

A Case of 'Non Strategic' Alignment - An IT and Business Unit Liaison Role

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Abstract

The nature of higher-level interactions in facilitating strategic alignment has received much attention in the past decade. The study sets out to explore the nature of the interactions between business and IT units through the investigation of an intermediary role called a liaison role. This was achieved by understanding the organisational context, identifying the information flows, and the processes and tasks embedded within these interactions.

The research provides an in depth case study of a liaison role for a core investment administration system. It suggests that intermediary roles have a large part to play in facilitating alignment between business and IT units. This case study establishes that the investigated liaison role promotes communication and the collaboration of lower level organisational actors, by formalising the relationship between business and IT areas.

Some of the key findings were that the liaison role facilitates horizontal information flows, it promotes understanding, enforces process, and most importantly it must be seen as an impartial group that appreciates the concerns of both business and IT.

Keywords

IT and business unit Liaison role, strategic alignment.

1. Introduction

Alignment of business and IT strategy is believed to improve organisational performance (Sabherwal and Chan 2001, Venkatraman, Henderson & Oldach 1993, Reich and Benbasat 1996, Croteau and Bergeron 2001). According to Venkatraman (1993) top management must incorporate a degree of high level planning, because developments and the building of infrastructure cannot be carried out in a random manner with bottom-up disjointed developments. Parties need to formulate coherent priorities for business decisions and their subsequent technical implications. "Dialogue not monologue" will ensure continuous alignment of diverse business and IT units (Keen 1991), (Enns, Huff & Golden 2001).

2. Business and IT Alignment

A more strategic role within organisations can be achieved when IT forms a connection with strategic management and this alignment is achieved through mechanisms including governance processes; value management; human resources capabilities and technological capabilities. Venkatraman (1993) put forward a framework for continuous strategic alignment composing of two components, namely analytical component (strategic alignment) and administrative component (achieving alignment). Business strategy is defined in many ways and many different schools exist including rationalistic with a planning, design or positioning perspective or the descriptive school with a cultural, political, learning, cognitive and emerging perspective (Eden & Ackermann 2000).

The characteristics of business and IT alignment proposed by Luftman, Papp and Breir (1999) include improved relationships between functional areas, work together in strategy development, communicate in a manner that is understandable to all, executive commitment and prioritise more effectively. Although Venkatraman (1993) and Luftman, Lewis and Oldach (1993) have attempted to capture strategic alignment within prescribed models, Venkatraman (1993) acknowledges that alignment is of a dynamic nature and will always need to evolve in order to maintain continuity.

Ciborra (2000) argues that strategic control is unobtainable due to the complexities and multiple influences pulling the organisation in different directions. Also, according to Ciborra (2000) aligned infrastructure is a rare occurrence that provides no clear-cut explanations, which are difficult to manage with approaches that are suited to mechanical organisations. Until recently, the depth of analysis into the interactions between IT and business units has received limited consideration in literature (Gordon & Gordon 2000). These interactions are very complex, because both strategy and the other operational levels of the entire organisation affect them (Venkatraman 1993, Luftman 1993, Luftman 1999, Teo and Ang 1999).

2.1 Nature of Business and IT Interactions

Gordon (2000) consider the nature of the interactions between business and IT units to be an important element of a company's competitive success and is a key determinant of success or failure. Design issues associated with the organisational structure of lower level functional groups to be more complex and interesting, because they are affected not only by strategy, but also by the structure of the firm (Gordon, 2000).

2.2 Liaison Role

Liaison roles are usually set up when the volume of contacts between departments grows. They are formal roles designed to facilitate communication and bypass vertical communication channels (Galbraith, 1977). A lot of their work is carried out through informal communication of information. According to Mintzberg (1983) they have no formal authority or power, but they acquire substantial informal power through their knowledge base. They have informal face-to-face meetings with members of different departments with the objective of relieving some of the priority problems.

2.3 Goal of the Study

According to Brown (1999) more study is needed in the field of horizontal coordination mechanisms between business units and centralised IS development units. She states that IS empirical research has only scratched the surface in terms of understanding the chosen methods for corporate and unit level coordination. She believes that even less investigations are carried out into the horizontal mechanism usages for different IS governance contexts.

According to Gordon (2000), further study is needed in the area of interactions between lower levels in organisations, particularly between IT and various business units. An investigation of the interdependent complexities and opposing driving forces at this level may provide a deeper understanding of how things function at this level. If these intricacies are understood then perhaps conflicts can be controlled in the future.

