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Research Paper

Achieving Optimal Business-IT Alignment in Small Firms: A Dynamic Perspective

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Abstract
This study uses Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory to examine how small enterprises dynamically connect IT adoption with business goals. To explore small company IT alignment practices, the research uses a qualitative approach to conduct in-depth interpretive interviews with 31 owner-managers. The study methodically analyses grounded data to find processes and concept interrelationships, examining contextual elements, actions, reactions, repercussions, and results. This analysis creates a new framework for business-IT alignment: adaptation, anticipation, synchronisation, and collaboration. Each state shows how small enterprises balance technological and commercial goals, presenting a detailed view of how they do so. This reactive alignment method allows small enterprises to adapt their IT plans to external changes or business needs. Anticipation is a proactive alignment strategy that positions organisations to strategically harness technological advances by anticipating future business and IT needs. Synchronisation occurs when IT and business strategy match in real time, harmonising IT systems and business operations. Collaboration involves deeper integration where IT and business goals are co-created through communication and cooperation. The study's methodology helps policymakers, researchers, and small firm owner-managers predict and analyse business-IT alignment behaviours. This methodology diagnoses alignment states and improves IT adoption strategies and business objectives-IT integration. These findings are important for IT-business alignment theories, especially in small enterprises with resource restrictions and unpredictable contexts.

Keywords*: Small Firms, IT Adoption, IT Alignment, Grounded Theory, Business-IT Integration, Dynamic Perspective, Qualitative Research*

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I. Background to the Study

The economic structure of nations is greatly influenced by the contributions of small businesses, which are of critical importance in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment, and innovation. Because of their significance, there is still a significant knowledge gap on the manner in which major companies strategically align information technology (IT) with their business objectives in order to achieve the highest possible level of performance. There has been a significant amount of study carried out on the topic of information technology adoption and alignment in large organisations; nevertheless, there is a lack of knowledge on the specific dynamics of small businesses, particularly in relation to the changing IT landscapes and the requirements of businesses. The Small Business Act Fact Sheet (2012) published by the European Commission underlines the fact that Malta is home to a significant number of small businesses. The country is home to approximately 29,638 companies, 95.1% of which have fewer than ten full-time employees. Not only are these small businesses widespread, but they also dominate the economic landscape of Malta. They are responsible for more than 43 percent of the total employment, 53 percent of the value added to the economy, and 56 percent of the employment in the private sector. Even though they are economically significant, there is still a lack of research on the strategic deployment of information technology within this industry.

The currently available models of IT-business alignment concentrate their attention mostly on large organisations, and thus offer only limited insights when applied to small businesses. Although large-firm models frequently place an emphasis on formalised processes and significant resources, it is possible that these models cannot be simply transferred to the environment of small businesses. It is possible for small businesses to

demonstrate distinct alignment behaviours and practices due to the differences in the resource constraints and operational dynamics that they face. Therefore, it is essential to have an awareness of how small businesses become aligned with their information technology in order to develop effective strategies that support their growth and competitiveness.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the ways in which owner-managers of small businesses in Malta embrace information technology from a dynamic point of view in order to fill the knowledge gap that exists. Through in-depth interviews that were carried out over the course of four years, this study investigates the lived experiences of thirty-one owner-managers. The research also makes use of the constructivist grounded theory approach that Charmaz (2006) developed. Adaptation, Anticipation, Synchronisation, and Collaboration are the four unique states of business-IT alignment that are identified and defined by the study. These states are identified and defined through the analysis of qualitative data. An adaptive strategy is one in which information technology strategies are modified in reaction to changes in the business environment or to challenges from the outside world. Proactively anticipating future information technology requirements and strategically positioning themselves to meet those requirements is what is meant by the term "anticipation." When information technology (IT) and business goals are aligned in real time, a situation known as synchronisation is achieved. This ensures that there is immediate coherence between technology and business activities. A deeper integration is denoted by the term "collaboration," which occurs when business goals and information technology goals are developed via continuing, joint efforts.

This paradigm offers a more nuanced understanding of an organization's adoption of information technology in this setting by providing useful insights into how small businesses manage their information technology resources and align them with business goals. The results of the research are intended to provide information to policymakers, researchers, and owner-managers of small businesses, with the goal of assisting them in predicting and improving IT alignment behaviours. This study makes a contribution to the larger conversation on the integration of business and information technology by addressing the limitations of existing IT-alignment models and presenting practical implications. This is especially true within the context of the small firm sector.

