

ONLINE COUNTERPOINT 4.8

It is also relevant to recall the importance of `human' as well as material and financial resources. Indeed, the quality of the information about the environment as well as the acquisition of resources from the environment will ultimately depend upon the availability and competence of those – the `human resources' - responsible for these critical tasks.

While use of the term `human resource' at least draws attention to the centrality of people in organizations, it tends to suggest that they are equivalent to other resources, such as capital, raw materials and so on. Human beings are different because they are the creative element that enables all the elements to be combined. This creativity can also take the form of deliberate resistance or non-cooperation – a capacity that other `resources' do not possess.

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Complexity is more directly related to diversity or variety than the size of the population. Interacting with many organizations that are very similar is less complex than interacting with a few organizations that are highly diverse (in terms of ownership, nationality, sector, culture, etc), especially if the nature of their diversity is also changing.

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While specific external elements may be relatively few for the small hardware shop, when broader social and cultural changes do occur, they can be devastating and there may be little that the owners can do to counter the threat, because they are simply too small to change their environment. For the small retail shop, the transition towards megastores and out-of-town shopping parks has often been fatal, no matter what efforts their owners made to respond to challenge.

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It can be risky to generalize about the environments enjoyed by different kinds of firms. Beer distribution, for example, can be buffeted by new technologies of delivery, shifting consumer preferences especially amongst young people, discounting by supermarkets and so on. Assuming that an environment is simple and stable can breed complacency so that when changes do occur, they are unappreciated; and this lack of awareness and anticipation increases their destabilising impacts.

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A big challenge for boundary spanning is the communication of the gathered intelligence to the relevant departments in an accessible and meaningful form, and for the significance of this information to be adequately grasped. There is also the issue of how to act on this information when it requires cooperation across many departments (see Chapter 3).

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This aspiration is commendable but its realization is fraught with difficulty. It might be imagined that organizing to be attentive and responsive to the environment is easy to achieve. If it were, organizations would be consistently successful and rarely encounter difficulties. That this is exceptional is indicative of how non-rational influences – notably, conflicts between groups with divergent priorities - are at once central and routinely disruptive of effective organization.

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As the emphasis upon organization-environment relations indicates, independence is not possible. What is possible is for organizations to accumulate sufficient resources to enable them to dominate suppliers and customers – for example, by striving to establish a monopoly, or near monopoly of control, of supply. In addition to securing economies of scale, a benefit of size is the greater capacity to squeeze suppliers tightly and/or buy out or crush competitors (e.g. through strategic discounting). Instead of conceiving of resource dependencies, it might be more instructive to think of organizations in terms of resource acquisitiveness. Organizations strive to accumulate resources that can limit their dependencies..

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An aspiration to determine the business it is in, or the environmental relationships it has, will depend upon the resources at the disposal of an organization, and not simply the strength of the desire to do so.