Other researchers have looked at the fit between centralised IT functions and corporate strategy and structure (Olson and Chervany 1980, Leifer 1988, Tavakolian 1989), and (Feurer, Chaharbaghai, Weber & Wargin 2000). With all this research little attention has yet been given to the relationships between IT and business units who respectively develop and use information systems (Gordon 2000).

3. Research Methodology

This research is undertaken via a single case study in Fidelity International Limited (FIL) by exploring a liaison role for the organisation's core information system (Darke 1998, Benbasat 1987, Cavaye, 1996). It uses qualitative research carried out through interpretive means (Miles & Huberman 1994, Trauth 2001, Myers 1997, Galliers 1992). The research process involves interviews with members of the liaison team, members of the business and members of related IT departments in order to obtain multiple perspectives of the processes, issues and conflicts contained within the development, maintenance and handling of this core system.

The conceptual model extended from Gordon (2000) is used as a sensitising device for describing the context. The units in this framework coincided with the units that interacted with the liaison role with the exception of the Product development and services and it proved to be a powerful data collection tool and a means of portraying the case study findings (Miles, 1994).

4. Case Description

The mutual fund investment industry is a highly competitive environment. Each investment institution must perform well and provide quality customer service in order to attain a good reputation, thereby

attracting and maintaining a large customer base. The investment industry has a highly complex construct due to rapidly fluctuating global markets, environmental uncertainty, rules and regulations, various combinations of investment products, multiple currencies, and a demanding clientele

4.1 Origin of System

In 1995 the systems areas in Fidelity developed an in-house multi-currency processing system for the investment fund industry, called GFAS. The number of client holdings to each back office employee was 10,354 in comparison to 4,833 clients to each back office employee by the nearest competitor. The system is used by over twenty-five organisations in numerous countries so GFAS needs to match many variations of system requirements.

GFAS was originally developed on IBM's AS400 platform and originally written in RPG. As AS400 can be rigid in its use, the core system has been further developed with C++ applications to provide an appealing front-end version client server workstation.

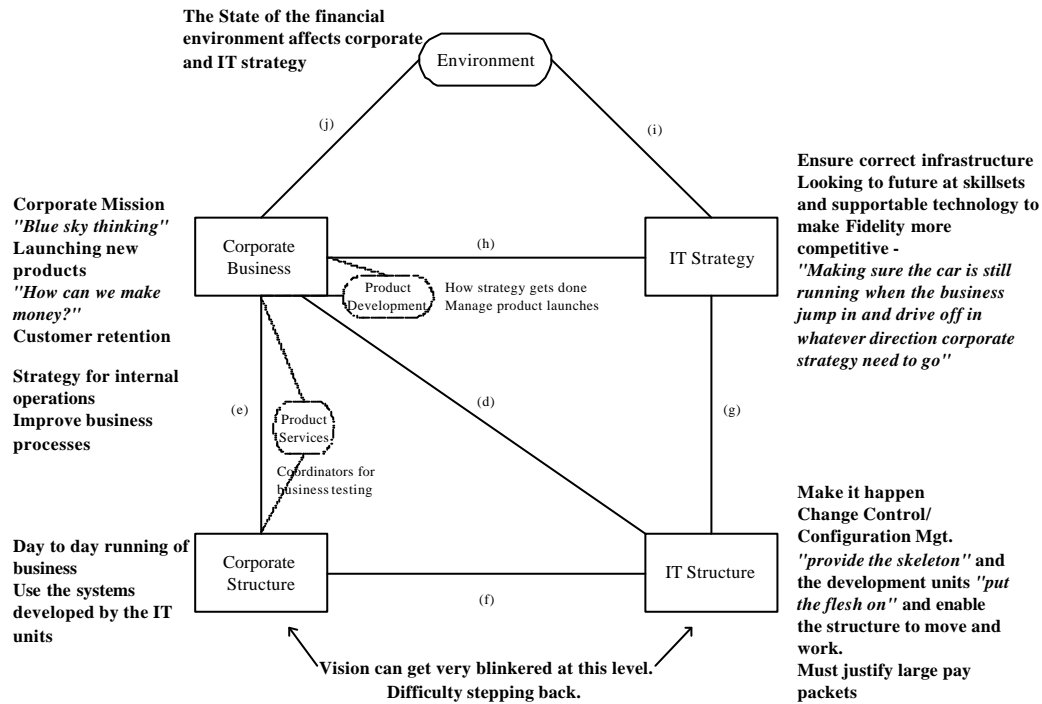


Figure 1: Model of the organisational context of Fidelity (Gordon & Gordon, 2000)