1.1 **The Aims of the Research Project**

Among the most important goals of this investigation are:

I. Investigating the dynamic dynamics of information technology adoption in small businesses: The purpose of this study is to investigate how small business owner-managers match their information technology endeavours with business objectives in an environment that is undergoing rapid change. This will be accomplished by focusing on the specific actions and tactics that these individuals adopt.

II. Develop a framework for aligning business and information technology by stating: The purpose of this study is to describe and expound on four unique states of business-IT alignment: adaptation, anticipation, synchronisation, and collaboration. These states indicate different levels of integration and alignment between business strategies and information technology.

To provide stakeholders with actionable insights: The purpose of this study is to deliver actionable advice to policymakers, researchers, and owner-managers of small businesses in order to enhance the adoption processes of information technology and achieve greater alignment with business goals. To improve the theoretical knowledge of how information technology and business align in small businesses: The project intends to contribute to the theoretical understanding of IT alignment, particularly in the setting of small firms, by employing a grounded theory method. This will allow the research to fill a significant gap in the existing body of literature.

In addition to this, the research investigates the shortcomings of the different IT-alignment models that are now available, the majority of which are intended for large organisations. By concentrating on small businesses, the research offers a context-specific perspective that has the potential to result in recommendations that are more effective and realistic in terms of enhancing the alignment between information technology and business. This research makes a timely contribution to the continuing discussion on the integration of business and information technology by adopting a dynamic perspective that represents the ever-changing character of both business strategy and information technology platforms.The overarching objective of this research is to bridge the gap between theory and reality by giving a comprehensive understanding of IT alignment in small businesses and offering helpful insights for improving their strategic IT management practices.

III. Literature Review

2.1 The Conceptual Foundations of Business-Information Technology Alignment

Over the course of the last few decades, business-information technology alignment, which is an essential component for the success of an organisation, has been the subject of substantial research and has been described in a variety of different ways. The degree to which business strategy, information technology strategy, business infrastructure, and IT infrastructure are compatible with one another and integrated is what Henderson and

Venkatraman (1993) mean when they talk about alignment. By highlighting the multifaceted aspect of alignment, this definition brings to light the fact that alignment comprises not just strategic congruence but also the integration of operational components simultaneously. This viewpoint is expanded upon by Reich and Benbasat (2000), who define alignment as the process of synchronising the relationship between the business domain and the IT infrastructure domain to capitalise on the opportunities and capabilities offered by computer technology. From their point of view, it is essential to match the IT infrastructure with the requirements of the business to effectively leverage the potential of information technology. A more pragmatic definition is presented by Luftman (2000), which places an emphasis on the timely use of information technology in accordance with the objectives, aims, and requirements of a business. Utilising this technique highlights the need of information technology being flexible and adaptive to the requirements of the business, so underlining the dynamic nature of alignment. According to Campbell (2007), alignment is achieved when organisations in the business and information technology sectors work together to achieve a common goal. By putting an emphasis on the collaborative effort that is necessary between business and IT departments, this definition emphasises the importance of ensuring that both are progressing towards agreed goals, which ultimately results in alignment.

2.2 Divergent Points of View Regarding the Alignment IT

The evaluation of information technology alignment from a dynamic rather than a static perspective has been an increasingly popular topic of discussion in recent study. In the beginning, models of alignment frequently envisioned it as a constant condition of concord between corporate strategy and information technology. However, Maes et al. (2000) believe that this static view is insufficient to convey the intricacies and fluid nature of business environments. They say this because this view is static. In addition, Ciborra (2001) and Chan and Reich (2007) stress the need of viewing IT alignment as a dynamic process that develops over the course of time. In this dynamic approach, it is acknowledged that alignment is not a one-time accomplishment but rather a continual process that entails continuing modifications and realignments in response to changes in the business environment, technological advancements, and the priorities of the organisation. In the context of small businesses, where resource limitations and constantly shifting market conditions need a more flexible and adaptable alignment strategy, the dynamic approach to alignment is particularly applicable. This is because small businesses are better able to react to changing market conditions. Levy et al. (2011) provide support for this viewpoint by underlining the necessity for small businesses to build IT strategies that are flexible enough to respond to the ever-changing requirements of their businesses and the improvements in technology.

