management responsibility. The bulk of the pay-outs are tied to P&L performance.

Dan, one of the CSA Reps for the MAX region, explained his incentive plan: “Yeah, there’s an incentive every quarter they give out…if the branch hits a certain number, if the region hits a certain number…we’ll get a stipend every three months…” Dan has an additional opportunity to earn incentive pay by way of a customer service bonus plan. He stated that MAX has an “employee of the quarter” that is determined by customer surveys: “…they have a form that you send to our customers and…I shamelessly plead for a bonus to some customers…but hey…you don’t get, if you don’t ask for it”.

MAX even extends incentives to some employee training programs. Gerry, a BDR at one of the MAX
branches, just began a prestigious, multi-year sales training program within the company. He shared that the program is a lot of work, and "nothing you can do during work", but he is excited because "...they’ve put some carrots out there for us as far as an end game on the whole thing. Stock options and things that are kind of beneficial".

Unlike the history and culture of DSC, a keen focus on individual performance and the extensive use of incentives, i.e. those external motivators disliked so vehemently by Liam, is very much tied into MAX operations and is a strong part of the company culture. In the course of my MAX interviews, all the participants discussed or referred to branch sales goals, and several discussed branch profit goals and various other financial measures as well.

The preceding review of the significant differences between DSC and MAX is captured and summarized by the diagram found in Figure 2:
Figure 2. DSC/MAX Differences

**MAX**

- Customer
- Corp. Operations Requirements
- The Branch
  - Branch Manager
  - Hard Goods
  - Individual Responsibility
  - Full P&L
  - Competitive
  - Individual Incentive/Bonus
  - Clearly Defined Hierarchy

**DSC**

- Customer
- Government Compliance
- The Project
  - Project Team
  - Knowledge
  - Shared Responsibility
  - No P&L
  - Non-Competitive
  - Group Profit Sharing
  - Flat/Little To No Hierarchy

Figure 2: DSC/MAX Differences
These extreme dissimilarities between DSC and MAX make the shared findings that will be detailed and discussed in the next section even more interesting and striking. The common drivers of execution found in these dramatically different organizations may prove an indicator of the findings applicability to a variety of companies across multiple industries.

Findings Detail

Multiple findings emerged from the analysis of the participant interviews. Tables 1 and 2 display the main and lesser findings discovered at DSC and MAX respectively:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carey</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Customer Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Customer Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overseeing, Supervising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customer Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Accuracy, Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Contracts</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Findings Map DSC
The two tables show universal agreement among interviewees regarding “measurement” and “communication” as essential, fundamental activities in their organization’s day-to-day operations. The tables
also show strong agreement among most of the interviewees that “quality people”, “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”, and “teamwork and collaboration” are also critical factors for their respective organizations’ capability to execute their performance objectives.

**Measurement**

In the course of interviewing both DSC and MAX participants, it quickly became apparent that “measurement”, the activity of measuring, tracking and assessing numerous business functions, was strongly embedded in both organizations. This organizational reality is summed up best for all by Tim, Regional Manager at MAX, when he stated: “You know, everything is tracked…sales, gross profit…from an operational standpoint…we measure inventory budgets, turn budgets. I mean essentially every segment of the business is measured in some way.” Whether it is a “yellow light, red light” measure used by Project Manager Amy and her team at DSC, or an extensive system of “trackers” developed by Carey, Technical Director at DSC, or the
"90-12 rule" for CSA call answering followed by Dan and Lance at MAX, it was clear that all participants are actively engaged in extensive measuring of key activities. This measuring and these measures are important for assessing and guiding performance, and for ensuring that both DSC and MAX are "getting things done".

The fundamental nature of each business requires that certain actions and performance be quantified, tracked, and measured. For DSC, the compliance requirements of the federal government dictate specific activity and how that activity must be performed. The goal is always to earn high marks on the Government's annual "Contractor Performance Assessment Report" (CPAR). It is a report card that evaluates those doing business with the government in such areas as financial management, subcontract management, and technical implementation. Mike, a Senior Project Manager at DSC, described some of the challenges in achieving these measures:
You know when you’re working with the federal government...margins are very small, and so if...we’re not meeting all the compliance requirements, and most large projects wind up getting audited...that can add up to a major loss for the company pretty quickly.

The CPAR proves to be a precise tool for measuring government contract compliance.

Similarly, MAX’s extensive measurement of branch operations, particularly inventory management, may be viewed as “compliance requirements” from MAX’s corporate headquarters. Product inventories are a high dollar asset in every MAX branch, so proper receiving, storing, and shipping are essential to operational success. As Gerry, BDR for MAX, shared, certain warehouse activities are closely measured and must be performed in a specific way:

So the radio frequency guns dictate that we do X amount of cycle counts [inventory test counts] per day. And then you can’t move forward until you do a second level count...So and then I would say the radio frequency guns are for pulling accuracy. They are set up to pull serial numbers as well so...you’re pulling the correct product, it’s telling you if you’re not pulling the correct products...Where before you could first put in NA and you’re done.
The performance of many of these prescribed operational activities is captured in a weekly, company-wide "Operational Flash Report". The report measures activities such as: cycle counts, stock outs [missed sales], shrink ["lost" product], inventory adjustments, and branch inventory levels, among other measures. As Tim, Regional Manager for MAX, shared, "The Ops Flash Report" is a critical daily measurement tool, and he complained that Corporate continues to set more stringent operational goals. One example Tim referenced was the target for stockouts: "They lower them is what I'm saying, so now our goal is...I can remember them being, they had to be under 7 or 8 percent. Now it's like 4 point something".

Much like the precise measuring applied to compliance and operations at DSC and MAX, evidence for a similar precision of measurement was found in the areas of sales and financial results. Given that both DSC and MAX are part of publicly traded companies, they track many of the standard financial measures required and expected for a public company. Al, Executive VP at
DSC, sums this up well for both companies when he stated: “The key indicators are revenue and profit. And new business leading to a suitable backlog of work...There is a negotiated process with our parent company that arrives at the revenue and operating income targets”.

Tim, Regional Manager at MAX, stated that the P&L is the “ultimate measurement”, and he shared that MAX recently instituted a “my digest” Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that provides “…anything you’d ever want to know...there’s some pre-program reports but you could also create any report you want”. Tim also shared that MAX Corporate is very much focused on “basis point increase”, the percentage change of key financial ratios: “So the percentages. So one percent would be 10 basis points. So...any branch every year is going to have to improve [their] margins by 10 basis points at a minimum”.

I discovered an interesting contrast when discussing financial measurements with both DSC and MAX interviewees. While the focus on numbers and precise
financial measures and goals were top of mind for Al, VP at DSC, knowledge of these measures and goals was not apparent in my conversations with the other DSC interviewees. Some DSC interviewees expressed a concern for expenses and some were aware of expense budget numbers, but they did not express or communicate an awareness of specific profit and loss targets and measures for individual projects or for the overall company. Mike, Project Manager at DSC, reflected this position when he spoke about expenses and managing to an expense budget: “Then I look at are we managing our budget well in terms of meeting our projected expenditures...even more so since we were acquired by Global Corp...”

This lack of focus, lack of awareness of profit goals and financial measures is likely due to the historical legacy of the DSC founders’ approach to running the business. Liam, President Emeritus, shared: “You know if there’s an interesting piece of work and we’re doing it well...and our staff enjoys working on it and we make 5 cents, it doesn’t make us
broke, why wouldn’t we do it?” He also explained that
during the 30 years that he and Mary ran the company,
they did not share much financial information with
employees because Liam believed: “If the company was
losing money, too bad for Mary and me, but that…wasn’t
their [employees] problem, that was our problem”. Many
DSC interviewees indicated that they were experiencing
a cultural shift in this area, where greater
measurement, review and more frequent discussion of
specific financial targets had become increasingly
important since being acquired by Global Corp.

In vivid contrast to the DSC participants, all MAX
interviewees were very much aware of sales and other
financial measures. They communicated that, at a
minimum, all branch personnel would be, and should be,
aware of a daily sales goal. Depending upon their
positions, MAX interviewees followed other financial
measures as well. Dan, an agent at the MAX Call
Center, discussed the reports that he receives and
reviews: “You know that, the very first column is sales
volume. So and so does 7.4 million dollars so far this
year, and this is how many calls he’s taken...” Ed, a BDR for MAX, explained how he uses the MAX CRM system to not only track overall sales, but to also review and target his individual customer accounts by category: “I...look at all my accounts...and try to figure out where I need to improve as far as growing a certain product category. And most of the sales team are pretty much driven the same way.” The Regional AR person for MAX, Rose, also indicated a top of mind awareness for “numbers”: “Well Corporate likes to look at numbers. Everything’s a numbers game...I have numbers, every department, you know, has numbers”. In speaking with the MAX interviewees, it was clear that they all were aware of the importance of measuring and achieving specific sales and financial goals. This was also supported by MAX’s use of extensive incentive plans as discussed previously.

Government compliance, corporate operations, sales and financial results, are key areas that DSC and MAX quantify and measure, and their goals and targets in these areas are well defined and precisely measured.
In the case of DSC however, employees were less aware of specific financial goals than the employees at MAX. They are good examples and serve as strong evidence to support “measurement” as one of the main findings of this study. Interviewees discussed measurement specifically and provided numerous examples of how and what they measure. It was evident that “measuring” is a guiding principle and a set of activities embedded throughout the operations of these two companies, and that measuring is a critical driver for getting things done at both DSC and MAX.

What became noticeable, however, is that when discussing the other drivers of execution, i.e. communication; quality people; autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness; and teamwork and flexibility, the interviewees often struggled to provide clear definitions and quantifiable “measures” of these drivers. This also proved to be the case when discussing their interaction with customers. In the course of reviewing each of the remaining findings and an “other finding” related to customer needs, I will
highlight how the interviewees’ struggle to clearly define these drivers and explain how they are measured within their organizations.

**Communication**

All the participants to this study identified “communication” in some form or fashion as one of the critical drivers for getting things done within both DSC and MAX. In answering the first question of the Interview Protocol, “what is the best way to describe or explain how things get done around here”, many, like the Technical Director Diane at DSC, responded that “communication” was a key activity: “I think that the secret is good interpersonal relations, frequent communication, and positive constructive feedback…” Kevin, the Director of Contracts at DSC, shared this view by stating: “I think staying in communication with your team that works on your project I think is huge…Communication is huge…you just can’t sit back and crank out paperwork”.

MAX interviewees expressed similar sentiments regarding communication. Rose, the Regional AR person
at MAX, identified communication as essential for getting things done at her branch, and she stated that, “I believe we communicate throughout the entire day”. Dan, a CSA agent at MAX, commented: “…I think that’s the key—is you got to have good communication skills with your employees. If you don’t, things fall through the cracks…”. Dan also pointed out the importance of communicating with customers. He stated that, “…if you can’t communicate with the customer…if you can’t get the customer an answer, to me that’s a problem”. Roger, Branch Manager at MAX, also identified communication with the customer as essential for successfully executing the business:

A key factor is order entry, and communication between the customer to the person keying the order. I would say that’s probably the most critical step. You know because from there it snowballs you know out of control.

