

Call for Papers for a Special Issue

Advancing Strategic Leadership Research for Business Ecosystems: Charting a New Research Agenda

Submission deadline: 31 May 2024

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BACKGROUND TO SPECIAL ISSUE

A hallmark of strategic management research is the explanation of how value is created and captured, with the attendant implications for competitive advantage and firm performance. This research has historically placed individual firms at the centre of theorizing, either in juxtaposition to a set of rivals that seek to capture value directly or as participants in value-creating transactions such as alliances or acquisitions. However, there is an increasing emphasis on business ecosystems – groups of interdependent and complementary organizations that share information, coordinate activities, and transfer resources and capabilities to create and coordinate value (Adner, 2021; Altman, Nagle & Tushman, 2022). By exploiting complementarities and managing interdependencies (Kapoor, 2018), organizations within an ecosystem work together to achieve individual and collective goals.

Besides the ongoing interest in ecosystems as a novel form of governance structure, referred to by some as the “translucent hand” (Altman et al., 2022: 81), and its relevance to value creation and capture more generally, ecosystems are core to research on business models, especially in the context of business model innovation where organizations must align customers, channel partners, and other complementors (Snihur & Bocken, 2022). Business ecosystems have garnered much attention in strategy, organizational, and entrepreneurial studies (e.g., Adner, 2017; Cobben et al., 2022; Snihur, Thomas, & Burgelman, 2018; Zahra &

Nambisan, 2012). Further, innovation ecosystems, a particular class of business ecosystems, have also become prevalent in management research (e.g., Thomas & Autio, 2020; Wang & Miller, 2020). Workforce ecosystems, as well, are emerging as another class of business ecosystems that encompasses individuals, organizations, and technologies (e.g., AI, robotics) working together to create value for organizations (Altman, Kiron, Schwartz & Jones, 2023).

Although the growing body of research on ecosystems offers a rich tapestry of descriptions, concepts, relationships, and explanations, a topic that has received less attention is strategic leadership within and for business ecosystems. By strategic leadership, we refer to the CEO, top management team, board of directors, and other executives with responsibility for the long-term direction of the organization (Hambrick, 1989). A greater scholarly focus on the intersection of strategic leadership and ecosystems is warranted for three reasons.

First, ecosystems cannot exist without the multifaceted interaction and interfaces of managers coordinating their knowledge, resources, and insights across organizational boundaries (Simsek, Heavey, & Fox, 2022). While there has been a tendency to focus on the design and macro-characteristics of ecosystems, several researchers have called for investigations into ecosystems' causal mechanisms and micro-foundations (e.g., Roundy & Lyons, 2023; Hou & Shi, 2021; Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016). Thus, a strategic leadership focus can help build micro-level insights to complement existing macro-level explanations of ecosystems by shedding light on the interactions, interfaces, and activities involved in forming, shaping, and maintaining ecosystems.

Second, although it has been recognized that the locus of activity in ecosystems is external, the locus of control is often internal. Altman and colleagues refer to these situations as "managed ecosystems," a governance structure "where a central organization engages and shapes external communities for key value-creating and capturing activities" (Altman et al., 2022: 80). For strategic leadership research, this type of governance has important implications. It indicates that the latitude of strategic leader influence must go beyond hierarchical boundaries to shape not only a focal organization's choices but also those of organizations within the ecosystem. We know little about the interactional, behavioral, and cognitive mechanisms through which strategic leaders influence choices made in other organizations.

Third, ecosystems give rise to various coordination and cooperation problems that cannot be resolved with the disjointed market and organizational mechanisms alone. In a recent theoretical framework, Foss, Schmidt, and Teece (2023) identify three ecosystem challenges requiring a leadership approach – developing mutual understanding, motivating ecosystem-specific commitments, and managing unexpected problems when ex-ante rules and policies are insufficient. Solving the problems of coordination and commitment necessitates leadership. To that end, a recent body of strategic leadership research on managerial interfaces (see, e.g., Simsek, Heavey, & Fox, 2022) is especially relevant to understanding how distinct attributes, activities, and aspirations of strategic leaders coalesce and conspire to shape how ecosystems are designed, governed, and managed. Understanding such micro-foundations of ecosystems may require adopting a more encompassing

definition of strategic leadership that recognizes the multi-lateral interactions and contributions of multiple actors.