a. Factors that Facilitate and Obstruct the Alignment of Information Technology in Small Businesses

The majority of the research that has been done on IT alignment in small businesses has been on determining the factors that either facilitate or prevent alignment. A successful alignment of information technology (IT) with business strategy is made possible by a number of elements known as enablers, whereas inhibitors are hurdles that prevent this alignment from occurring. Smaczny (2001) investigates a number of factors that can facilitate the alignment of information technology (IT), such as the support of top management, the presence of IT champions within the organisation, and good communication between IT and business divisions. To ensuring that IT projects are in line with business objectives and that IT and business divisions collaborate effectively, these aspects are of the utmost importance. A lack of resources, limited IT experience, and resistance to change are all examples of factors that might have a negative impact on the alignment of information technology. The authors Sabherwal and Chan (2001) point out that these obstacles can make it difficult for small businesses to achieve effective IT alignment, which can result in a mismatch between IT strategies and business strategies. In addition, Chan and Reich (2007) emphasise the significance of organisational culture and structure in matters pertaining to the alignment of information technology. A culture that encourages collaboration and open communication between business divisions and information technology can help improve alignment, whereas an organisational structure that is fragmented or isolated might make it more difficult to achieve alignment.

2.4 Obstacles to Overcome When Measuring IT Alignment

Due to the fact that both IT alignment and business strategy are fundamentally unobservable, Tallon (2008) outlines the challenge that arises when attempting to precisely measure both. Alignment, in contrast to measurements that are more concrete, involves subjective evaluations of the degree to which information technology and business plans are linked and the degree to which IT effectively supports business goals. A full grasp of both information technology and business strategy, as well as the interrelationships between the two, is required in order to measure alignment. Due to the complexity of the situation, it may be difficult to create validity and reliability in alignment measurements. Consequently, for academics to acquire insights on alignment processes and outcomes, they are required to rely on qualitative methodologies and case studies.

2.5 Models and Frameworks for IT Alignment

To conceptualise and evaluate the alignment of information technology, a number of models and frameworks have been established. Additionally, in order to address the ever-changing nature of alignment, these models frequently integrate dynamic components and improve upon the descriptions that were initially supplied by early scholars. The Strategic Alignment Model (SAM), which was developed by Henderson and Venkatraman (1993), is an example of such a model. This model places an emphasis on the necessity of aligning company strategy, information technology strategy, and both organisational and information technology infrastructure. The SAM framework offers a holistic perspective on alignment and emphasises the significance of attaining coherence across a number of different areas. Another important paradigm is the Dynamic Capabilities paradigm, which focusses on the capacity of organisations to modify and reconfigure their information technology capabilities in response to shifting business conditions. The dynamic perspective on IT alignment is aligned with this paradigm, which also offers insights into how organisations can create and exploit IT skills in order to sustain alignment over time.

2.6 Empirical Studies on the Alignment of Information Technology in Small Businesses

Numerous insights into the ways in which small businesses manage their information technology resources and align them with their business goals have been uncovered as a result of empirical study on IT alignment in small businesses. For example, limited resources, a lack of knowledge in information technology, and quick changes in the business environment are some of the unique issues that small businesses frequently encounter when it comes to IT alignment, according to studies. For example, research conducted by Rai and Tang (2010) underlines the significance of information technology capabilities in small businesses and the impact that these capabilities have on the operation of the business. According to the findings of their research, small businesses that possess robust information technology skills are in a better position to establish alignment and exploit IT for competitive advantage. In a similar vein, Kwon and Zmud (2012) conducted research that investigates the function that IT governance plays in small businesses and the influence that it has on alignment. Their findings suggest that effective IT governance procedures can improve alignment by ensuring that IT efforts are aligned with business objectives and that resources are distributed properly. This can be accomplished by ensuring that resources are deployed efficiently. In the body of research on business-information technology alignment, the importance of adopting a dynamic perspective is emphasised in order to comprehend how small businesses might achieve alignment. Even if traditional models of alignment are helpful, it is possible that they may not adequately capture the intricacies and fluidity of alignment procedures in small businesses. It is possible for researchers to get more profound understandings of the ways in which small businesses adjust and realign their information technology strategy in response to shifting business conditions if they take a dynamic approach. There are a number of implications that can be drawn from the findings of this literature review for both researchers and practitioners simultaneously. For the benefit of academics, there is a requirement for additional empirical studies that investigate the dynamic processes of information technology alignment in small businesses and produce models and frameworks that are more nuanced. Small business owner-managers can benefit from a greater understanding of the factors that permit and impede alignment, as this can assist them in developing more effective information technology strategies and achieving better alignment with their business objectives. Taking everything into consideration, this literature review sheds light on the ever-changing nature of IT alignment and emphasises the necessity of ongoing study to address the problems and opportunities that small businesses have when it comes to aligning their IT strategy with their business goals.