4.2 Contextual Functions

The corporate strategy group includes the directors and marketing personnel at the higher levels of the organisation who develop strategies to maintain competitive advantage in the investment industry (See Figure 1). The strategy exists and is primarily focused on making profit, budgetary control, customer retention and also has a formal set of objectives and goals. Marketing divisions were considered an integral part of the corporate strategy because they are the drive behind new products. IT strategy has a primary roles ensuring the correct IT infrastructures are in place so that future products and competitive ventures can be supported by IT, as well as, the skill sets in the market and within the organisation for the required technological advancements.

“The infrastructure needs to be ready to drive off in whatever direction the corporate strategy needs to go”. (Senior IT manager)

Business units are responsible for the day-to-day operations and transactions of the organisation. The relevant business areas are in effect the GFAS customer base include back office: Treasury, Tax, Customer Documentation, Accounts and Control, Onshore and Offshore dealing departments, and new accounts, including the UK call centre.

4.3 Motivation for the liaison role

The liaison role which interacts between the IT and business units, was set up for a number of reasons. Gaps were identified in the interaction and decision processes for systems enhancements and the processes used for defining business requirements. Also at the time there was no centralised function for dealing with any GFAS issues. There was a great deal of friction between business units and the development units over the choice of work done and the resultant functionality provided. The need for such a role had more relevance, because the company systems were becoming more complex, and there are more development requests than ever before.

In order to comprehend the impact of the liaison role, it is necessary to identify the problems encountered prior to its introduction. Problems encountered includes conflict between business versus IT, inadequate communication, poor understanding, no structure to prioritisation, business without control, increased pressure on systems, time wastage, insufficient requirements determination and employee demoralisation. Conditions subsequent to liaison role includes, single channel, promotion of understanding, structure and clarity, removal of some emotion, formalisation of prioritisation process, new frustrations for business, uniform requirements determination, management of expectations, pressure removed from IT units, greater control for the business and barriers remain.

4.4 Characteristics of the liaison role

GFAS Liaison is responsible for knowledge of all changes in the functionality on the core administration system, and in understanding and communicating how the enhancements impact other business and systems areas. It became a central point of contact and a source of expertise for all GFAS related issues. GFAS Liaison became the department to contact if either FIL business or other FIL systems have any questions or issues about the GFAS system. GFAS Liaison is often used as a means of communication between business and systems areas that sometimes have difficulty interacting with each other.

The Liaison role consists of three business analysts with two permanent and a annually rotated intern. The team leader has extensive experience of the GFAS product, but has a business background, as does the other permanent team member. There is no formal training for the role, but they are required to have an in-depth knowledge of the products and peripheral systems. More importantly they must maintain many contacts and an Intranet site proved useful in interaction with overseas offices.

GFAS Liaison is an enforcer of process, not because of the direct power of the role, but because they have the sponsorship and backing of the top IT directors. For enhancements of extreme urgency there is also a fast track process.

As this role sits between spaces previously filled with confrontation, tension and conflict it is understandable that it may take some of the blows that originally went directly between groups or else up the corporate ladder. GFAS Liaison is a highly political role because they are in a very precarious position between business and IT. If there are unresolved issues between business and IT they now approach GFAS liaison with their grievances, which in turn make endeavours to deal with these issues, instead of resorting to the influence of corporate or IT strategy.

“The whole idea of the liaison role is taking away the pain, and the amount of interruptions that these strategy guys get.”

GFAS Liaison steps in and listens to the issues and becomes a mediator in attempting to find a rational solution to the standoff. It was found that some problems could be as simple as IT not physically having the resources at hand to deal with a business issue immediately. One of the critical characteristics of this role is its ability to remain neutral, or at least appear neutral in all scenarios. They are supposed to facilitate both sides and work through any impasses.

“I see them as being neutral. I don't see them as protecting IT or the business, if you like an honest broker.”

One interesting finding from the interviews was that the liaison role is perceived to be purposefully non-strategic. One senior business member was a proponent of the liaison role possessing greater influence in strategic decision-making. This would entail GFAS Liaison expanding its position on the conceptual model. However, it was found that the overwhelming majority of interviewees believed the liaison role should stay under the control of middle management. The consensus was that a critical success factor for this role and one of its main strengths was its neutrality. It is a role that must be seen to be working for the good of both sides. By having no direct influence on strategy, the intention is that this role will have the appearance of being neutral even if this was not always the case. It was suggested that the challenge is *“understanding politics and then avoiding them”*.