In addition to this general consensus regarding the importance of communicating and the principle of communication as essential to execution, the interviewees identified and described a variety of
methods used to communicate at both DSC and MAX. Both organizations conduct numerous, formal meetings at multiple levels within their respective organizations. Nancy, Technical Director at DSC, leads team meetings every Thursday and third Wednesday of the month. When asked about their effectiveness and outcomes, she stated: “Well I think it’s just one—information sharing and so people are on the same page…it’s when we want information delivered to the whole group so the message is clear…and people have the opportunity to ask questions...” Al, Executive VP at DSC, as well as several other DSC interviewees, provided a long list of company meetings that were open to most everyone: a President led, company-wide “town hall, once or twice per year, and frequent technical, operations, business development and executive management meetings throughout the year.

Similarly, Ted, Regional Manager at MAX, explained the nature and the extent of formalized meetings within the company and his region:
So once a year the entire company comes together...we have our own show [product, sales, marketing related]...then Rod will come in as General Manager once a year at a minimum he’ll sit down with my region...At the regional level, you know from my direction, I do have a monthly sales meeting...I pull my entire region together...At the branch level, I haven’t set any specific expectations of number of meetings, but I will tell every branch manager at a minimum pull the teams together three or four times a year...

Most of the interviewees maintained that meetings were an important tool for communication, and often used for communicating many of the compliance, operations, and financial measurements discussed in the previous section.

In addition to these meetings, DSC and MAX employees communicate in a variety of other methods as well. Dan, CSA agent at MAX, explained how all the agents have and use a “chat” tool designed just for the Call Center: “We got...we can chat with them via a little bubble on our computers now...I can still send him a link message and say, ‘call me asap’ or ‘hey, I got so and so on the line’”. Dan also passionately expressed the importance of email as a communication method for doing
his job, and his frustration with some of the MAX branches that fail to respond to his email: “It is email, email, email; it’s copy, copy, copy…I find there’s branches that I email every day and every day they never email me back. They never say they got it”. Gerry, a BDR at MAX, pointed out that technology is also driving some of the communications methods and expectations: “…technology has kind of taken over…I get a text message [from a customer] five cents high on this...on a Saturday night at 10:00 pm”.

Both companies rely heavily on phone communication, and this communication method is especially important for DSC given that most of their work is conducted internationally. Kevin, Director of Contracts, explained how one of his team members manages the time difference issue: “And I mean you know, we have someone in our department who will get up in the middle of the night to take a call from Pakistan at 3 am”.

Many interviewees identified “old fashioned”, face-to-face meetings and conversations as a pervasive
and important method of communication. Karen, Director of HR at DSC, explained how the physical layout of the departments at DSC headquarters encourages and facilitates face-to-face communication:

...I mean just the way we’re physically located, physically seated, it’s the same around all the departments at DSC. The contracts team sits together...accounting and finance are sort of in the same area. And so very easy; I see it all the time as I walk around people getting up out of their space and walking across the hall to actually talk.

During his interview, Bill, Assistant Manager at MAX, provided several examples that demonstrated his use of face-to-face communication. One example involved a conflict with one of his drivers. The driver became angry and upset because an employee called out and Bill asked him to add three more stops to his route. The driver failed to do one of the deliveries and Bill explained how they had a private “consult” in which Bill communicated the following: “You know that’s very childish. And you know, you’re a grown man. I mean we expect a lot from you, we expect a lot from everyone...” Bill was one of several interviewees who clearly
expressed a preference for direct, face-to-face communication with his team members.

These DSC and MAX interviews demonstrated a consensus among the participants that communication is an important driver of getting things done. The interview data also documents the various actions and activities that constitute this driver “communication”. Given this consensus, one might expect, or hope, that the interview data would also have identified a specific “formula” for communication that could be universally applied to all businesses. For example, a prescription or guidance regarding the frequency and the optimal number of meetings, emails, phone calls, and/or face-to-face meetings to conduct each week. Unfortunately this proved not to be the case. No such formula or prescription emerges from the data.

The data instead indicates that individuals communicate using a constantly changing mix of methods and varying frequency. For example, despite the extensive use of meetings in both organizations, several interviewees voiced their reservations
regarding the need and effectiveness of meetings in all situations. Mike, Senior Project Manager at DSC, cautioned that some meetings can actually hinder communication: "...I think you have to be selective in what you take into a meeting and how you use that time otherwise it can become quickly wasted time and...they [meetings] can actually break apart a team..."

Tim, Regional Manager at MAX, echoes Mike’s feelings when he shared: “I’m just not huge on meeting to meet. You know I mean I think they can turn into just fluff…and then you know nothing has changed”. Tim also expressed his scepticism toward email as a critical communication method: “There’s a lot of email…I’m not a huge email person either. Because to me it’s noise…I mean there’s certain stuff, yeah I’m going to forward…I’m a buffer or whatever”. Contrast this position with the earlier quotation from Dan at MAX who stated that communication is “email, email, email”. During his interview, Tim also made it clear that face-to-face communication was his preference. Karen, HR Director for DSC, expressed a similar
preference for face-to-face communication as well: “I’m a big pusher of having a verbal discussion, getting up out of your seat and going into someone’s space to talk when you can put those quick answers”.

The interviewees strongly voiced their belief that communication was a key driver in their organizations’ ability to get things done. However, when asked in follow on questions to better define and detail what they meant by “good”, “frequent”, and “effective” communication, and how to measure those states, the interviewees were at a loss. They could not provide greater specificity or precise measures. Interviewees did respond with a list of actions and activities, but they could not or would not volunteer any measures regarding how many meetings, emails, phones calls, and/or face-to-face discussions should be conducted on a daily or weekly basis. In response to my probing, they looked at me as if I should just “know” what was meant by “good”, “frequent”, and “effective”.
Quality People

When asked how the critical things “got done” within their organizations and what they viewed as the “key to success” for their businesses, many participants responded with the following: “employees”, “our people”, “good people”, and “quality people”. “Quality People” was a main finding for thirteen of the eighteen interviewees, and that ratio increased to fourteen of eighteen when also accounting for the lesser findings (see Appendix G).

Similar to the challenge of arriving at a precise understanding of “good communication”, it was also a challenge to determine what the interviewees meant, exactly, by “quality people”. What emerged from the interviews was not a static description of a “type” of person or individual, but rather an identification of several attitudes and/or “dispositions” that trigger or cause action and activities that enable the individual, and their respective organization, to get things done. These individual dispositions centered around: initiative, drive, engagement and/or commitment.
In the earlier, “Company Contexts” section of this chapter that detailed the dissimilarities between DSC and MAX, Al, Executive VP at DSC, had been quoted as stating that the company employs “smart people” and that DSC was known as the “eggheads”. While Al identified these “smarts” as a definitive DSC capability, when asked how DSC got things done, how the overall organization executed its major objectives, Al identified “personal initiative” as a critical element:

I would say this company is an unusual blend of systems and personal initiative and connection...I’d say very early middle stage of development and cover only half the things that processes might cover in a company. On the other, to balance the gap is filled by a degree of personal initiative by technical staff who lean forward to undertake projects or pursue work and personal connection...

The President Emeritus of DSC, Liam, had explained the efforts of he and his wife to build a company for talented people, i.e. individuals with a lot of “intellectual fire power”, creativity, and/or “organizationally dysfunctional”. When asked to identify the most important element behind the more than 30-year success of the company, he did not respond
with “talent”, but rather he stated that success was due to:

...people who are not standing on ceremony about their job titles and responsibilities, who feel some collective responsibility for producing the results and who are willing to do the things that nobody quite instructed them to do to make sure that happens.

For Liam, this individual initiative and commitment to achieving results is the key to organizational success.

Carey, a Technical Director at DSC, described this initiative, drive, and commitment as the “passion” of her staff:

I think that the passion of the staff...and if that means you work late to get it done, then you work late to get it done. I don’t know many box checkers here who are just here for a pay check.

Several other interviewees, who identified “quality people” as a driver of execution, supported their claims with specific examples. Amy, a Project Manager at DSC, explained how her team, entirely unsolicited, organized and conducted a Myers-Briggs testing and analysis workshop so that they could improve their collaboration and team dynamics. Carey provided the
example of what has been labelled the “treasure hunt” within DSC. Given the flat, non-hierarchical structure of the company, new hires must demonstrate drive and initiative in order to find the people within DSC who have the information and answers they need to perform their jobs. Carey noted the frustration and inefficiency of the treasure hunt, but she also stated that it was an excellent process for making contacts and establishing relationships within DSC. An additional example of what quality people do at DSC is the previously cited case of an employee regularly fielding a 3 am phone call from Pakistan. Kevin, the Director of Contracts, who supervises that employee also shared: “That’s just the way she operates. I tell her that’s not necessary...but it’s very appreciated”.

The support for “quality people” as a main finding proved even stronger at MAX where eight of the nine MAX interviewees identified it as a key driver of execution. These interviewees provided a substantial amount of data, an amount of data that I am unable to
adequately review here, so I will provide several representative examples across the MAX interviewees.

When asked to describe the one key to success for the company, Rose, Regional AR person for MAX, stated: “you have to have passionate people and you have to have good leadership”. In questioning Rose regarding the meaning and actions behind “passionate”, she provided several examples that demonstrated her own drive, initiative, and commitment, as well as the drive, initiative, and commitment of her fellow team members:

So in the morning even though I’m not a counter girl, I will ring up the orders for customers... or in the back for instance... like today, I think there’s three guys missing back there, so the counter knows they’re going to have pull some of their orders...

She further explained that her branch has twenty-one associates, a staffing level that is often insufficient given the volume of work, and the common practice is for everybody to “jump in” regardless of position. Rose also pointed out that “jumping in” is not necessarily due to the direction of management. She
described how the team will get together, on their own, to make sense of a “rough day”, and determine what adjustments are needed to improve the day-to-day operations.

Rose also provided additional examples of how individual initiative and drive help branch performance. She described how, despite all the formal operational procedures and operational measures, employees develop their own tools to better execute the day-to-day activities: "...I mean you’ve got some guys back there that have been doing this forever. So they’ve developed tools or you know...I guess we all kind of come up with what works best for us". Rose explained how she has developed her own “system” for AR collections: "...I have a different way of doing it than any other branch". She then went on to further describe how she used the Corporate AR procedures as her starting point, but then modified and adapted those procedures. No one at MAX instructed or directed Rose to do this. In fact, her system has been so successful
that Tim, her Regional Manager, asked Rose to train other AR collection agents within the company.

Bill, Assistant Manager at MAX, provided another outstanding example of the importance and the impact that quality people have on business execution. He recounted a story of how his warehouse manager, without being asked, fixed the fence around the branch after a damaging storm. Bill stated: “He fixed it, he fixed it. This man, this man is insane, he’s a workaholic”. This same warehouse manager, again unsolicited and self-initiated, also developed a unique solution to their branch space constraints. As Bill explained:

...you know pallets come like this and you can only fit two [in a rack]...well he, he managed to actually slice them through, make them half pallets so you can fit three SKUs [stock keeping units] in one row rather than two SKUs. So we gained space.

