

## Bridging the gap between strategy design and delivery

Author: Naomi Stanford . October 2021

Last week I completed a Coursera programme getting a cheerful email saying, ‘Congratulations - we mean it! Take a moment to reflect on your hard work and enjoy your completion of [Bridging the Gap between Strategy Design and Delivery](#). You’ve earned it.’

I can’t remember now how I came across the course, offered through the [Brightline Initiative](#) a ‘non-commercial coalition of leading global organizations dedicated to helping executives bridge the expensive and unproductive gap between strategy design and delivery, and Coursera.

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I wasn’t looking for a programme but it must have been mentioned in something I read and it piqued my interest on a few counts, and then I let myself register by mentally leaping the gap between the time I think I have to spend things on and time I actually have to spend things on.

My rationale was three-fold: first, that I’m in the middle of writing some online organisation design course materials and wanted to compare the Coursera approach to the [FutureLearn](#) one. This was my first Coursera experience but I’ve taken several FutureLearns.

Second, I’ve noticed that there often seems to be a gap between purposefully designing something and then putting it into action. Coursera quotes some statistics on the strategies designed but not realised. They don’t mention the opposite gap of doing something without having any clear purpose or strategy for doing it, for which I’ve discovered a brilliant word – [coddiwompling](#). This means proceeding purposefully in an unclear direction. It’s become a favourite word with colleagues.

Third, the notion of ‘designing strategy’ was also something I wanted to explore as I’ve been [reading](#) that people are not good at designing strategies and better strategies are designed as a [continuous process](#) of strategising rather than an annual or periodic design event.

I set off on this 5-week journey armed with my usual kit of scepticism, curiosity and lack of time. I wasn't coddling as my purpose was clear – complete the course. My delivery strategy – do a bit each day.

**Course design and delivery:** I thought the course is well designed and engagingly delivered with a mix of readings, video interviews, and case studies, all downloadable for future use. (The videos are not but their transcript is and many of the videos are available even if you're not a course member.) Learner interaction is fostered via, polls, 'test your knowledge' quizzes, encouragement to join the discussions, and green ticks + progression charts. I found it easy to keep going.

The course 'text' - a chunky compilation of 25 HBR articles on aspects of strategy and strategy execution – will be a good reference source.

I liked that I could work through it on my phone making following the course easier to fit into my schedule. The feature saying 'this element works better on a computer' explained why some things couldn't be done so easily on a phone.

On the downside, I couldn't find out how to engage with the course leaders. I tested out the Contact Us function – with some admin points I couldn't find in the FAQs so went to the chat. My first question there was 'are you a [chatbot](#) or a human being'. I got the answer from Joseph that he was human. (Would a chatbot say the same in answer to that question?) I also got the answer to my real questions – how long to I have access to the course after completion? (Indefinitely) and why isn't the course showing up in 'my completed courses on my account?' (Technical glitch that engineers are aware of and working on).

**The gap between purposefully designing something and then putting it into action:** We learned in week one that the gap between strategy design and delivery is alarmingly common: 'When asked what percentage of their organizational strategic objectives over the previous three years was not being met because of flawed or incomplete strategy implementation, 90% of the executives responded that their organization had failed to meet all of their strategic objectives. And this is because they don't implement well.' (The sceptic in me wants to know if the survey that yielded this information has been validated and is reliable, but as I said, I couldn't find a way to interact with the educators).

The course content is designed around [10 Guiding Principles](#) that ‘We have crafted ... to help leaders shrink the costly and wasteful gap between strategy design and delivery.’ The authors make some bold claims about the Principles: ‘They safely guide leaders and teams toward the right decisions, practices, and processes. They enable organizations to counter threats and seize opportunities.’ For them the Principles are ‘both a moral rule and a basic truth. Practices can change, business models are disrupted, technology evolves, but principles do not change’.

Hmm - I’m not sure that the statement ‘Promote team engagement and effective cross-business cooperation’ (Principle 6) is a moral rule, but it is something we talk about a lot at work. In fact, all of the ten principles seem like basic good management to me. What manager is not constantly trying to ‘Dedicate and mobilize the right resources’ (Principle 3) – in order to counter the threat of not meeting his/her objectives? Again, I wouldn’t put it in the ‘basic truth’ bucket, more the ‘common sense one. However, collectively the 10 are a good enough reminder to any manager (or strategy developer/designer) that once they’ve designed something, they should then deliver it, and the case studies (including Amazon, Netflix, Spotify, ING, BCG, Emirates) would be useful in design/delivery workshops.

**Designing strategy:** The thread running through the strategy design discussions is that it’s a process not a product and that delivery is part of the process. Listen, for example to [Tendayi Viki](#), Benneli Jacobs and Company who, talking about Principle 9 ‘Fail fast to learn fast’, argues ‘managers and leaders should be thinking about strategy as a process of sensing and responding to the market. So, we shouldn’t view strategy as a single process where we come up with our strategy and then we just implement it regardless of what’s going on around us. ... It’s really important to view strategy as ... a vision or a set of hypotheses. And then when we make decisions, and make investment decisions, we view those investment decisions as experiments to test our strategic hypotheses. And every now and again, maybe every quarter, as leaders, we get back together and review whether our strategy is actually still working and whether our strategy is actually adaptive to the world that it’s operating in.’

In a similar vein, [Roger Martin](#), of the Rotman School of Management tells us that ‘the vast majority of strategy in the business world now is not useful. Yet we let it off the hook and say, the big problem is strategy execution. We just didn’t execute that strategy. No, that was a dumb strategy-- vacuous.’ He approaches strategy though getting answers to 5 questions that cover both design and delivery as a single process.

The key message I got from the programme was that strategy design and delivery is/should be a single and continuous process. I think that lesson could be learned in less than five weeks. But overall I enjoyed the programme and got some value from it.

Inevitably, having completed the course I was asked to take a survey on my experiences and asked if I would recommend it. Has what I've said about it piqued your interest? Let me know.

*The post "Bridging the gap between strategy design and delivery" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/bridging-gap-between-strategy-design-delivery-naomi-stanford/>*

## About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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