This liaison role was found to be reactive in nature. Since its establishment in 2000 it has constantly evolved to fill gaps in processes. Although there are many proactive steps taken by GFAS Liaison it must be prepared to be react to any changes in the environment, either internally or externally.

4.5 Categorising Information Flows

By categorising the information flows, using the conceptual model, it is possible to grasp the types of communication between the different sections of the model. Figure 2 shows the intensity of the communication flows is indicated by the thickness of the flow line. There were differing views on the effectiveness of communications between corporate and IT strategy (flow (h)). The more senior

level interviewees believe interactions through flow (h) are strong, but warned that there are difficulties in defining boundaries, "the edges blur".

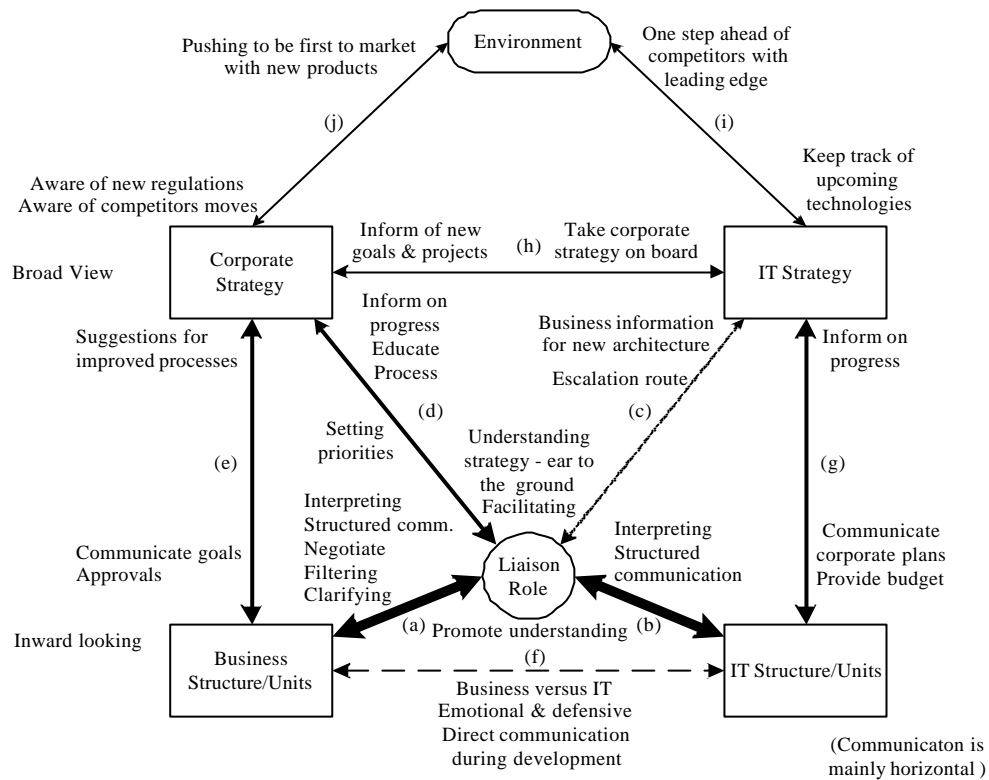


Figure 2: Description and Intensity of Information Flows

Other members raised questions over the alignment of the two strategies, and argue that politics plays a large part in interactions, thus hindering the strength of their relationships. Information flows through (f) still form an important part of the development process, and are utilised further down the line when a developer wants to confirm specifications of the development or go back and ask the 'business contact' some questions. This is the stage where GFAS Liaison must step out of the process, or run the risk of no longer adding value.

"We don't want to sit in the middle when the development is being done, because we'll just add time to that process."