Not only was this an example of individual initiative and drive, it also proved to be a major improvement in inventory management and warehouse efficiencies.

Ted, currently a Regional BDR and a former Branch Manager at MAX, provided one of the best, most
passionate descriptions regarding the impact and importance of quality people on their business. When answering the question, “what is the best way to describe how things get done around here”, he replied:

I think it always comes down to people and their individual drive and leadership. When you have responsible, engaged, hungry people, they get things done...So really it’s...do the branch managers, and the sales team, the operations folks, react to issues and opportunities and jump on it and make things happen or not. Or are you waiting for two days for responses and action.

Ted may have a broader view of this issue given the fact that he was a Branch Manager for many years prior to becoming a Regional BDR. He also mentioned branch manager leadership and employee experience levels as important elements of execution, but during our interview he kept returning to the notions of “drive” and “engagement”:

Is the sales guy really engaged and is he out pushing, or are they just there for the ride...I think it comes down to the people and it’s hard to say but I’m an engaged guy. I get things done but I focus on branches where the team is there and can get things done with me. So it’s individual drive and leadership of the branch manager and his or her team.
From the data provided by the DSC and MAX interviewees, a better understanding of the concept of “quality people” emerges. Quality people take unsolicited action; they demonstrate initiative in getting things done. They react and respond to problems and challenges without the direction of management; and they develop their own, oftentimes unique, solutions to problems. Quality people possess a pre-disposition that consists of drive, initiative, and engagement; an individual capability that serves as a trigger or source of their actions.

While there was strong support in identifying “quality people” as a major driver of execution at both DSC and MAX, obtaining answers to the questions as to the meaning of “quality” and how to measure that “quality” proved elusive. When I pressed the interviewees in my follow-on questions regarding how to better define and measure such elements as “drive”, “initiative”, and “engagement”, they struggled to provide definitive answers. When I asked Ted at MAX as
to how and why the organization was so fortunate to have these quality people, he responded:

You know it’s funny. We don’t do a very good job of training here. So maybe it does have to do with recruitment. We always do find a way to get some pretty good people…it must have to do with recruitment, and getting lucky sometimes.

An interesting “other finding” of this study is the fact that almost all interviewees for DSC and MAX specifically stated, and some vented their frustrations, that both of their respective companies provide little or no employee training. This data points to a conclusion that the quality people working at both DSC and MAX are not developed through company provided training. I specifically asked Liam, President Emeritus at DSC, how he had selected and hired the “right”, i.e. quality, people in the past. Given his more than 30 years leading and growing the DSC business, I expected, and hoped, that he could provide some specific criteria and measures. Unfortunately he could not; Liam responded: “I don’t know the answer to
that. I would be interested, when you get it done, in your answer to that question”.

Finally Tim, Regional Manager at MAX, admitted his inability to adequately measure “quality people”, and instead described how he and his team had taken an aggressive observation and assessment approach to all new hires: “So my team is very effective at...evaluating if they’re [new hires] going to fit or not. Basics you know. Are you on time every day...are you hustling every day...do you have a good attitude?” Tim explained that they know within one or two weeks if they have the “right” person; if not, they quickly terminate the new hire. While Tim did identify some characteristics he and his team associate with a “quality” person, i.e. punctuality, hustle, good attitude, he was unable to tell me how to go about measuring such characteristics as “hustle” and “good attitude”.

The data from most of the participants provide strong evidence that “quality people” are essential and instrumental for getting things done within DSC and MAX. Quality people propel these organizations
forward. Unfortunately, however, the data does not shed light on how to specifically describe and more precisely measure the elements of drive, initiative, and engagement that make up “quality people”. Similar to the measurement challenges confronted when exploring the driver of “communication”, the interviews again yielded imprecise explanations and measures. While the interviewees did provide some activity and trait-based descriptors, a clearly defined and measurable profile of “quality people” remained elusive.

**Autonomy, Flexibility and Nimbleness**

At first this finding may appear as an odd combination of disparate elements; forcing very different descriptors of activities into a single category. During the course of my interviews, however, I found that whenever a participant referred to one of the elements of “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”, the participant also referred to at least one of the other elements, and in many cases identified all three elements together as a major contributor of getting things done within their organizations. The
participant understanding of “autonomy”, “flexibility”, and “nimbleness” reflected the common, every day meanings for these words. Autonomy was understood as an individual freedom to act, an independence to make decisions and to solve problems. When participants spoke about “flexibility”, they described it as an ability and a willingness to change, both organizationally and on an individual level. They often used words such as “adaptable”, “fluid”, and “customize” or “tailor” to convey the meaning of flexibility. The meaning of “nimbleness” is closely related to “flexibility”. Participants used this term to also explain change within their organizations, but also communicated a “responsiveness” and a “quickness” related to the change, as well as other organizational actions and activities. “Autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” was a main finding for eleven of the eighteen interviewees, which increased to thirteen of eighteen interviewees when also accounting for the lesser findings (see Appendix G).
“Autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” proved to be a particularly strong finding for DSC where eight of the nine DSC interviewees identified it as a critical driver in getting things done. The importance and impact of this driver may likely be due to the legacy of the DSC founders, who, as described previously, desired a non-hierarchical organization and a culture supportive of individual creativity. Al, Executive VP of DSC, provided an insightful summary regarding the influence of this driver at the organizational level:

We do retain a degree of flexibility from not having an enormous set of procedures for every single action. So there is a bit of nimbleness...So to adapt or change is in theory much easier for us than it is for some organizations.

Several DSC interviewees shared how autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness were essential for getting things done at the project level and in and among various DSC teams. In responding to the question regarding “how things got done” at DSC, Carey, a Technical Director, responded: “In one word, sort of ‘fluid’...” She further explained that, “The projects I
work on require flexibility because we work really closely with our client and they change their mind on a day-to-day basis...So we really have to be flexible and fluid”. Diane, another Technical Director at DSC, stated that their industry requires a certain level of flexibility, and she assessed DSC favourably in this regard by stating: “I think...we have a willingness and flexibility to be able to mobilize quickly and to work as larger teams on some ad hoc assignments that might come up...” The Director of DSC Contracts, Kevin, identified this driver of execution as “resourcefulness” and explained that most DSC employees actively seek out answers when something arises that is not specifically defined in their job descriptions.

Mike, Senior Project Manager at DSC, perhaps best expressed the importance and the need for autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness across multiple levels of the organization when he explained:

So I think we have a lot of intelligent people who come up with innovative solutions to tailor what we do to the particular circumstances in a different country or in a different technical practice area or with a different client who has a
different set of expectations. So there’s a lot of analyzing specific situations and sort of adjusting what we do to that circumstance...there’s no one specific approach to anything.

DSC participants described how success in their industry and the ability to accomplish major goals and objectives was largely due to the organizational environment at DSC, one that supported and promoted freedom and a willingness and ability to change, with employees who were flexible and adaptable.

While the MAX interviewees identified “adaptability, flexibility, and nimbleness” less frequently than DSC interviewees, only three of eight main findings and six of eight when combining main and lesser findings, numerous examples of adaptability, flexibility, and nimbleness emerged from their interviews when discussing other issues.

One of the most interesting examples related to this driver of execution was Bill, an Assistant Manager at MAX. Of all the MAX interviewees, Bill was the most focused and steeped in operational policies and procedures. He extensively detailed how he and his
team comply with policies and procedures, i.e. MAX corporate operations, and how he tracks everything:

I’m more of an operations kind of guy. So…strict protocol on safety goggles…steel toe shoes no matter what...if I see someone on a cherry picker [forklift] without a harness, I write them up...Yes, I track injuries. I track lateness.

Given Bill’s acute focus and sensitivity to corporate operations requirements, it was interesting to learn that he believes he and his team have a lot of freedom and flexibility to come up with their own operational practices and solutions to problems. He stated, “...of course some [procedures] come down from corporate...but I like for them [warehouse team] to use their own mind. I don’t like to micro-manage”. Bill further explained how he encourages his team to come up with new ideas and how his typical response to those new ideas is usually, “Let’s give it a shot—it’s your warehouse”.

Roger, a Branch Manager at MAX and Bill’s supervisor, shared Bill’s sentiments and went even further when he stated: “Yeah, we have adapted. The only real corporate things that’s come down is just the
use of the RF guns...no, there’s a lot of freedom”. He provided a great example of this adaptation relative to the MAX computer system that directs them to put newly received inventory into any available warehouse space. Roger pointed out that, while theoretically this makes sense, in practice it creates problems: “...so supposedly you can put anything anywhere, but at some point you have product so blended it...turns into a mishmash...you still need to categorize your products and keep certain product categories together...” He further explained that grouping certain product categories together increased picking efficiency and enabled newer employees to learn the products more quickly.

Several other MAX interviewees recounted stories that reflected employee nimbleness and flexibility on a day-to-day basis. Gerry, a BDR, explained how his branch team was cross trained, intentionally, so that they could better adjust to the demands of the day-to-day business: “...I’m in sales, but if I have a guy in the warehouse that’s out, I can go back there and do the cycle counts. I can receive things...I can do it
all”. Much like all the other MAX interviewees, Gerry discussed the existence of corporate requirements but maintained that each branch has considerable freedom as to how to meet those requirements: “So some of them are directed by corporate, but how we really achieve those things is all internal from the branch”.

Many additional examples emerged in support of “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” as a driver of execution at MAX: Rose, as a Regional AR collections agent, “jumping in” to help customers at the counter and to write up orders; Bill’s warehouse manager re-designing pallets in order to be able to store more inventory due to facility space constraints; and Ed, a BDR, who explained that given this freedom and autonomy at MAX, the burden is on the individual to learn how to use the available tools to be successful; according to Ed, “It’s up to the individual to learn and grow…”

While far fewer MAX than DSC interviewees specifically named “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” as a driver of execution, through numerous examples and the detailed discussions of the nature of
the MAX business, it was evident that this driver is a strong determinant in MAX efforts “to get things done”.

Teamwork and Collaboration

The final, strong finding that emerged from the interviews was “teamwork and collaboration”. It proved to be a main finding with ten of the eighteen interviewees, and it was identified by thirteen of the eighteen interviewees when including lesser findings (see Appendix G). The data clearly demonstrated that teamwork and collaboration is another key driver for getting things done at both DSC and MAX.

“Teamwork and Collaboration” was particularly strong at DSC where it proved to be a main finding for seven of the nine interviewees, and expanded to eight of nine when including the lesser findings. Amy, a Project Manager at DSC, perhaps best communicated the importance of teamwork and collaboration at DSC. She stated that it was one of the primary reasons for their success and it was her answer to the question as to “how things got done” at DSC:
I think if things get done and it’s really centered around teams...I feel like that’s really how we get things done. It’s a lot of collaboration and the teams aren’t really separate teams because, you know, I work on one project, but I still have to work with accounting and payroll or the travel teams.

Many other DSC interviewees shared and voiced this sentiment regarding the critical nature of teamwork and collaboration within DSC. Nancy, a Technical Director, concluded: “So I think it’s basically teamwork and now making proper assignments to staff”. Kevin, Director of Contracts, explained that much of the way in which DSC staff and projects were organized was in response to the nature of Federal Government contracts. Teamwork and collaboration was essential in order to comply with those government requirements:

DSC is set up in such a way that, for every project we have a project manager and a senior project manager, contracts administrator, senior contracts administrator, a technical director. The Director of Operations oversees the project managers and we all support the field offices.