IV. Methodology

This research adopts a grounded theory methodology, a qualitative method that develops theory from observation. Grounded theory handles biases systematically and allows theory to evolve from the systematic collection, comparison, and analysis of data, leading to concept generation and continuous interaction between actions and concepts (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This study uses Charmaz's (2006) constructivist approach, combining inductive and abductive thought to generate a framework of IT strategic behavior from grounded data.

3.1 **Grounded Theory Methodology**

The methodological stance adopted in this research study is that of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a qualitative method that develops theory from observation, representing a structure that is both flexible and rigorous. As a methodology, it systematically handles biases and prejudices. In this approach, theory evolves from the systematic collection, comparison, and analysis of data gathered, leading to concept generation and the continuous interaction between actions and concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The approach adopted in this study aligns with recent research developments, where grounded theory is used as a methodology employing the interpretative approach to undertake management research (Goulding, 2002; Urquhart, Lehmann, and Myers, 2010). In order to encompass the contextual conditions of these small firms, this research study adopts a

constructivist approach using a combination of inductive and abductive thought (Reichertz, 2007). Such an approach is suitable to generate a framework of IT strategic behavior from the data that emanate from the area of enquiry. Whereas induction is initially utilized to examine the grounded data from the initial cases, abduction considers the various possible explanations for the grounded data through constant comparison analysis and by discovering a new rule which has not yet emerged by logical rules.

Table 1: *Demographic overview of small firms*

No.	Type	Nature of Business	Operation (Yrs)	Employees	Owner_Manager Education	IT Expertise
1	Manufacturing	PC Assembly & Netw ork Equipment	21	11	Engineering Graduate	IS Graduate
2	Services	Cargo Transporters	22	47	Post-Secondary	IT Manager
3	Retail	AirConditioners	12	2	Technician	Nil
4	Manufacturing	Electro_Plating	18	3	Engineering Graduate	Basic
5	Wholesaler/Retailer cum Service	Salon Services	25	25	Post Secondary	Semi Basic
6	Wholesaler/Retailer	Construction Material	35	20	Econ & Acc Graduate	Basic
7	Retail cum Service	Netw orking Components & IT support	13	14	Post Secondary	High
8	Services	Market Research	12	4	Business & Man Graduate	Low
9	Services	IT Support	5	6	Post Secondary	Self Taught
10	Services	Insurance Brokers	36	48	Post Secondary	Self Taught
11	Retail	Bathroom & Fireplaces	30	8	Post Secondary	Self Taught
12	Services	Quality Assurance	20	7	Micro_Biology_Graduate	Basic
13	Wholesale/Retail	Candles Importation	21	6	Diploma Level Management	Self Taught
14	Manufacturer/Retail	Ceramics	30	3	Seconday	Low
15	Sevices	Cargo Transporters	13	12	Diploma Level Management	Low
16	Retail	Wines & Spirits	41	48	Post Secondary	Low
17	Wholesaler/Retail	Wines & Spirits	125	48	Post Secondary	IT Graduate
18	Services	Property Investment	10	5	MBA	A Level
19	Retail	Pow er Control Systems	25	14	Secondary	Low
20	Manufacturing	Paints	32	18	Secondary	Low
21	Retail cum Service	Security Systems	23	40	Post-Secondary - HTD	Low
22	Services	Medical Clinic Services	26	5	Medical Graduate	Low
23	Manufacturing	Cable Manufacturing	12	22	Secondary	High
24	Services	Cargo Transporters	110	25	Secondary	IS Graduate
25	Services	IT Softw are Development & Training	17	15	Maths & Computing Grad	High
26	Services	English Teaching for Foreigners	10	10	Tertiary - Pharmacist	Medium
27	Services	Restaurant	4	8	Tertiary - Architect	Medium
28	Retail	Toners & Printer Cartridges	25	3	Post Secondary	Medium
29	Retail	Home Furnishings	16	8	Post Secondary	Low
30	Services	Architectural Services	16	12	Tertiary-Architect	Low
31	Retail	Sw eet Shop	15	7	Post Secondary	Medium