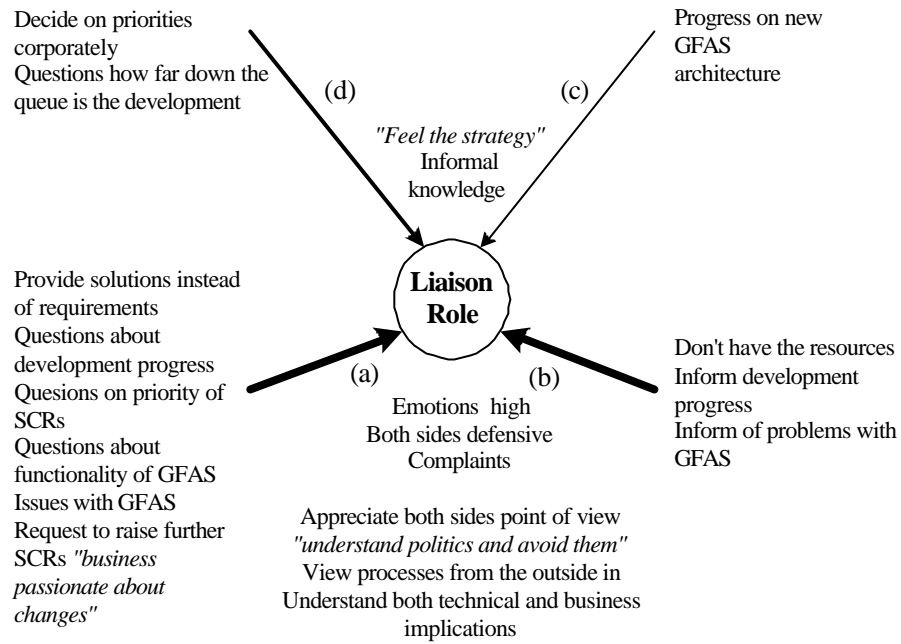


Figure 3: Categorisation of information flowing into GFAS Liaison

GFAS Liaison's interactions with corporate strategy, through (d), mainly involves facilitating the decision process for prioritising system enhancements (See Figure 3). They inform corporate strategy of progress on developments and any other major issues with the core system. GFAS Liaison are still educating business executives who are not yet fully within the formal prioritisation process.

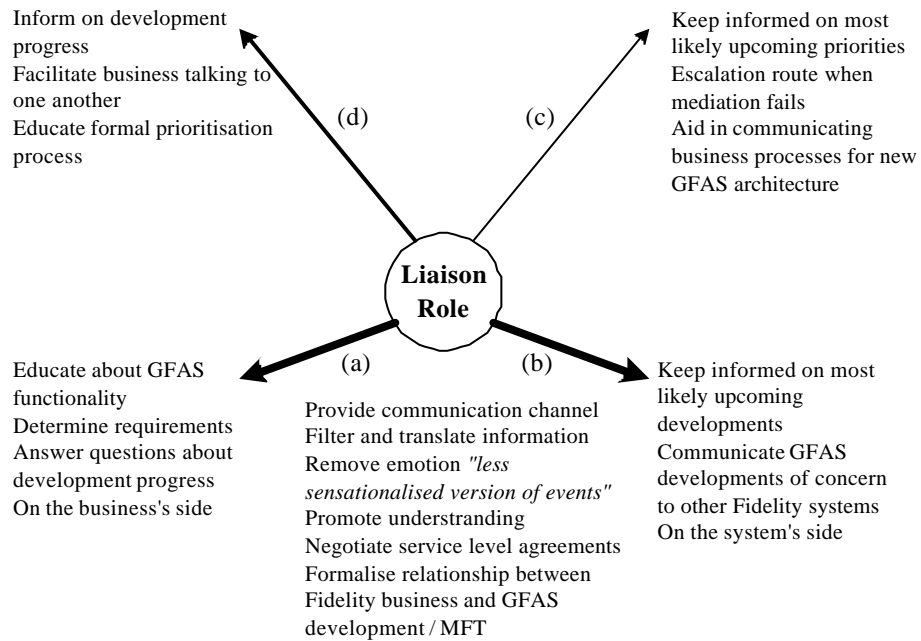


Figure 4: Categorisation of information flowing out of GFAS Liaison

GFAS Liaison's communication with IT strategy involves informing them of development priority decisions made by the business. Information flows along (c) are not substantial (See Figure 4). The only other need for communication involves the reporting line, as IT strategy sponsor the liaison role. The case evidence shows that GFAS Liaison did not get involved in making strategic decisions; it must keep an ear to the ground so as to be aware of strategy. This knowledge results in informal power (Galbraith, 1977), (Mintzberg, 1983), and it gives the role a broader perspective of processes and developments that affect the greater scheme of things. The majority of information flows are horizontal in nature, through the coordination of business and IT units.

4.6 Tasks and processes during early stages of development

The majority of the liaison role's time involved work prior to any GFAS developments taking place. Some of the main processes are pre development analysis; facilitation for prioritising of developments; the requirements determination process, and clarification of business sponsorship. Other areas of concern are providing consultation for larger GFAS development projects involving new products.