The DSC interviewees also provided numerous examples of teamwork and collaboration in practice. In
one such representative example, Diane, a Technical Director, explained the nature of their Practice Area meetings: "We share experiences, we share best practices, we share lessons learned and there's always a lot of lessons learned on how to deal with clients". In listening to the DSC interviewees it became clear that, given the nature of federal government compliance requirements and the internationally based projects, DSC would fail to have a viable business without extensive teamwork and collaboration between its various departments and individual employees.

While not as many MAX participants cited "teamwork and collaboration", specifically, as a key driver for getting things done, numerous examples of day-to-day teamwork and collaboration emerged in the course of the overall interviews. Gerry, a BDR, viewed teamwork as essential for his branch’s success. Gerry stated that, "Our culture down here, I think, is more teamwork driven..." He supported this claim by describing how the region identified a need and then took the initiative to deploy a "transfer truck" that replenishes inventory
to each of the region’s branches on a daily basis. As opposed to relying solely on a single, weekly delivery from the Regional Distribution Center, the branches help fill each other’s orders via this transfer truck on a daily basis. Another example of teamwork is Gerry’s description of cross training detailed in the previous discussion of “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”. Recall that Gerry was the MAX employee who stated, “I can do it all” regarding numerous operational procedures.

All the MAX interviewees provided examples of teamwork and collaboration as a critical element of their day-to-day operations. Bill, an Assistant Manager, indicated that teamwork and collaboration was essential just given the nature of their business; one of high pressure, voluminous customer demands, and extremely long hours: “We all see each other more than we see our families, see our wives, see our kids. If we all didn’t get along, oh boy, that would be bad”. Lance, who works at the MAX Call Center, explained how the CSA agents all work together as a team:
One good thing is we’re always talking to each other...and if somebody messed up, I get a phone call from Tom...‘Hey Lance, you messed up on this ticket...this is what the customer wanted, this is what you needed to do...’ ‘Great, thanks man’...So we’re always looking out for each other...

Lance also explained how he extends that teamwork beyond just his CSA group. He offered an example where a branch failed to deliver an overdue order to a customer, and the branch could not explain the reason for the failure. Lance was the point of contact with the upset customer, and he stated:

So in order for me to handle the customer...an apology, we’re sorry...Sometimes I’ll make up something just so we don’t look like complete and utter idiots...To go back and say...the branch screwed up...I’ll try to fabricate a little something like, “Oh, we had a glitch in the system”.

The data revealed a strong consensus, either explicitly expressed by the interviewees or by way of numerous operational examples, around teamwork and collaboration as a critical driver of execution at both DSC and MAX. However, determining the specific nature of the teamwork and collaboration proved difficult. The typical interviewee response was to cite “good
teamwork” and “strong collaboration” as the explanatory phrase for this driver. Similar to the previous challenges of pressing the interviewees to more clearly define and explain what they meant by “good communication” and “quality people”, so too the challenge of determining the meanings behind “good teamwork” and “strong collaboration”. Interviewees once again looked at me as if I should be well aware of the meaning of these statements; that I should just “know” their meanings.

The interviewees failed to identify and discuss more specific definitional elements or indicate how they measured “good teamwork” and “strong collaboration”. To better understand this driver, I examined the examples of teamwork and collaboration provided by the interviewees to see if greater specificity and potential measures could be discovered.

During the course of the interviews, most participants discussed the prevalence of meetings at both DSC and MAX. The picture that emerged is one of two organizations that have numerous, frequent, formal
and informal meetings. A natural assumption might be to identify “meetings” as an indicator and specific action reflective of “good teamwork” and “strong collaboration”. While the data often shows this to be the case, it is also important to note the previously cited warnings about meetings from some of the interviewees. Recall that Mike at DSC had cautioned that some meetings could actually “break apart” a team, and Tim from MAX had expressed his concern that some meetings can turn into “just fluff”.

In describing the long hours put in by he and his team, Bill, an Assistant Manager at MAX, had discussed a potential indicator of teamwork and collaboration. Recall that Bill had identified “getting along” as an important factor in the teamwork at his branch. When I asked Bill to be more specific, he was unable to further explain and describe what “getting along” actually meant.

“Relationships” proved to be an “other”, main finding for Mike, Senior Project Manager, at DSC. During his interview, Mike shared a philosophical view
that all business is driven by relationships, and that relationships are the foundation of getting things done: “I think the key element for me is relationships with other people in the organization...So much of it is delivering technical services through people. So we have relationships. Our product is people...” When pressed in a follow on question as to how to develop strong relationships, he responded: “...I think the most important elements to developing strong relationships with other people is trying to understand...what are the motivations and needs of the other person...How can I listen to them...” Mike shared a deeply thought out perspective regarding the inter-personal and relationship dynamics between individuals, leading to his identification of “making an effort to understand” and “listening” as critical elements of building good relationships.

While the identification of “making an effort to understand” and “listening” proved helpful in providing a more specific description of “relationships” and how those elements impact execution within DSC,
definitional and measurement challenges surfaced again. Reminiscent of Bill’s inability to further explain “getting along”, so too was Mike unable to further explain what, exactly, constituted the “effort to understand” and “good listening”.

Rose, Regional AR at MAX, expressed feelings similar to Mike’s regarding the importance of relationships, but tied relationships directly to teamwork: “And yeah...we talk about personal things and, you know, really try to not just form a business relationship, but to get to know that person...I think team and performance building is very important”. Interestingly though, Lance, CSA agent at MAX, provided a contrary example where not getting along does not keep him from collaborating and performing as a good team member. Lance shared how he and a fellow CSA agent, Ray, do not get along at all and that they have a “huge history”, yet they support and help each other. Lance stated, “...I mean when you’re in the middle of a war...you look out for my back and I’ll look out for your
back...or we’re going down with the ship, there’s no life boats...”

The data demonstrates a few conflicting instances and examples within the driver of teamwork and collaboration. While “getting along” is a key element for Bill, and “relationships” are critical for Mike and Rose, Lance serves as a contrary example where his inability to get along and a poor relationship with Ray does not prevent him from providing good teamwork and collaboration.

Summary

The findings indicate that five key drivers: measurement; communication; quality people; autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness; and teamwork and collaboration are major contributors to an overall process of getting things done at DSC and MAX. The data and evidence from the detailed discussions with the interviewees show the following: that execution at DSC and MAX involves individual initiative and the actions of driven, engaged employees; combined with
organizational processes related to measuring, communicating, collaborating, and teamwork; all operating within an organizational environment supporting a freedom to act and encouraging change and adaptability based on the demands of the business.

Customer Needs – An Important “Other Finding”

When considering the question as to how a business gets major things done; that is, how it executes its major objectives, one might reasonably expect “the customer” to have a major impact or influence in that execution. While “customer needs” did emerge as an “Other Finding” in this study, it was surprising just how infrequently the interviewees identified customer needs as a major contributor of execution. It was a main finding for two MAX interviewees, and a lesser finding for four MAX and three DSC interviewees.

Dan and Lance, both CSA Reps at MAX, communicated the importance of “customer needs” in getting things done. This may be due to the nature of their positions because of the immediacy and urgency of interactions
they experience with customers. As Dan stated, "You know when the customer calls in, who's the first person to talk to—me or Lance". Lance shared Dan's "front-line" mentality, but he also took a broader view in terms of how the customer and customer needs drive activity within MAX:

I mean it really starts with just a call and a very demanding customer, and 'I need, I need, I want, I want'. So really it starts with just how am I going to get what the customer needs in a timely manner and keeping the customer happy...

Lance also explained how meeting those customer needs, creating a favourable customer experience, impacts company performance and financial results: "That call is everything because I mean depending on how the customer is satisfied at the end of the call will...determine is he going to call back again. And are we going to get a repeated customer". Similarly, Roger, a Branch Manager at MAX, viewed the actual customer order as the "trigger" that sets into motion the major activities at his branch. Rose, the AR Rep at MAX, also shared the importance of trying to satisfy
those customer needs and to do their best “to make
everyone that comes through the door feel special”.

Only a few DSC interviewees identified customer
needs as a significant factor in their efforts to get
things done. Early in our interview Nancy, a Technical
Director at DSC, expressed the importance of the
customer and her focus on taking care of customer
needs:

I always reply to clients within the first one day
of their email so that’s very important because
they’re the ones who are paying us and giving us
work and future work and give us reviews. So
that’s my priority number one, make sure that not
a single client request is neglected and addressed
properly in a timely manner…

Carey, a Director of Operations, provided great detail
regarding her “trackers”, i.e. her system of monitoring
all the major deliverables of a project to ensure that
DSC meets its obligations to the client. She also
described the frequent communication that she has with
her client because that is what the client “needs” and
wants:

We talk almost daily, but we have weekly Wednesday
meetings that are three hours long…And I
personally think those could be significantly shorter, but she really likes to chat...And so we’ve learned that that’s important to our client, and so we do that.

Amy, a Project Manager at DSC, shared similar stories detailing how and what she does to make a client happy. While “customer needs” emerged as a main finding for just two interviewees and a lesser finding for seven other interviewees, its role and influence in how DSC and MAX go about getting things done may not be accurately represented by the findings. The reason for this is that all of the interviewees acknowledged and discussed the importance of customers. It was apparent that they clearly understood how their individual efforts and major organizational activity were directly tied to the customer; that is to customer needs and a customer experience. A potential explanation for the infrequent identification of “customer needs” as an explicit driver of execution may be due to the interviewees viewing customer needs as the purpose behind their action and activities, as opposed to a driver of those actions and activities. Customer needs
is the “why”, the purpose for what the interviewees do; and the five drivers of execution that emerged in the findings are the “how”, the specific actions and principles involved in getting things done in order to fulfill that purpose.

One final, interesting note regarding “customer needs”. When I asked all the participants, not just those who had specifically identified customer needs as a driver of execution, how they knew if and when they were delivering “good service”, or how they could be certain that their customer had had a “good experience”, the DSC and MAX interviewees were not able to provide clearly defined metrics or precise measures. Two representative examples of how “imprecisely” the customer experience is measured came from Carey, a Technical Director at DSC, and Roger, a Branch Manager at MAX. When I asked Carey how she knew if she and her team had performed well for her customer, she responded: “Did the client yell at us?” Similarly, when I asked Roger what indicators he relies upon to know if he and his team are providing good service for
his customers, he replied: “customer complaints”.

Roger elaborated further regarding this indicator:

> You know if I have a high level of customer complaints and I always feel like I’m constantly in the weeds, then you know something’s not right. You know I would say that’s my highest indicator. Obviously, I can look at the P&L and see if the numbers are bearing themselves out, but a lot of customer complaints because that makes my life miserable.

Many other DSC and MAX interviewees communicated how they relied upon “customer complaints” to know how they were performing.