AIMS AND SCOPE

We propose to orient the special issue around five major themes:

First, we call for research that ***enhances our theoretical and empirical understanding of the meaning of strategic leadership within and for business ecosystems***. Much of strategic leadership research explains the influence of leaders on strategic choice and outcomes; and more widely, their cascading impact throughout the organization (e.g., Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Focusing on business ecosystems calls for a complementary set of theories explaining how leaders influence outside organisations. We welcome submissions that address questions such as:

- What is the conceptual meaning of strategic leadership within business ecosystems? What elements of traditional strategic leadership are less relevant in ecosystems, and which new elements must be incorporated for strategic leadership in ecosystems?
- What is the appropriate unit and level of analysis when conceptualizing strategic leadership? How does strategic leadership of or for ecosystems differ from strategic leadership *in* ecosystems?
- Who are the strategic leaders in business ecosystems? Does strategic leadership exist at lower hierarchical levels, such as middle-level managers or employees responsible for ecosystems initiatives, and how does it manifest?
- How should strategic leadership be conceptualized in highly decentralized ecosystems without a dominant or focal organization? How might this vary by size or type of organization?
- Given that business ecosystems may involve organizations and individuals as critical actors (e.g., in crowdsourcing contexts), are there strategic leadership considerations for individuals working independently as ecosystem participants?
- How might some emerging perspectives, such as leadership interfaces, provide conceptual and empirical leverage to understand the dynamics of leadership effects in ecosystems?
- What is the role of emerging technologies in the leadership of business ecosystems? To what extent does strategic leadership in business ecosystems consist of human+AI collaborations? Are there roles for AI-as-a-manager when operating in an ecosystem context?

A second closely related question is ***to what extent strategic leaders matter to the activities and outcomes of ecosystems?*** One argument is that the organization's attributes (their resources such as assets, complementary contributions to the ecosystem, etc.) matter much more than their strategic leaders. Given the economic nature of exchanges, an organization's position within an ecosystem might be more influenced by the 'cards' at their disposal in terms of technological assets, know-how, appropriation regimes, etc. An alternate argument

is that one's position and influence is primarily shaped by how well strategic leaders 'play' their hand. This raises several questions:

- How much do strategic leaders matter compared to organization-level and ecosystem-level attributes and qualities? How much variance in ecosystem outcomes is due to strategic leadership effects?
- How much do leader attributes/traits matter to ecosystem outcomes relative to asset positions, technological know-how, intellectual property, and capabilities, and the structure and economic properties of the ecosystem?
- What leadership traits are most likely to explain the influence of strategic leaders within broader ecosystems? Similarly, what are the characteristics of strategic leaders of organizations that take central versus peripheral roles in business ecosystems?

Third, to the extent they matter, ***what role strategic leaders play within business ecosystems*** becomes the next logical question. Most of what we have learned about strategic leadership roles from Mintzberg (1973) and Floyd and Lane (2000) have been inward. But ecosystems call for much wider external engagement and the ability to influence a wide range of dispersed actors across organizational boundaries with different incentives and often without exercising formal authority. Yet, insights into the roles and influence approaches of strategic leaders have been limited. We also need to gain deeper insights into the pathway of influence, including a focus on the mechanisms underpinning the causal impact of strategic leaders. An associated issue is what skills and capabilities strategic leaders need to exercise power and lead within and around ecosystems (i.e., Foss et al., in press). Thus, we ask:

- What are the distinct roles of strategic leaders in ecosystems? And how do these roles vary based on the ecosystem the organization participates in?
- What capabilities must strategic leaders develop or hold to play these roles? Where do such capabilities come from?
- How do strategic leaders overcome resource deficiencies and weaknesses to occupy central positions in the ecosystem? How is power accumulated in ecosystems? How do these power dynamics play out and what temporal shifts might be of interest as the ecosystem develops?