GFAS Liaison has since played a pivotal role in establishing a recognised process for deciding which developments to work on when resources are next available (Figure 5). A fast track process is also enforced and facilitated by GFAS Liaison and is only used when enhancements are urgently needed and tends to be reactive in nature.

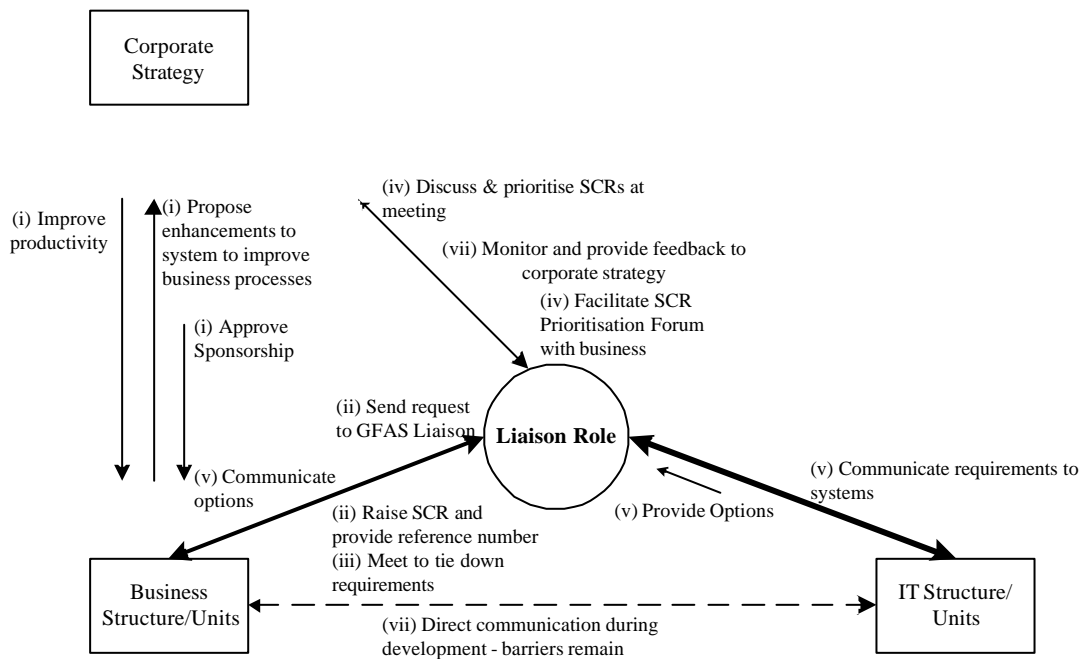


Figure 5: Initiation process for GFAS developments & small enhancements

This formalised prioritisation process provides GFAS Liaison with one of its strongest links to the business areas and, over time, provides a good insight into business processes and day-to-day business operations. It is a means of building up relationships within business areas.

Requirements determination is a sub-process within the formalised prioritisation process. It takes up a large proportion of liaison time, and provides added value for both business and IT when articulating requirements by combining their basic technical knowledge, and appreciation of business processes. If a system enhancement eventually receives prioritisation, the development teams have a solid starting point, through a comprehensive definition of the requirements. The post-GFAS development stage takes up only a small amount of the roles time. It involves supporting incident report analysis. These are occasions where relationships deteriorate as sides become defensive in their denial of responsibility.

5. Discussion

The liaison role was found to have many positive impacts on the interactions between business and IT. The liaison role is understood to facilitate in the initial stages of communication between both sides. By sitting in the middle the liaison role has a knowledge of the workings of the business and a basic understanding of the technicalities of the IS side. Boynton, Jacobs and Zmud (1992) regard this as an ideal trait.

One of the interesting findings from this research is that this role was found to be non-strategic. In fact it turned out to be possibly the most important facet of the role. Galbraith (1977) discussed lateral linking devices as being occupied in solving problems at the middle and lower levels, but these roles were associated with having power. Brown (1999) had referred to these formal roles mainly consisting of having senior managers. Having middle level staff within the role without a direct link to strategy served its purpose, because GFAS Liaison is now a more approachable avenue that both sides feel they can confide in. They are building up relationships and facilitating collaboration. On top of relationship building one liaison role member suggested that obtaining credibility from all sides remains a challenge for the group. Credibility is easier maintained with organisational actors, if the liaison role member comes from the same career background to the areas they interact with.