> When I pressed the interviewees for more detail regarding the nature of the complaints or for a threshold as to an acceptable versus unacceptable number of complaints, they were unable to provide me with those answers. As was the case with several of the identified drivers of execution, a measurement challenge emerged relative to customer needs. The findings reflect the difficulty and inability of the DSC and MAX interviewees to clearly define and precisely measure their customer’s happiness and/or satisfaction.
Chapter 5
Discussion, Conclusions, Applications and Further Research

Overview

This study explored the nature of business execution; that is, how organizations “get things done”. It examined two companies: DSC, a professional services and consulting firm in the international development industry; and MAX, a distributor of hard goods to the recreational and construction industries. The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory, multiple case study was to discover how these organizations executed their day-to-day operations and to better understand the drivers behind this execution. An additional purpose, and hope, was to also find evidence in support of developing a theory for the concept of execution. Such a theory is lacking in the strategic management and organizational routine literature. The research questions guiding this study focused on the nature of execution, the effort to
measure execution, and the impact that an ability to execute has on organizational performance.

I begin this chapter by first discussing the five drivers identified in the interviews as having a significant impact on execution within DSC and MAX. This section reviews the key findings established in chapter four relative to: (1) measurement, (2) communication, (3) quality people, (4) autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness, and (5) teamwork and collaboration. I examine each driver individually, and then in combination as a five-driver capability. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings for practice and theory. I then re-visit my theory of execution as a “catalytic capability”, proposed at the conclusion of chapter two. I assess its explanatory value, if any, given the evidence presented in this case study. This chapter concludes with sections identifying the potential limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.
Individual Drivers of Execution

In responding to the general question as to how their organizations “got things done” and in describing the operations and major activities of their organizations, interviewees identified measurement; communication; quality people; autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness; and teamwork and collaboration as significant drivers of performance and outcomes. Figure 3 shows the individual drivers of execution identified by the study participants.
The drivers fill the “gap” in the literature identified earlier in Figure 1 in chapter one; that gap being an explanation as to how organizational routines and capabilities may be converted to organizational performance and outcomes. The findings demonstrated how each individual driver had a significant impact on
organizational performance and outcomes. The interviewees described, explained and provided numerous examples of specific actions, activity and principles that constitute each identified driver of execution. At DSC and MAX, people continually measure and evaluate important activity and key results; they engage in extensive, frequent communication through multiple methods; they exhibit drive, initiative, and engagement; they work and support each other as a team; and they operate in an environment that fosters an individual freedom to act and a willingness and ability to respond quickly to changing business demands.

**Extensive Measuring**

The participants of this study identified measurement as an activity and principle deeply embedded in the operating cultures of both DSC and MAX. As previously detailed in chapter four, interviewees provided numerous examples of what and how their organizations measure activity and performance. Examples included the CPAR at DSC, the Operations Flash Report at MAX, and financial reporting for both
organizations. Support for this concept of measurement can be found in the organizational routine literature. This driver is best explained by the Feldman and Pentland (2003) concept of a routine, and their introduction of the performative and ostensive aspects of routines. DSC’s government compliance and MAX’s corporate operational procedures are clear examples of a routine in practice, Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative aspect. The extensiveness of the measurement throughout the two organizations serves as strong evidence of measurement as a routine in principle, that is, their ostensive aspect. Tim, the Regional Manager at MAX, captures both the performative and ostensive aspects of a routine at work when he states, “...essentially every segment of the business is measured in some way”. The interviewees for both DSC and MAX provided many examples of specific acts of measurement and also expressed how the principle of measurement guided much of their efforts in assessing performance and getting things done.
While the evidence showed measurement as a strong routine operating throughout both organizations, an interesting, related finding showed that not all the measures employed at DSC and MAX were well defined or quantifiable. During the course of the interviews, the participants shared numerous, precise measures that they employed in the areas of compliance, operations, and financial reporting. They also revealed several major functions and critical areas of their businesses that proved difficult to clearly define and precisely measure. Those functions and areas included the other drivers of execution identified in this study and their customers. One such example highlighting this challenge emerged when I asked the interviewees to explain how they knew if their customers were “happy” or “satisfied”. The most common interviewee response was “customer complaints”. When pressed to further define and quantify this indicator, the interviewees struggled to identify the elements and measures constituting customer complaints.
This proves to be one of the most interesting, and perhaps surprising, discoveries of this study. All the participants held positions that can be characterized as mid to senior level responsibility within their organizations. All the participants have extensive, and generally varied, professional experience; if not directly with DSC and MAX, then certainly within their respective industries. All the participants conveyed a strong understanding of the importance of measuring every major organizational function in order to evaluate and guide performance and outcomes. It is surprising therefore that these mid to senior level employees were unable to provide clear metrics and quantifiable measures for the other drivers of execution identified in this study, and for determining the satisfaction of their customers. When pressed to clarify or better explain their measures, most interviewees responded with very broad indicators such as the following: “good communication”, “effective communication”, “driven, hungry, engaged people”, “freedom to act”, “quick to adapt”, “strong teamwork”, ...
and "good collaboration". By responding with answers such as these, the unspoken assumption was that I would readily understand what those phrases meant in terms of performance standards.

I draw two possible conclusions from this finding. First, attempting to clearly define and precisely measure such drivers as communication, teamwork, and collaboration is extremely difficult. One might employ activity-based measures to better explain the key drivers and major operational functions within an organization. In the case of communication, for example, "meetings" could be identified as an indicator essential for "good communication". The limit and challenge of such a measure, however, is the fact that conducting a meeting, or numerous meetings, does not guarantee that those meetings are effective or that they will indeed produce "good communication". Recall Tim at MAX warning that some meetings turn into "just fluff".

Second, the interviewees recognize and are resigned to the challenge of precisely measuring
something like “good communication”. In response they turn to their own accumulated experience and they rely on their “gut feelings” to determine and know what constitutes “good communication”. In the course of the interviews, many participants referenced “knowing” through their “feelings” and “experience”, especially in relation to their interactions with customers. Mike and Carey at DSC both described the importance of a “feel” when evaluating the condition and strength of a customer relationship.

Based upon the broad ranging business discussions conducted within the study interviews, I conclude that the interviewees rely on both approaches to measure and manage the key operational drivers and functions of their businesses. They try their best to quantify and precisely measure critical activities whenever possible, but they also rely on their experience, knowledge, and gut feelings in the throes of the day-to-day operation of their business.

Setting aside this challenge of clearly defining and precisely measuring all the critical functional
areas of their business, the findings demonstrate that measurement is pervasive throughout DSC and MAX. Measurement is an aggregation of numerous actions applied to all the major functions of the business, and a strong guiding principle for those actions. Though clearly defined metrics and precise measures were not always found, the interviewees universally expressed that their organizations were committed to, and all employees were actively engaged in, extensive measuring of performance.

**Extensive Communicating**

The other driver that enjoyed universal agreement among the interviewees was communication. The findings showed communication as action, principle, driver, and facilitator of major activity in pursuit of getting things done. At both DSC and MAX, communication was evident between management and staff, among and between employees, and with customers. Both organizations demonstrated their use of numerous methods of communication that included formal and informal meetings, face-to-face discussions, phone, and email,
among others. As was the case with measurement, communication is best understood and supported in the literature by Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) definition of a routine. The numerous methods of communication, i.e. meetings, phone, etc., is the performative aspect, or, communication in practice. The frequent statements by the interviewees regarding the importance of “good communication” or “effective communication” was evidence of the ostensive aspect; that is, communication in principle at work in both organizations.

Much like the driver of measurement, the findings showed the ubiquitous nature of communication operating within and throughout DSC and MAX. Employees engage in constant communication via multiple methods, and communication serves as a guiding principle influencing and directing major operational activity, as well as the other identified drivers of execution.

An interesting discovery emerged during the course of the detailed discussions about communication. The interviewees were unable to offer a “winning formula”
for communication; that is, a prescription of methods and frequency that would constitute that "good communication" that so many of the interviewees claimed was so critical to getting things done. None of the interviewees argued for or would commit to a specific number of meetings, phone calls, emails, etc. as a requirement for that "good communication". Instead the findings showed that communication was a constantly changing "mix" of methods and frequency. All actions could not and should not be pre-determined; communication was ever changing based on the specific situation and the changing demands of the day-to-day business. Rose, the Regional AR Rep for MAX, captured this condition best when she explained how, in response to a "rough day", the branch employees would get together after closing to discuss the problems from that day, and then come up with a new game plan for the following day.

While the Feldman and Pentland (2003) concept of routine accurately and readily applies to communication as practice and as principle operating at DSC and MAX,
it does not account for this changing “mix” of methods and frequency. Communication as a changing mix is best described and supported in the literature by the Pentland and Reuter (1994) concept of routines as “grammars”. In their study they argue that diverse, even non-routine “performances” could constitute a routine. As numerous and varied sentences operate within the rules of a grammar, so too can the numerous and varied mix of communication methods be viewed as operating within a broader, “grammar” of communication. Thus communication at DSC and MAX exhibits performative and ostensive aspects while operating within a communication “grammar” that allows for ever changing methods and frequency.

**Quality People – Extensive Drive, Initiative, and Engagement**

The DSC and MAX interviewees firmly believe that “quality people” is a critical factor to overall performance and organizational success. The interviewees strongly expressed that given the nature of their businesses, the realities of their day-to-day operations, and the demands of their customers, it was
essential that employees be driven and engaged, and that they be willing and able to take initiative. There is no “hand holding” at either of these organizations. One of the best, representative examples of this approach and principle was shared by Karen, the Director of HR at DSC, when she explained that her own onboarding process consisted of being directed to her desk and receiving a laptop computer. (She has since worked hard over the last year to develop a formal onboarding and new employee training program at DSC.)

The DSC and MAX interviewees shared many stories similar to Karen’s, and they communicated a consistent position that it was necessary and expected that employees would “figure things out” and solve problems. Whether Carey’s “treasure hunt”, a MAX warehouse manager’s innovative pallet re-design, or Rose’s unique system for collecting money, getting things done at DSC and MAX was the result of actions initiated by “quality people” who are driven, engaged, and committed. The examples provided by the interviewees also demonstrated
that this driver of execution was not directed by management; this driver was usually the result of individual employees and employees working together in teams to solve problems and improve performance and outcomes.

When queried about how each organization acquired these "quality people", no clear answer emerged. Some interviewees responded with recruitment, some stated that it was luck, and some admitted that they did not know. Tim, the Regional Manager at MAX, explained that he and his team had developed an ability and placed a high priority on closely monitoring and evaluating new hires during their first two weeks of employment. If the new hires failed to demonstrate the requisite "hustle" and "good attitude", among other traits, they were quickly terminated. An additional, interesting finding related to this driver "quality people", was the strong agreement among all interviewees that DSC and MAX were poor at providing employee training. Most interviewees stated that DSC and MAX provided no training whatsoever.
The interviewees had great difficulty trying to define and explain the meaning of "quality people" however. Individuals possessing and demonstrating such characteristics as "drive", "initiative", and "engagement" is admittedly a challenge to describe and somehow precisely measure. Direct support for this concept could not be found in the organizational routine and capability literature.