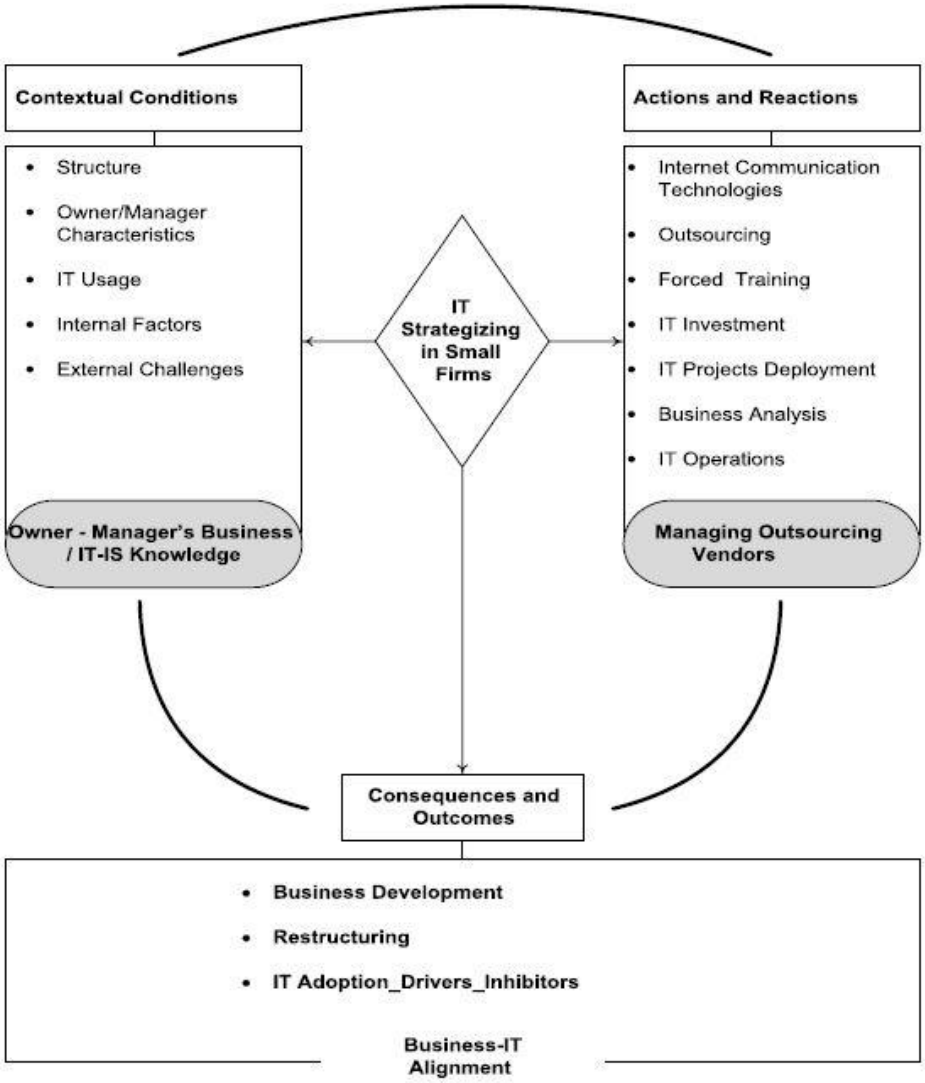

Figure 1: *"Evaluation of emerging constructs of IT-adoption behaviour in small firms"*

Data were gathered from 31 small firms over four years (2023-2024) using observations, interpretative and qualitative in-depth interviews with owner-managers, and transcribing digital recordings. Grounded theory's sampling approach discarded calculating sample size, instead searching for valuable cases rich in information content. Convenience sampling was initially used to identify early participants, followed by purposeful and theoretical sampling until saturation of properties was reached. Secondary data were gathered from each firm's website. MAXQDA was used for qualitative data analysis, exploiting the mapping capabilities resulting from coding and analyzing the large volume of data gathered.