Fourth, we seek ***a rich theoretical and empirical understanding of how strategic leadership emerges in ecosystems, and specifically how strategic leadership and ecosystems may co-evolve***. We know for example, that ecosystems emerge from economic and social interactions among organizations that may begin as communities but subsequently morph into more formalized, institutionalized, stable structures (Thompson, Purdy & Ventresca, 2018). In understanding the influence of lead organizations (Jacobides et al., 2018), it is essential to understand how much of an influence strategic leaders have on the emergence and ongoing evolution of the ecosystem. Thus, several questions beg further development, including:

- How do strategic leaders of central organizations (a.k.a. "keystone organizations") instigate the development and emergence of ecosystems?

- What role does the vision of strategic leaders and, by extension, the lead organization, have on the emergence and development of ecosystems? Do strategic leaders imprint their qualities (and the qualities of their organizations) on ecosystems and if so with what effects?
- What strategic leadership qualities are present in ecosystems that quickly disintegrate or fizzle out early on versus ecosystems that sustain and develop?
- How do strategic leaders reconcile the forces of competition and cooperation early in the development of an ecosystem? Specifically, how do strategic leaders balance their organization's interests against the interests of the wider ecosystem?

Finally, there is a need to ***deepen our understanding of the processes by which strategic leaders engage in, mobilize, and orchestrate ecosystems***. While variance-based studies can help to an extent, inductive and processual studies investigating the micro-processes through which strategic leaders engage in the daily work of managing ecosystems could be revelatory. We envision that such work could especially focus on patterns of interactions and interfaces among managers and ecosystem participants with different paradigms, knowledge bases, power, interests, aspirations, and problem views (i.e., Simsek et al., 2022). This focus raises several questions:

- What role do interfaces play in explaining business ecosystem emergence, development, and ongoing maintenance?
- Which types of interactions and interfaces are most conducive to the development of ecosystems? And how can these interfaces be fostered?
- Through what strategic routines and day-to-day practices are ecosystems maintained and perpetuated? What is the role of meetings, workshops, and bilateral vs. multi-lateral engagements? What routines and practices are most and least conducive to ecosystem development?

These are by no means an exhaustive set of questions, and we invite submissions that cover other issues and topics that fall within the aims and scope of this special issue.

SUBMISSION PROCESS AND DEADLINES

- Submission Deadline: **31 May 2024**
- Expected Publication: 2026
- Submissions should be prepared using the JMS Manuscript Preparation Guidelines (<http://www.socadms.org.uk/journal-management-studies/submission-guidelines/>)
- Manuscripts should be submitted using the JMS ScholarOne system (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/jmstudies>)
- Articles will be reviewed according to the JMS double-blind review process
- We welcome informal enquiries relating to the Special Issue, proposed topics, and potential fit with the Special Issue objectives. Please direct any questions on the Special Issue to the Contact Guest Editor: ciaran.heavey@ucd.ie

SPECIAL ISSUE EVENTS

Online Information Session: The editorial team will host an online information session on **Friday, 22nd September at 10am EST (3pm GMT/4pm CET)** to introduce the call. Prospective contributors can ask questions about the call, and the recording will be uploaded to the JMS website shortly thereafter. To register for the session, please complete the following [form](#).

Special Issue Conference: To maximize the scholarly audience for the special issue, the editorial team may organise a special issue conference in Summer 2025 (specific format to be determined). Further details on the conference will be announced closer to the submission date. Participation in the conference does not guarantee acceptance of the paper in the Special Issue and attendance is not a prerequisite for publication.

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