"Quality People" as described by the interviewees does not meet the Feldman and Pentland (2003) definition of a routine. There was no evidence of consistent, well-defined performative aspects at work relative to drive, initiative, and engagement. An ostensive aspect may exist and the concept may provide some understanding of this driver, but the interviewees identified varied principles such as "hustle", "good attitude", and "doing whatever it takes" as operating within this driver. The Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) definition of a routine perhaps comes the closest to capturing and explaining what the interviewees described as "quality people". Hodgson and Knudsen
(2004) define a routine as a pre-disposition, an energizing causal capability that, when triggered, produces action. While these scholars viewed a routine as an organizational level phenomenon, as opposed to an individual capability, their concept applies and adapts well to this individual level. Drive and initiative may be characterized as a pre-disposition for action or a capability for action possessed by an individual. Once triggered, the individual’s drive and initiative cause action.

Partial support for “quality people” as a driver of execution may also be found in the most recent literature on dynamic capabilities. Teece (2017) maintains that entrepreneurial management is a critical factor in dynamic capability development and deployment, in executing that sensing and seizing of new opportunities and in transforming an organization in response to a rapidly changing environment. Teece (2017) argues that senior managers play a crucial role in developing and orchestrating those dynamic
capabilities, and as such, those managers must be good “at getting things started”.

While strictly focused on senior management, this attribute of “getting things started” is clearly compatible and reflective of the elements identified within the driver “quality people”. The findings show that quality people identified from this study are certainly individuals who get things started; they are individuals who initiate action. One may argue that moving beyond senior management to an examination of all “quality people” within an organization, is a logical and valuable next step in the effort to further explore and better explain dynamic capabilities.

**Autonomy, Flexibility, and Nimbleness**

The DSC and MAX interviewees identified “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” as essential for their individual ability, as well as the overall organizational ability, to get things done and drive performance. The nature of their businesses, the day-to-day operations, and the demands of their customers require a working environment that supports and
promotes autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness. The interviewees provided many examples demonstrating the need for the freedom to act and a willingness to change and adapt. They shared how they often had to respond to changing circumstances, such as when faced with staffing shortages, MAX counter sales people pick their own order, or, as in the case of Carey at DSC, having to remain flexible because her client changes his mind on a day-to-day basis. All the interviewees either specifically voiced its importance or provided supportive examples demonstrating the impact and influence that “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” has on the ability of DSC and MAX to get things done.

This driver is clearly not a routine as defined by Feldman and Pentland (2003). Partial support for “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness” may be found in the Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) definition of a routine however. One may argue that “flexibility” and “nimbleness” can be viewed as both an individual and organizational level pre-disposition or capability for
action. In this case action would involve change and adaptability.

"Autonomy", however, appears to be less of a Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) pre-disposition and energizing capability, and more like a "condition"; that is, an environment supportive of the freedom of action or an environment providing the absence of restrictions to act. Stronger support for this aspect of the driver of execution may be found in the dynamic capability literature. The dynamic capability concept was founded upon the belief that firms needed to respond, adapt, and transform themselves in the face of rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). Whether the O'Reilly and Tushman (2008) element of "exploring" in the dynamic capability of ambidexterity, or the Teece (2012, 2016) variables of sensing, seizing, and transforming, the freedom to pursue new opportunities and the ability of firms to adapt and change are critical operating principles within dynamic capability theory.
This study provides evidence and specific answers as to how such organizational change and dynamic capability development comes about. One can make a strong case that in order to be able to explore and to sense, seize, and transform capabilities, it is essential to develop, promote, and preserve an organizational operating environment supportive of “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”.

**Teamwork and Collaboration**

The final driver of execution that received strong support in the findings was “teamwork and collaboration”. Each study participant provided specific examples of critically important teamwork and collaboration in their day-to-day operations at both DSC and MAX. From the regional transfer truck at MAX, to the Practice Area meetings at DSC, to Lance at the CSA who often “covers” with customers for the mistakes made by MAX branches, it was evident that teamwork and collaboration are essential for getting things done and for driving performance.
Support in the literature for teamwork and collaboration is comparable to the support and characterization of the driver “communication” found earlier in this section. The Feldman and Pentland (2003) definition of a routine is relevant here. Typical DSC and MAX activities of meetings and training exemplify the performative aspects of a routine; that is, teamwork and collaboration in practice. The frequent reference and expression by the interviewees for the need of “good teamwork” and “we work as a team” demonstrate the ostensive aspect of this driver; that is, teamwork and collaboration at work as a guiding principle within DSC and MAX.

Similar once again to “communication”, the Feldman and Pentland (2003) articulation of a routine does not explain all the evidence for this driver. Recall that Mike from DSC and Tim from MAX warned that meetings could sometimes “tear a team apart” or just turn into “fluff”. Also recall how Lance from MAX explained that despite a “huge history” with a fellow CSA Rep, Lance still looked out for this Rep and remained a strong
team player. This anomalous evidence is best described and supported in the literature by the concept of “grammars” developed by Pentland and Reuter (1994). The concept of “grammars” allows and explains significant differences in specific actions, even non-routinized action, while still acknowledging the presence of a routine. As was the case with communication, “teamwork and collaboration” is a driver of execution at DSC and MAX that operates as a routine with peformative and ostensive aspects, within an overall structure of a routine as grammar.

Table 3 provides an overview of the five individual drivers of execution identified in the findings and their support in the literature. Relative to each driver, Table 3 displays the following: support from the relevant scholars; the applicable concept or theory, i.e. organizational routine, organizational capability, dynamic capabilities; key attributes of those theories as described in the literature; the application of those
attributes to the drivers of execution; and supportive examples identified and discussed in the findings.
Table 3: Drivers of Execution - Support in Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Drivers</th>
<th>Support in the Literature</th>
<th>Concept / Theory</th>
<th>Concept / Theory Attributes</th>
<th>Driver Application</th>
<th>Examples in Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pentland &amp; Reuter (1994)</td>
<td>Org. Routine</td>
<td>&quot;Grammars&quot;</td>
<td>Drivers as &quot;performances&quot;</td>
<td>The Communication &quot;Mix&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Other Disciplines?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(partial)</td>
<td>Dynamic Capability</td>
<td>Entrepeneurial Management</td>
<td>Driver as &quot;getting things started&quot;</td>
<td>Pallet storage innovation; New A/R collection method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teece (2017)</td>
<td>(partial/extension)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hodgson &amp; Knudsen (2004)</td>
<td>Org. Routine</td>
<td>Pre-Disposition; Energizing Causal Capability</td>
<td>Driver as individual capability for change</td>
<td>Innovative people tailor solutions to the circumstance; &quot;cross training&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(partial)</td>
<td>Dynamic Capability</td>
<td>Sensing, Seizing, Transforming</td>
<td>Driver as freedom, change, adaptability</td>
<td>&quot;Our client changes his mind on a day-to-day basis&quot;; &quot;It's your warehouse&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teece et al. (1997)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pentland &amp; Reuter (1994)</td>
<td>Org. Routine</td>
<td>&quot;Grammars&quot;</td>
<td>Drivers as &quot;performances&quot;</td>
<td>Meetings as &quot;fluff&quot;; CSA Reps' &quot;huge history&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One major conclusion of this study is that each individual driver identified from the research proved to be a significant contributor to the execution of organizational performance and outcomes at both DSC and MAX. Each driver has a major impact on overall operations and how things get done within both organizations.

**Combined Drivers – A Capability of Execution**

The findings provided substantial evidence demonstrating that each, individual driver has a significant impact on the overall ability of DSC and MAX to drive performance and to get things done. What proves even more interesting, however, is examining the five drivers not in isolation, but rather, operating together. In the course of discussing and describing the individual drivers, the interviewees always referred to several of the other drivers as part of their explanations and examples. From the interviewee answers and their detailed discussions about their business, it became clear that the five drivers are interconnected, and that the success and impact of any
one driver is very much dependent upon the other drivers. Combined, these five drivers seem to form and function as a larger organizational capability within DSC and MAX. Figure 4 depicts these drivers as a combined capability of execution.

![Figure 4: Execution as Capability](image.png)

**Figure 4: Execution as Capability**
From the findings a clear picture emerged as to how these five drivers operated and worked together as a capability of execution. Figure 4 shows how three of the drivers overlap and intersect. For example, “quality people” work on a customer project or order. These DSC and MAX individuals are driven and engaged; they often demonstrate initiative in their ongoing effort to produce high quality work for their customers. Given the needs of those customers and the nature of their businesses, these quality people cannot implement projects and fulfill customer orders entirely by themselves. They work in teams; they rely heavily on teamwork and collaboration to carry out their individual responsibilities and to satisfy their customers. These quality people who collaborate and work in teams also operate in an environment that supports autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness. The nature of their respective industries and customer demands require responsiveness, adaptability, and a willingness to change. Both DSC and MAX promote and support freedom for the individual and for teams to
take action, adapt, and change when necessary and beneficial. This freedom and autonomy, in turn, creates an ideal environment for those quality people and their teams. It facilitates and further promotes that drive and initiative found in those quality people and the collaboration between the teams. Thus, the overlapping circles represent the interaction and interconnectedness of these three drivers of execution.

The drivers of measurement and communication sit in a larger sphere outside and surrounding the spheres representing “quality people”, “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”, and “teamwork and collaboration”. Their position and the outward-bound arrows are intended to express the ubiquitous nature of measurement and communication within both organizations; they are deeply embedded in the major operations and activities within DSC and MAX. Of the five drivers, these drivers received universal agreement and main support in the findings. The interviewees identified measurement and communication in practice and in principle as having a major impact
on their organization’s ability to drive performance and achieve their desired outcomes.

One of the most important conclusions of this study is the identification and recognition that the five individual drivers of execution combine to form and create a larger capability of execution within DSC and MAX. As expressed in Figure 4, the five drivers are interconnected, interwoven, and very often found working together simultaneously. While the findings show each individual driver as a significant contributor toward execution, they involve and depend upon several of the other drivers for that success. These drivers as a combined capability of execution represent an aggregation of specific actions, principles, and conditions evidenced in each of the individual drivers. This capability of execution fills an operational gap between the organizational routines and the organizational and dynamic capabilities of DSC and MAX, and their organizational performance and outcomes.
Implications for Practice

The findings from this research provide several valuable insights that may help managers in their daily challenge to effectively run their businesses and achieve their desired performance outcomes.

First, this study provides evidence showing that measurement; communication; quality people; autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness; and teamwork and collaboration are significant drivers of execution in two publicly traded companies. This research identified many specific actions and several guiding principles that practitioners may consider and choose to employ in their efforts to “get things done” and to improve operational performance.

The evidence also showed that, when combined, these five drivers of execution form a larger capability of execution that appears to be stronger than any of the individual drivers. Managers may use this “five driver capability model” as a frame of reference to evaluate and assess their own organization’s ability to execute. This study provides
specific examples of what to do and how to do it in order to execute major activities within their organizations. It also provides a potential model for identifying and developing a larger, stronger capability of execution. Developing these drivers and this capability may help managers improve organizational performance and outcomes.