3.2 Evaluation of Emerging Constructs

This grounded theory research provides a framework for compiling constructs related to small firms' IT-adoption behavior. Constructs are placed within a hierarchical structure, linking categories, subcategories, properties, and dimensions. Corbin and Strauss (2008) define categories as higher-level concepts under which analysts group lower-level concepts according to shared properties. In this study, subcategories are linked to categories, properties are characteristics or components of an object or action, and dimensions represent variations within properties.

V. Findings and Discussion

The research identified four business-IT alignment equilibrium states:

1. **Adaptation:** Small firms react to external pressures by adjusting IT strategies.
2. **Anticipation:** Small firms proactively plan IT strategies in alignment with future business needs.

3. **Synchronization:** Small firms integrate IT and business strategies simultaneously.
4. **Collaboration:** Small firms engage in continuous interaction and mutual adjustment of IT and business strategies.

These states provide a dynamic perspective on business-IT alignment in small firms, highlighting the importance of context, actions, and reactions.

4.1 Hierarchical Structure of IT Strategizing in Small Firms

The hierarchical structure illustrated in Figure 1 categorizes the patterns of IT strategizing among small firms into three major categories: contextual conditions, actions and reactions, and consequences and outcomes. This structure is based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) coding paradigm of the 'Conditional and Consequential Matrix'.

4.2 Contextual Conditions

Contextual conditions set the stage for IT adoption scenarios to which owner-managers respond through various actions and interactions. Key factors influencing these conditions include the characteristics and knowledge of the owner-manager and the management of outsourcing relationships. These conditions impact business development, restructuring levels, and the drivers of IT adoption leading to business-IT alignment.

4.3 Actions and Reactions

Actions and reactions are the responses of owner-managers to contextual conditions. The deployment of IT projects and management of outsourcing relationships are critical subcategories in this domain. The owner-manager's approach to IT projects, whether improvisational or planned, and their effectiveness in managing outsourcers play crucial roles in IT and business alignment.

