

Decoupling Managerial Cognition from Organizational Ambidexterity: A Reconceptualization of the Exploration–Exploitation Paradox Under Dynamic Capability Constraints

Charlie Adams

Professor

University of Warwick

Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

Quinn Thomas

Associate Professor

WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management

WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management, Burgplatz 2, 56179 Vallendar, Germany

Drew Parker

PhD

University of Toronto

Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, 105 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 3E6, Canada

Alex Smith

D.Sc

Seoul National University

Graduate School of Business, Seoul National University, 1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul, 08826, South Korea

Abstract. Contemporary scholarship on organizational ambidexterity presupposes a linear correspondence between top management team (TMT) cognition and the firm's capacity to balance exploration and exploitation. This paper challenges that assumption by systematically re-examining the foundational premises of the exploration–exploitation paradox within the context of dynamic capability constraints prevalent in post-pandemic global markets (2022–2025). Drawing on a mixed-methods design—incorporating structural equation modeling across 347 mid-to-large enterprises in four OECD economies and qualitative case triangulation—we demonstrate that managerial cognitive schemas operate as mediating inhibitors, not enablers, of ambidextrous routines under high environmental volatility. Our findings fundamentally revise the widely accepted "cognitive alignment thesis," revealing that strategic decoupling of individual managerial mental models from organizational-level dynamic capabilities generates statistically superior adaptive performance outcomes. Implications for TMT composition, governance architecture, and capability reconfiguration are discussed.

Keywords: organizational ambidexterity, managerial cognition, dynamic capabilities, exploration–exploitation paradox, top management team composition, cognitive schema decoupling, strategic governance architecture, capability reconfiguration, environmental volatility

Introduction

The dominant theoretical tradition in strategic management has long operated under the premise that organizational ambidexterity—defined as the simultaneous and deliberate pursuit of exploratory innovation and exploitative efficiency—is fundamentally contingent upon the degree of cognitive alignment between top management teams and the firm's prevailing strategic orientation (March, 1991; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996; Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013). This cognitive alignment thesis has become so deeply institutionalized within the scholarly community that it now functions less as a testable proposition and more as an axiomatic baseline against which competing frameworks are evaluated. Yet, as the global business environment undergoes profound structural reconfiguration—characterized by the compounding effects of geopolitical fragmentation, accelerated digital transformation, and the macroeconomic aftershocks of successive supply chain disruptions spanning 2020 through 2025—there are compelling theoretical and empirical reasons to subject this foundational assumption to rigorous critical scrutiny. At the core of the problem lies a methodological conflation that has persisted largely unexamined in the ambidexterity literature: the tendency to treat individual-level managerial cognition and firm-level dynamic capabilities as analytically co-constitutive constructs. Dynamic capabilities, as originally theorized by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) and subsequently elaborated by Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), refer to the organizational-level routines by which firms sense, seize, and reconfigure resources in response to environmental perturbations. Managerial cognition, by contrast, operates at the individual or team level and is subject to well-documented behavioral constraints including bounded rationality, heuristic entrenchment, and status quo bias (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011). The empirical conflation of these two analytically distinct constructs has generated a body of literature in which the causal architecture underlying ambidextrous performance is systematically misspecified. This misspecification carries non-trivial implications for the governance of contemporary organizations. As firms in advanced economies confront the dual imperative of sustaining near-term operational efficiency while simultaneously investing in exploratory capabilities—particularly in high-velocity industries such as financial technology, biopharmaceuticals, and advanced manufacturing—the prescriptive outputs of misspecified theoretical models risk guiding managerial practice in counterproductive directions. Empirical evidence from recent longitudinal studies conducted across North American, European, and Asia-Pacific enterprise cohorts suggests that firms whose governance structures enforce a deliberate decoupling between individual TMT cognitive frameworks and organizational-level capability routines exhibit significantly superior adaptive performance metrics, including innovation yield, resource redeployment velocity, and strategic responsiveness indices. The present study proceeds as

follows. Section 2 provides a systematic review of the ambidexterity and dynamic capabilities literatures, with particular attention to the theoretical fault lines surrounding the cognitive alignment thesis. Section 3 outlines the mixed-methods research design, including the structural equation modeling protocol and the qualitative case selection criteria. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, including path coefficient analyses and cross-case thematic synthesis. Section 5 reconceptualizes the exploration–exploitation paradox through the lens of cognitive decoupling theory and develops a revised governance framework for TMT structuring. Section 6 discusses theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and avenues for future research.

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