5.1 Responsibilities of Business and IT

In all eight organisations investigated by Gordon (2000), the business units drove all IT decisions. In this case the business drives IT decisions regarding priorities, but processes are necessary to avoid placing unfair pressure on IT departments when making the final call.

Although GFAS developers and support teams have dominant responsibility for the system they must be responsive to business needs, and a lot of enhancements to the systems tend to be reactive in nature. Although the liaison role for GFAS also attempts to remain proactive, its main purpose is to be reactive and “plug holes”.

5.2 Contribution to Alignment

It is evident from the findings that the liaison role under investigation has played an important part in coordinating business and IT areas associated with GFAS. The alignment of information systems areas with the other organisational areas was one of the top ten information systems management issues identified by Brancheau and Wetherbe (1996). This, and other literature, seems far more concerned with achieving alignment at more senior levels (Venkatraman 1993, Brown and Magill

1994, Luftman 1993, Croteau and Bergeron 1999) but the researcher argues that alignment of business and IT functions at lower levels must also be considered.

GFAS Liaison's main influence was through the social dimension of business and IT alignment as discussed by Reich and Benbesat (2000). They outlined, "shared domain knowledge" as an acknowledged factor to the success of both long-term and short-term alignment. This correlates with GFAS Liaison's efforts to assist IT units in comprehending business processes while giving the business a broad overview of the IT situation.

Ciborra (2000) does not believe there is a set of rules that help control strategic alignment. Instead, he describes the attempt to link multiple actors and resources by balancing all the complexities and interdependencies as a "*long, tortuous, and fragmented process*".

Without having any direct input into the strategy, GFAS Liaison is indirectly contributing to alignment in an indirect manner. They are somewhat reactive in nature "sweeping up" issues and promoting collaboration as they go along. It is the "bricolage" method of achieving strategic alignment alluded to by Ciborra (2000). If the alignment perspectives described by Venkatraman (1993) are to be considered as realistic means of describing modes of strategic alignment then the alignment of the core system could be considered within the "service level alignment perspective".