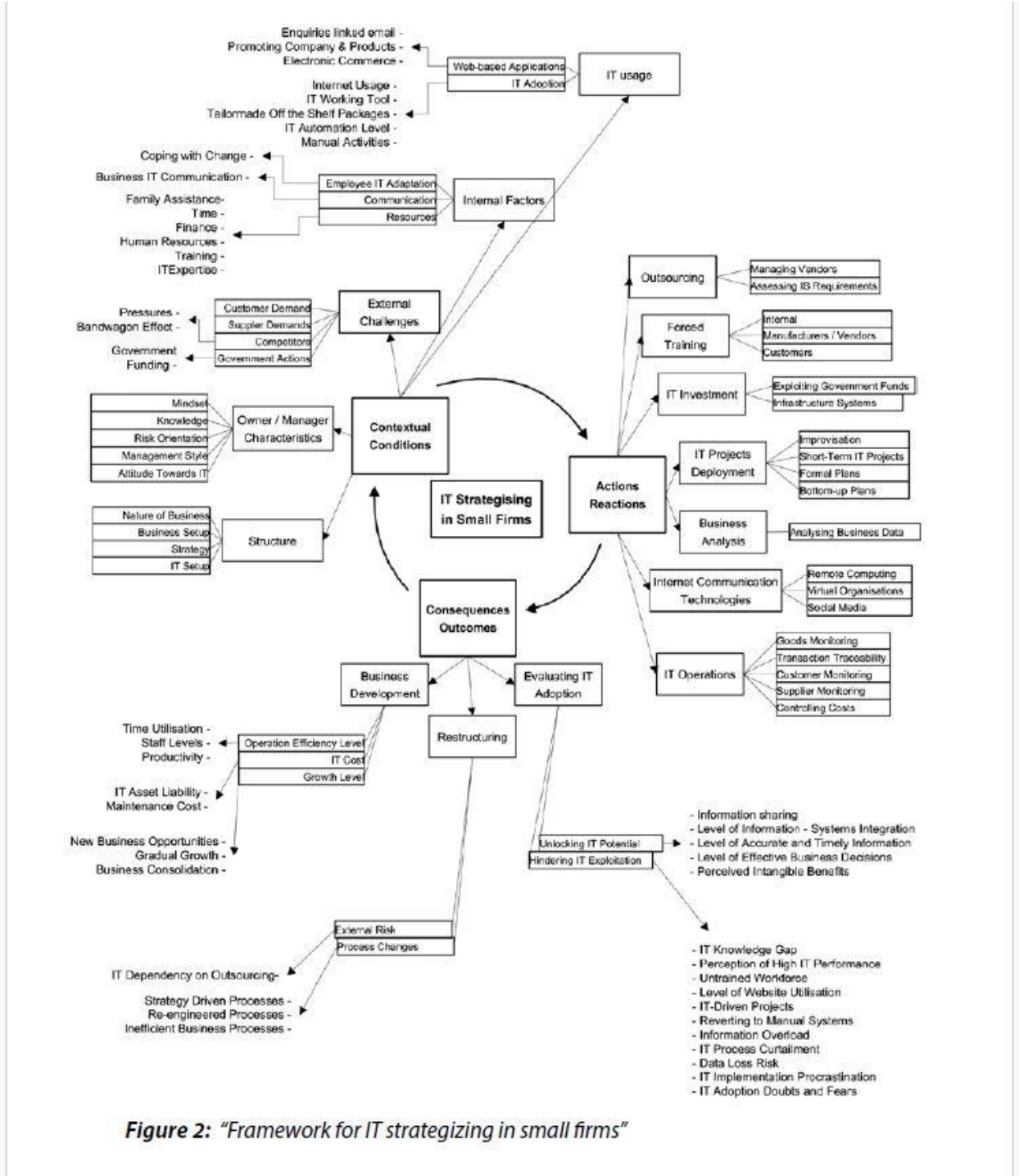

***Figure 2:** "Framework for IT strategizing in small firms"*

4.4 Consequences and Outcomes

The outcomes of IT adoption are influenced by actions and reactions. They address what happens as a result of these actions, including external dependency on outsourcing, the IT knowledge gap, and the perception of high IT performance. Effective IT deployment, leading to business-IT alignment, is often hindered by a lack of internal IT expertise and professional management of outsourcing arrangements.

4.5 Evaluation of Emerging Constructs

Curran and Blackburn's (2001) recommendation to organize constructs into categories, subcategories, properties, and dimensions was followed. The relationships between these constructs were evaluated to understand the dynamic process of IT and business alignment. Two subcategories, owner-manager's characteristics and outsourcing management, were highlighted for their impact on business development and IT adoption.

4.6 IT Alignment Equilibrium States

This study identified four IT alignment equilibrium states based on the quality of IT expertise and the level of integrated business processes. These states are Adaptation, Anticipation, Synchronization, and Collaboration.

1. **Adaptation**: Firms with low integrated business processes and IT expertise. IT and business strategies are often misaligned, and IT investments are seen as costs with limited business value.
2. **Anticipation**: Firms with moderate integrated business processes and IT expertise. IT can drive strategy but may result in fragmented systems if not linked to strategic objectives.
3. **Synchronization**: Firms with high integrated business processes and moderate IT expertise. Positive attitudes towards IT lead to sophisticated solutions and strategic value.
4. **Collaboration**: Firms with high integration and IT expertise, where business and IT strategize together, ensuring alignment and fostering innovation.