Second, the evidence from this study confirms the nature of the current business environment described in chapter one. Businesses today operate in a rapidly changing environment that demands responsiveness, flexibility, and a willingness and ability to adapt in order to remain viable and achieve long term success. Mike, Senior Project Manager at DSC, expressed this situation the best when he explained that, "there's no one specific approach to anything". Businesses today must develop and provide customized or tailored solutions based upon differing customer needs; needs that also change based on changing circumstances and changing customer expectations. The findings from this research demonstrate the need for managers to focus on
their capability to execute and on the specific actions and principles that enable that execution. A strong capability of execution is critical for navigating in today's fast-paced, constantly changing business environment.

A third and final insight that may have significant value for practitioners is that much important results-driven activity is frequently non-routinized and difficult to clearly define and precisely measure. The interviewees at DSC and MAX are intelligent, experienced individuals with important responsibilities within their organizations. They demonstrated an inability to detail and precisely measure important elements within major functions and areas of their business. They struggled to clearly define and to provide metrics for such things as "good communication", "strong teamwork", and "customer satisfaction". All the interviewees understood well the need and importance of measurement to their organizations, but they also expressed the need to use their experience and "gut feel" to evaluate and drive
performance in those difficult to measure areas of their business. The evidence from this study supports a lesson for practitioners that getting things done and driving performance require a combination of precise measures and metrics wherever possible, while also being supplemented by the management intangibles of “feeling”, “gut”, and experience. My assumption is that effective managers already know this; this study provides evidence to support that position.

Implications for Theory

This study produces evidence that makes a significant contribution to the existing literature and academic theory in several ways; it does so by: confirming the continued relevance and practical value of concepts found in the organizational routine and capability literature; supporting the recent call by scholars from a number of disciplines for more qualitative studies that focus analysis on a micro-foundational level; combining different ontological elements found in the organizational routine literature
to explain execution as a capability; and by extending the dynamic capability literature and creating new knowledge within the theory of dynamic capabilities.

The findings provided evidence supporting several well-known, longstanding concepts found in the organizational routine and capabilities literature. Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative and ostensive aspects of routines are present and active within DSC and MAX operations. Specific actions and principles supporting these aspects were frequently observed in the interviewees’ discussions of measurement, communication, and teamwork and collaboration. The Hodgson and Knudsen (2004) concept of a routine as a pre-disposition and an energizing causal capability was evident relative to the drivers of “quality people” and “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”. The notion of “grammars” from Pentland and Reuter (1994) found expression in the interviewees’ explanation of “teamwork and collaboration” and “communication”. The substantial evidence provided by the DSC and MAX interviewees, i.e. their description of
specific actions, principles, conditions, is proof of the continued relevance and value of several concepts within organizational routine theory, and its applicability and explanatory power relative to practical day-to-day business operations.

This study is also a response to the recent call by scholars from multiple disciplines arguing for greater micro-level analysis in social science research. Scholars from the disciplines of Strategy-as-Practice (Johnson et al., 2003), microfoundations (Winter, 2013), practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), and routine dynamics (Feldman et al., 2016) argue that in order to better understand organizational behaviour, it is critical to study the actions, practices, processes, and/or the individuals in specific contexts.

The findings from this study provide many examples of specific actions, activities, and processes and specific individuals as part of the explanation of the five drivers of execution. The responses of the interviewees provided the “fine grained” data that has
enabled a more granular level of analysis of execution. They explained what they do on a daily basis in terms of specific actions and guiding principles within specific circumstances. The interviewees explained how they fulfil their major responsibilities and how their organizations perform the critical tasks that drive performance and produce desired outcomes. Salvato and Rerup (2011) observed that “organization studies have long neglected the fine grained, multi-layered nature of routines and capabilities”. This study produced fine-grained detail related to the five drivers of execution at work within DSC and MAX. This research makes a contribution toward filling the gap in organizational studies and provides fresh data for those scholars calling for more microfoundational studies.

The evidence of the drivers of execution at work within both DSC and MAX also confirmed one of the major insights from the literature review; that is, that execution is a complex concept composed of multiple ontological elements. This study documents execution
as a routine in practice and in principle, Feldman and Pentland’s (2003) performative and ostensive aspects. Supporting examples were found in the drivers of “communication” and “teamwork and collaboration”. The findings also demonstrate execution to be a pre-disposition and an energizing causal capability (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2004). Examples supporting this ontological element were found in the factors of “drive” and “initiative” for the driver “quality people”, and the individual capability for change found in the driver “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”. A major contribution of this study is discovering and documenting that execution does indeed operate on multiple levels and requires a recognition of multiple ontological elements in order to adequately explain the concept.

The final, major contribution of this study to theory can be found in an extension of some of the most recent dynamic capability literature, and in the identification of new knowledge as a result of this extension. The literature review documented the
progression of “execution” from an assumed and implied variable in the early dynamic capability literature, to an explicitly identified and important factor for getting things done in the most recent literature.

This evolution can be seen in the writings of David Teece and other dynamic capability scholars. In his earlier writings, Teece (2009, 2012) uses words such as: build, integrate, reconfigure, orchestrate, transform, and harness, to explain how organizational assets and resources are transformed into dynamic capabilities. The words are broad and the discussion of dynamic capabilities is high level. In more recent writings, Teece (2016, 2017) narrows his focus by examining the need and role of entrepreneurial management in directing the necessary sensing, seizing, and transforming for dynamic capability development and deployment.

In case studies by other dynamic capability scholars, the trend toward a greater micro-level analysis is evident: the specific activities and principles employed by the Executive Management Team at
IBM (Harreld et al., 2007); the role of middle managers in deploying dynamic capabilities (Leih & Teece, 2013); and the development of specific questions to better determine how to sense, seize, and shape resources at the Valve Corporation (Felin & Powell, 2016). As dynamic capability theory evolves, scholars are moving from broad concepts to a narrower focus on activity, principles, and values.

This study represents a next step in the micro-level analysis of execution. This research of the five drivers of execution within DSC and MAX provide some specific answers to Teece’s use of those general terms; the evidence shows how to actually build, integrate, coordinate, reconfigure, orchestrate, transform and harness DSC and MAX assets and resources into dynamic capabilities. This study is a continuation and an extension of the dynamic capability literature.

The findings also provide new knowledge due to the granular level of the evidence provided. The discoveries made in this study support an argument that Teece and others should not limit their analysis to the
level of executive management, or even middle management within organizations. To more thoroughly understand dynamic capabilities, one must conduct micro-foundational research; that is, examine the actions, principles, and behaviour of individuals and their impact on exploring new opportunities (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008) and on the sensing, seizing, and transforming of dynamic capabilities. This research has demonstrated the value of studying the activity of all employees; the actions they take and the guiding principles they follow in the execution of their responsibilities. This approach has produced insight and better understanding of the concept of execution and may serve as an example and model for future study into dynamic capabilities.

Execution – Catalytic Capability Re-Visited

At the conclusion of the literature review, I proposed a conceptual framework for execution and offered a definition for execution. I stated that execution is a “catalytic capability”; that is, a
stored behavioural capability comprised of repetitive, recurrent actions, shaping principles, and a guiding discipline that energizes and effectuates organizational behaviour. I argued that execution is a complex, multi-level concept that involves actions, principles, and a guiding discipline, and I proposed several specific actions and principles as essential elements of this capability.

Significant support for this proposed conceptual framework and definition of execution can be found in the evidence from this study. The findings identified five drivers of execution, and demonstrated the major impact and influence those drivers have on getting things done within DSC and MAX. The evidence shows that each individual driver is “catalytic”; each driver produces specific actions and principles that propel performance and outcomes in both organizations.

As previously reviewed and discussed, each driver is fairly complex. Table 3 shows the multi-level nature of each driver, with each one possessing two to three different conceptual attributes found in the
literature. For example, the driver “communication” is best understood as an organizational routine comprised of performative and ostensive aspects, while also operating within an overall grammar of communication.

The evidence from this study also shows that, while each individual driver is itself a capability of execution, when the five drivers are examined in combination, it is clear that a larger, stronger overall capability of execution emerges. As discussed and explained previously, the five drivers are interconnected and interwoven, and each driver is often dependent upon one or more of the other drivers for its own expression. Recall that freedom and autonomy support those driven, engaged quality people, and how teamwork and collaboration rely extensively on communication. By examining these five drivers of execution together, a broader, stronger organizational capability of execution is observable.

Other than having documented the interconnectedness of the five drivers, additional proof for this broader capability cannot be found in
this study. Its substantiation rests upon the argument that, since there is strong supporting evidence that “measurement”; “communication”; “quality people”; “autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness”, and “teamwork and collaboration” each drive execution, then the combination and sum of these five drivers must constitute an overall, and perhaps greater, capability of execution. Another challenge in seeking to support this idea of a larger capability, is the fact that none of the interviewees stated that their organizations possessed such a general capability of execution. In the course of the interviews, at no point did the participants argue that the five drivers combined created a broader capability of execution. The interviewees frequently mention two or three drivers together when explaining how things get done in their organizations, but they never explicitly identified the five drivers together as creating a larger, stronger capability of execution.

This study also failed to produce evidence supporting my concept of “discipline” as an important
third element of a theory of execution. While the concept of “grammars” allows for the enacting of varied actions within a driver as a routine, recall the changing “mix” of communication methods within “communication”, the way in which those actions are carried out is not captured by the concept of grammars. My notion of “discipline” was that actions and principles would be instituted in a specific, prescribed manner. For example, when communicating, some prescription such as, “one must always do X”, or when conducting a team meeting, a general rule such as, “the team must always do Y at the conclusion of the meeting”. Such a guiding discipline, i.e. prescriptions guiding the specific actions and principles of each driver, was not evident from the findings.

The specific actions and shaping principles that I proposed as part of the theory found only partial support in the evidence. Just two of the six proposed actions that I deemed critical to execution emerged in this study. Measurement and communication were
strongly supported in the findings. Also, just three of my seven proposed shaping principles of execution were observed in this study. A pre-disposition to act, communication, and measurement as principles were supported by the research.

The definition and theory that I proposed at the end of chapter two provides just moderate explanatory value relative to concept of execution. The evidence does confirm that the five identified drivers of execution are “catalytic”, and their natures are complex, consisting of two or three different ontological elements. The findings did not strongly support the existence of a larger, combined capability of execution. The interviewees did not provide any direct evidence for this combined capability. An argument in support of this broader combined capability can only be made by assuming its existence through a combination of the individual drivers. The findings also demonstrated only partial support for my proposed “execution as action” and “execution as shaping
principle”. Finally, the evidence did not support my argument for execution as a “guiding discipline”.

**Limitations**

A few limitations must be noted relative to this study, and they may have impacted some of the results of this research.

The recruitment and selection of the interviewees was conducted by Karl, President of DSC, and Tim, Regional Manager at MAX. Through some extensive discussions with both gentlemen, I explained the nature of my study and my desire to interview as broad a selection of employees as possible within DSC and MAX. Karl and Tim provided nine participants each; each respective pool of participants consisted of individuals with varied positions, responsibilities, and experience levels. Ultimately, however, the solicitation and selection of the employees was the choice of Karl and Tim, and their choices may have impacted the results of this study.
There was also a limitation regarding the duration of the interviews. Both Karl and Tim requested that I limit the interviews to approximately thirty minutes. They were concerned about each interviewee’s absence from the day-to-day operations, and the potential negative impact that might cause the business. Based upon that request, I was mindful of the thirty-minute time limit. Actual interview times ranged from twenty-six minutes to forty-six minutes. This time constraint may have impacted results.