5.3 Horizontal or Lateral mechanism

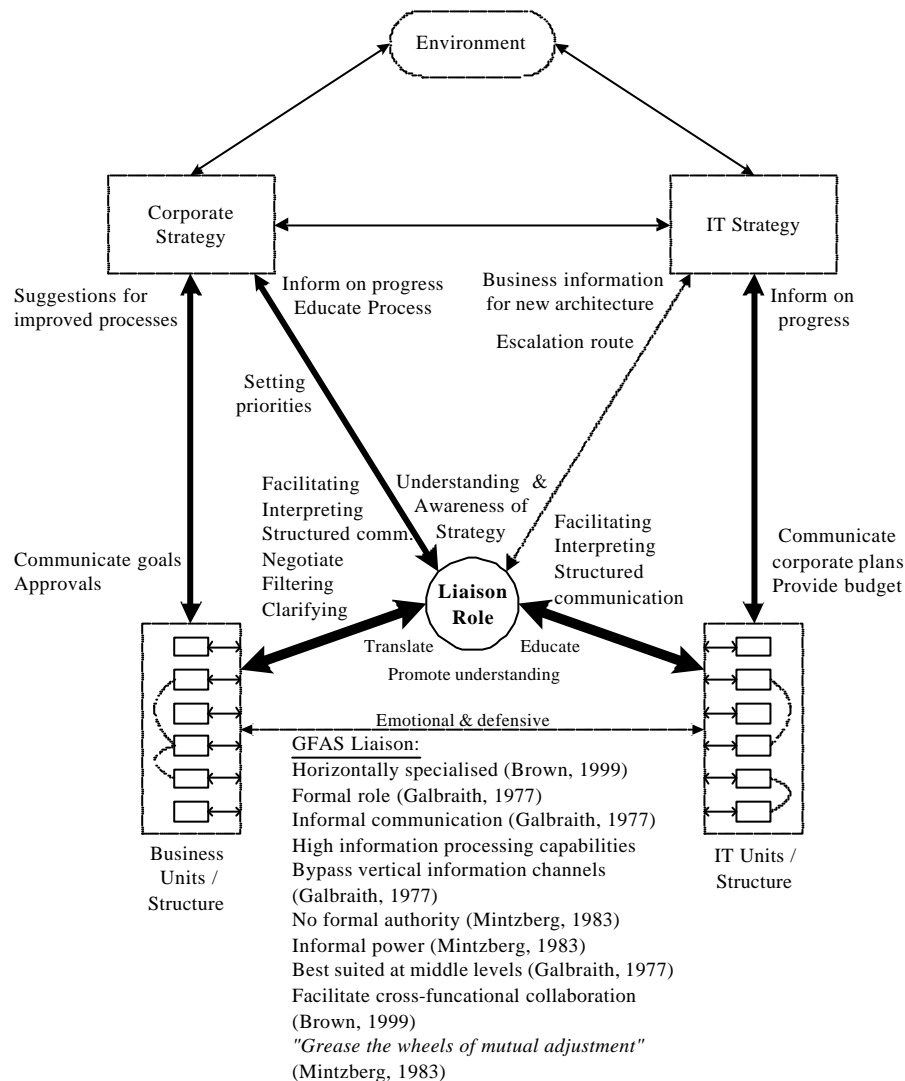


Figure 6: Facets of GFAS Liaison Facilitating Alignment

It is thus evident from the diagram (figure 6) that the liaison role is mainly involved in flows of information, which are horizontal in nature. This is in line with substantial literature investigating lateral linking devices (Galbraith, 1977, Mintzberg, 1983, Daft, 1998, Brown 1999). GFAS Liaison can be described as a horizontal mechanism, which Brown (1999) outlines as suitable devices when work is horizontally specialised, of high complexity, and contains a large network of interdependencies.

Brown (1999) outlined how senior IT executives are implementing multiple forms of both formal and informal lateral linking devices. GFAS Liaison was found to be both a formal and informal horizontal mechanism. The role is structured and can be described as formal when considering its maintenance of communication between business and IT. It also provides an informal relationship with decentralised Fidelity system groups for communication of changes that may affect these systems, or to discuss possible workarounds. These findings are in agreement with Brown's (1999) conclusions that formal horizontal mechanisms are required for coordinating between business and centralised IT

functions, and informal horizontal mechanisms are suitable for providing lateral communication across centralised and decentralised IT units. Liaison roles always need to demonstrate the value they provide to the organisation, so as to justify the extra step in the communication process, and the extra costs identified through these horizontal mechanisms (Brown, 1999, Galbraith, 1977). GFAS Liaison contribution towards formalising repeatable processes has helped to reduce risk, facilitate staff movement and reduce reliance on key resources. The liaison role however, rigorously stays in line with processes, because they are in a vulnerable position and must ensure their function is not undermined.

6. Conclusions

Team members and clients of the group or actors affected by the role consider the position as non-strategic in nature. GFAS Liaison was found not to influence strategic decisions, it has no formal power, and it does not make development priority decisions. Although many of the processes involving the liaison role are designed to be proactive, it was regarded as a “suck it and see” function. As problems or conflicts arise with the core system the liaison role steps in to smooth things over where possible, thus in this regard they are reactive. The investigated liaison role does not influence strategy or drive strategic decisions, but has a subtle impact on alignment. It is argued that this facilitation of lower level alignment contributes to the overall strategic alignment of the organisation. It can be concluded that they indirectly implement strategic alignment.

There is a contradiction in the nature of the liaison role, which is very much evolutionary and involves ‘tinkering’ in defining its role, while it operates by formalising and standardising processes that are imposed on the interaction between the business units and IT. GFAS Liaison facilitates communication, improving the productivity of interactions between diverse actors. In this respect the findings have shown that the majority of these communications have been horizontal in nature. They push back both sides and mediate in conflict situations. The liaison role provides clarification of requirements and is influential in managing expectations. GFAS Liaison members are also required to be accomplished business analysts who also have a basic technical knowledge so they can make sense of communication from the IT functions.

There has been debate on how alignment is achieved through frameworks (Venkatraman, 1993), (Luftman, 1993), (Reich and Benbasat, 2000), (Croteau and Bergeron, 2001), and yet alignment is indirectly achieved by a role which was admittedly established to “plug some holes”. GFAS Liaison was said to be “sweeping up as they go along” in order to get the lower level activities aligned with one and other. It resembles Ciborra’s (2000) patching and “bricolage” effect of achieving alignment in complex interdependent environments.

The researchers argue that a non-strategic liaison role is in fact facilitating strategic alignment. The resultant phenomenon from this scenario is a form of “Non-Strategic Strategic Alignment”. On isolating the horizontal information flows GFAS Liaison has a non-strategic influence by “feeling their way”. If however, the liaison role is considered in the overall context it makes a significant contribution to the delivery of indirect alignment. With GFAS Liaison facilitating alignment and preventing the escalation of issues up the corporate ladder, “*it enables senior management to sleep well at night*”.

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