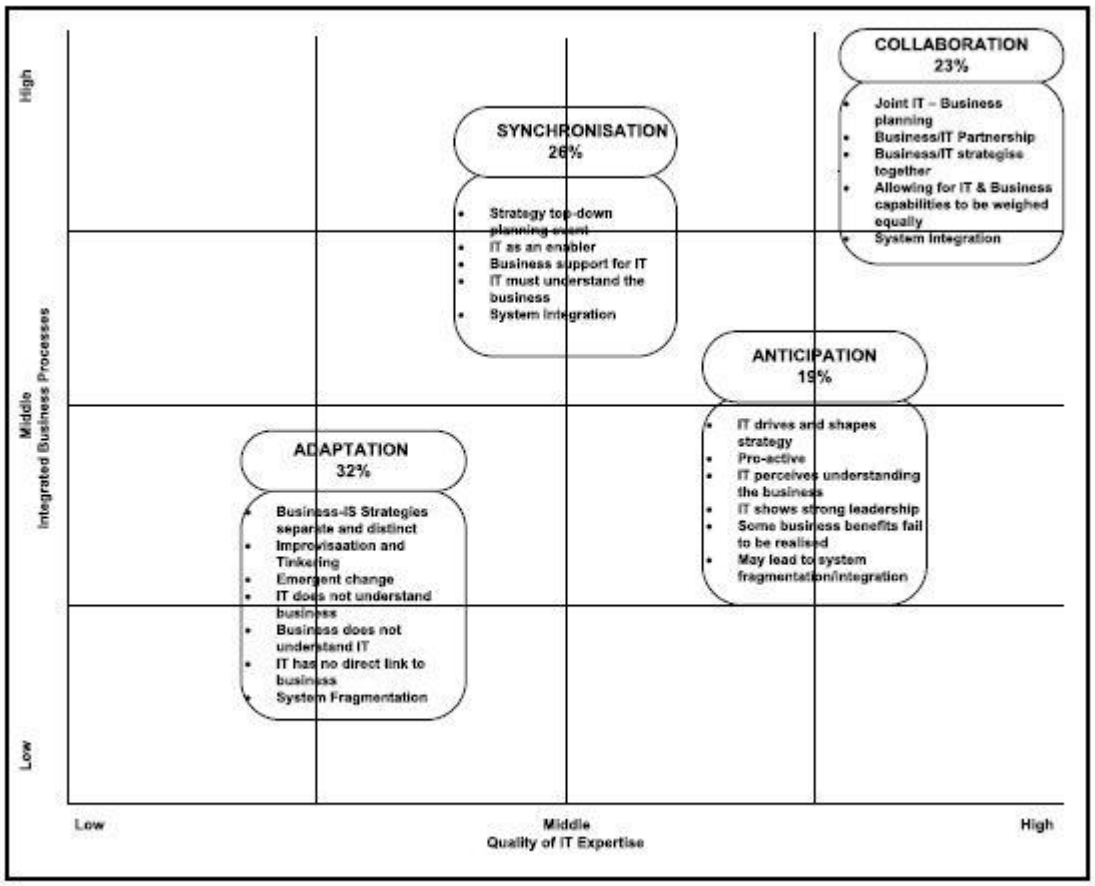

***Figure 3:** "IT alignment equilibrium states"*

VI. Conclusion

From a dynamic point of view, the research that was conducted on the topic of establishing optimal business-information technology alignment in small businesses highlights numerous major results and implications. The report highlights the critical role that owner-managers play in the adoption and alignment of information technology. The knowledge, risk orientation, and management style of these individuals are extremely important, and excellent information technology outcomes are frequently the product of strong managerial competencies and outsourced relationships. Many small businesses fail to make full use of information technology (IT) because to a lack of full-time specialists and system integration, despite the fact that IT is typically seen as favourably. A synergistic approach to business and IT processes is promoted by the Collaboration Alignment State, which represents the highest level of alignment. This state is characterised by the fact that owner-managers and IT partners collaborate on strategic planning. The implementation of this paradigm encourages innovation, enhances integration, and guarantees that information technology solutions efficiently complement business strategy.In order to achieve this alignment, key components include the following:

1. A High Level of Knowledge Regarding Business Processes In order to guide IT alignment, owner-managers need to have a profound awareness of business processes.

2. An Extensive Level of Information Technology Knowledge It is essential to have both internal and external IT competence, and efficient management is required to guarantee a high level of system integration.
3. Development of a Joint Strategy: In order to achieve strategic alignment, it is necessary for business and information technology divisions to engage in collaborative planning and mutual learning.

Adaptation, Anticipation, Synchronisation, and Collaboration are the four states that make up the typology of IT alignment equilibrium states that are presented in this paper. The most advanced of these is the Collaboration state, which is distinguished by a strategic partnership between information technology and business. This collaboration makes it possible for IT to play a central role in supporting business goal achievement. In the context of stakeholders, the implications include the necessity for owner-managers to improve their knowledge of information technology, the significance of professional management of information technology outsourcing, and the requirement for supportive policies to assist the adoption of information technology. Research in the future should investigate whether or not these findings are applicable in a variety of settings and should also investigate the dynamics of IT alignment in greater depth. In general, the research offers a dynamic framework that can help small businesses achieve optimal alignment between their information technology and their business operations. The study places an emphasis on the integration of IT with business processes in order to improve efficiency, innovation, and competitive advantage.

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