A final, potential limitation of this study involves the micro-foundational nature of this research. While well documented in the literature, the call by many scholars for more qualitative studies devoted to a granular level analysis of actions, practices, and individuals, may in itself, prove to be a possible limitation. Becker and Zirpoli (2008) warn that if a task chosen for study is too “micro”, the object of the analysis becomes meaningless and the analysis itself might become meaningless also. I do not believe this to be the case with this study. The
common findings across DSC and MAX, shown to be two extremely different organizations, may serve as proof and strong support that the five drivers of execution found in this study may be applicable and generalizable to other companies.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

While this study identifies five specific drivers of execution operating and impacting the performance of two organizations, these may not be the only drivers to have such an impact. Further research should be devoted to identifying and explaining other potential drivers of execution. A few of the interviewees in this study identified “leadership”, “relationships”, and “structure” as important factors for getting things done within DSC and MAX. These factors may merit additional investigation. Also, though the strong consensus around the five drivers was encouraging, this study is based on just eighteen interviews. A new group of interviewees may identify new and different drivers of execution. Additional research is needed to
confirm the findings of this study and to explore the possibility of additional drivers of execution.

I agree with the scholars from the various disciplines identified in the literature review, that there is a need for more and greater research at the microfoundational level. Answering the questions as to what is execution, how is it measured, and how does it impact organizational performance, can only be found in the details of the day-to-day operations of a business. The progression of the dynamic capability literature is certainly pointing in this direction. The findings from practitioner surveys and the writings in the business press confirm the very real concern and critical need to more thoroughly understand the concept of execution; specifically, how to develop the capability and successfully deploy it to achieve better organizational performance and desired business objectives.

Given the complex nature of the concept demonstrated in this study, future research should also look to other disciplines for insight and answers.
Perhaps human resources, organizational behaviour, and/or psychology. There is need to identify and develop several constructs in order to better define and more clearly explain some of the drivers in this study. For example, creating or finding a construct for the elements of "drive" and "initiative" within "quality people". Do such constructs already exist within psychology? If so, could they be adapted and used to better understand and explain execution within the context of organizational performance? Similarly, for the driver "teamwork and collaboration": might a construct for "collaboration" be found in the human resource or organizational behaviour disciplines? Research leading to clearer, better-defined elements, and the attempt to quantify some of these elements will prove valuable in furthering our knowledge of execution and in developing a theory for the concept. The complexity of the concept also points to the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to the research. New knowledge and the development of a theory for execution
may only be achieved by examining these other disciplines and combining their insights.

Summary

The focus of this qualitative, grounded theory case study was to better understand how organizations "get things done"; to understand how they execute their daily operations in order to achieve their desired organizational performance and objectives. Execution was examined through the perspectives of organizational routines and capabilities by exploring the experiences of the individual employees. The participants of this study shared the details of their own actions, and the overall activity within their organizations, relative to running their businesses and meeting the demands of their customers. This detail serves as a body of evidence showing how specific actions, principles, and processes contribute to and drive execution.

This research discovered and identified five "drivers" of execution within the two organizations studied. These five drivers were: (1) measurement, (2)
communication, (3) quality people, (4) autonomy, flexibility, and nimbleness, and (5) teamwork and collaboration. Key results emerged supporting the individual impact of these drivers, as well as their combined impact, on execution.

The experiences and insights shared by the interviewees presented a clear picture of how these drivers of execution, both individually and combined, operated within their organizations. Execution was demonstrated and expressed by: driven and engaged individuals who are self-motivated. They take initiative; they take action to solve problems, improve business operations, and satisfy the demands of their customers. An individual’s success frequently depends upon the help and support of colleagues, so individuals work in teams and engage in constant collaboration. Individuals and teams are further supported by an operating environment that fosters extensive freedom and autonomy, and a willingness and ability to quickly respond and adapt to changing business needs. As part of these overall efforts to drive performance,
individuals and teams also continually measure and evaluate important activity and key results, and they engage in frequent communication using numerous and varied methods.

A major goal, and hope, of this study was to find evidence that would contribute to a better understanding of the concept of execution, and perhaps also provide the beginnings of a theory or framework of analysis to explain the operation of execution within an organization. The microfoundational approach of this study uncovered specific actions and principles related to execution in action and execution as an organizational capability. This data has value for both scholars and practitioners. For scholars, the five drivers identified in this study help to answer the question found in the literature regarding the gap between organizational routines and capabilities, and organizational performance and outcomes. This research also contributes new data and extends the work of recent dynamic capability scholars who are examining dynamic capabilities at a more granular level of
analysis. For the practitioners, this study provides many concrete examples of actions, activity, and principles that can be used to improve daily business operations and drive organizational performance.

Whether from an academic or practitioner perspective, one of the most important questions and greatest challenges is to determine, exactly, "how things get done" in organizations; that is, how well do businesses execute relative to their organizational performance and desired outcomes. Those businesses that excel at execution most likely possess an advantage over their competitors, while also increasing the probabilities of their success and continued viability in the marketplace.
References


Appendix A
Letter of Introduction

University research study exploring the nature of the day-to-day execution of successful business activities.

Study Title: “Execution: A Catalytic Capability of Firm Performance”

Robert Keimer (the researcher) is a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration at the College of Business at the Florida Institute of Technology. He is interested in conducting a case study within your organization. The purpose of the study is to better understand how and why some organizations execute better than others. Specifically, he is looking to discover how organizations “get things done”; that is, the day-to-day activities that lead to successful performance.

The research will consist of short interviews with consenting participants. The nature of the interview questions will relate to the general topic of “how things get done” within the organization. Participation in the interview process is entirely voluntary, anonymity is guaranteed, and only the researcher will have access to the interview responses. Interviewee names will not be used in any report and interviewees will have the opportunity to review their responses to the interview questions. Participant confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

Participants are critical for the success of this study. At the end of the study participants will receive information about successful efforts at execution, and this may prove beneficial for improving an organization’s performance. Please direct any questions or requests for additional information to Robert Keimer at the contact information listed below. Thank-you for your consideration to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Keimer
Instructor of Management
Nathan M. Bisk College of Business
Florida Institute of Technology
150 West University Blvd.
Melbourne, FL 32901
rkeimer@fit.edu
(O) 321.729.9729
(M) 321.961.8371
Appendix B
Participant Informed Consent Form

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. The researcher will answer any questions before you sign this form.

Study Title: “Execution: A Catalytic Capability of Firm Performance”

Dear Participant:

The following notice invites you to participate in the study listed above. You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with your co-workers, managers, or other team members.

The purpose of the study is to better understand how and why some organizations execute better than others. Specifically, the study seeks to discover how organizations “get things done”; that is the day-to-day activities that lead to successful performance. The research will consist of short interviews with consenting participants. The nature of the interview questions will relate to the general topic of “how things get done” within the organization.

Please do not hesitate to contact the researcher with any questions about the study either before participating or during participation. Your anonymity is guaranteed. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know your identity as a participant. The recordings and any related notes will be stored on a password protected memory disk, and only the researcher will have access to any research data. The audio-recordings and interview transcripts will be stored in a locked, fireproof safe for five years following the dissertation’s final approval and will be destroyed at that time.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. After completion, the researcher will share the study findings with you. The expected benefits associated with your participation include information about successful
efforts related to execution and how that may benefit your organization’s future performance.

**Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:**

Dr. Lisa Steelman, IRB Chairperson  
150 West University Blvd.  
Melbourne, FL 32901  
Email: lsteelma@fit.edu  Phone: 321.674.8104

**Agreement:**

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _______________________________ Date: ______________

Principal Investigator: ______________________ Date: ______________

Robert F. Keimer  
Nathan M. Bisk College of Business  
Florida Institute of Technology  
rkeimer@fit.edu  
(O) 321.729.9729  
(M) 321.961.8371
Appendix C
Interview Protocol

Employee subjects’ participation in the interviews are voluntary. Employee subjects can cease involvement at any time during the study with no negative consequences to their employment.

1. What is the best way to describe or explain how things get done around here?

2. What are the key factors in the branch’s/practice area’s ability to get things done around here?

3. What are the key factors in your ability to get things done around here?

4. How do you know if what the branch team/practice area team is doing is good and effective?

5. How do you know if what you are doing is good and effective?

6. What indicators do you use to evaluate the branch team’s/practice area team’s performance? Your own performance?

7. How do you go about reviewing those indicators for the branch/practice area? How often are they typically reviewed?

8. How is performance information communicated and shared within the branch/practice area? How frequently?
9. Are team meetings used as part of that communication process? If so, how are the meetings typically conducted? What are the typical outcomes of these meetings?

10. How does the branch/practice area determine goals and set priorities? What is done to ensure that the goals and priorities are met?

11. What is the typical approach to making an important business decision for the branch/practice area?

12. Describe a major decision that was made in the last 6 months. How did it go? What were the results?

13. How are major problems typically handled when they pop up? How long does it typically take to solve/resolve a major problem?

14. How is conflict typically handled within the branch/practice area?

15. How do you typically handle conflict when it arises?

16. Are there any particular capabilities that you believe the branch/practice area possesses that are critical to achieving your branch/practice area performance objectives?

17. Are there any routines that stand out in your mind as having a big impact on performance?

18. What are the unwritten, informal, “this is the way we do things around here” guidelines that people follow? What, if any, impact do they have on performance?
Appendix D
Research Themes

Worksheet: The Themes (Research Questions) of the Multicase Study

These themes indicate primary information about the Quintain the researcher seeks (Stake, 2006; p. 68).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: What, exactly, is execution?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: How can execution be measured?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: How does the ability to execute impact organizational performance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E
Journal/Memo (JM) Form

Name: Robert Keimer
Date: 
JM #: 

Memo: 

Notes: 

Codes themes emerged:
Appendix F
Employee Case Report Template (ECR)

Employee Case Report (ECR)
ECR #: __________
Pseudo name: ____________________
Organization (MC/DSC): __________
Position: _______________________
Primary Responsibilities: 1. _____________ 2. _____________

Notes:

Research questions:
1. What, exactly, is execution?

2. How can execution be measured?

3. How does the ability to execute impact organizational performance?

Quintain as seen at outset:

Notes:

Embedded Case:

Themes and Quotations:

Findings:

Main finding:

Main finding:

Main finding:

Lesser finding:

Lesser finding:
Lesser finding:

Conclusions:

Quintain newly conceptualized:

Summary:

Transition Defined:

Main finding:

Main finding:

Main finding:

Lesser finding:

Lesser finding:
## Appendix G
### Findings Map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carey</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Main Finding</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Customer Needs</td>
<td>Overseeing, Supervising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Customer Needs</td>
<td>Overseeing, Supervising</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Accuracy, Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Accuracy, Quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Contracts</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Quality People</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>Autonomy, Flexibility &amp; Nimbleness</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix G
## Findings Map Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Findings Map: MAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerry</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>