

**The performativity of strategic foresight tools: Horizon scanning as an activation device  
in strategy formation within a UK financial institution**

**Abstract**

This paper reports on a longitudinal study into the use of a strategic foresight tool – the Horizon Scan – in the strategy development process of a UK financial institution. Drawing on concepts of performativity, we build on an emerging literature that demonstrates that strategic foresight tools don't just describe the world, or a future state, they also actively create it. In this way, we argue, strategic foresight tools assume agency in of themselves, and through their interactions with strategists, a theory of the future emerges that can be acted on and performed. Our study identifies four ways that a Horizon Scan is performative – through enrolling, temporalizing, consolidating, and persuading – and in so doing, we develop the notion of an activation device that shows how strategic foresight tools, conceptualised as such, broadens our understanding of the active and interconnected roles that they perform, and how this in turn shapes the work of strategy-making.

**Key Words:** Horizon Scan, Foresight, Performativity, Strategy, Tools

# The performativity of strategic foresight tools: The Horizon Scan as an activation device in strategy formation within a UK financial institution

## 1. Introduction

Strategy tools are described as a formal approach to strategic analysis, within which, knowledge about strategy-making is codified (Jarratt and Stiles, 2010; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). According to the existing literature, the purpose of strategy tools is to ‘aid and guide managerial decision making – ideally, allowing managers to make better, more informed decisions as a result of their use’ (Wright *et al.*, 2013: 94). Despite the debates that surround their usefulness (March, 2006; Mintzberg, 1994, 2004), they are pervasive entities used in a variety of industries and organisations (Grant, 2003; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015; Orndoff, 2002; Tapinos *et al.*, 2005).

The widespread use of strategy tools makes them an important research focus for scholars (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015; Vuorinen *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, Carter *et al.* (2010: 582) assert that “an important agenda for understanding strategy is to try and understand the effects that strategic tools and concepts have on making the world which they describe”. Yet, many studies of such ‘devices’ as ‘strategy tools’ over-simplify the wider role that they play by portraying them as ‘an aid to an otherwise fully purposeful, plainly human action’ (Muniesa, 2008: 291). In other words, they are frequently portrayed as “technologies of rationality” (March, 2006: 211) or “props for decision-making” (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015: 537). More recently, scholars have incorporated notions of performativity (Callon, 1998; 2007; Mackenzie, 2006) into the study and theorisation of strategy tools and concepts (e.g. Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009; Gond *et al.*, 2016; Ligonie, 2018). These studies demonstrate that strategy tools are not neutral (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015), but are imbued materially with strategic thinking and participate actively in the strategy process

(Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Vuorinen *et al.*, 2018). However, research into the degree to which strategy tools assume agency in of themselves remains nascent (Vargha, 2018).

In this study, we investigate the performativity of a specific strategy tool – the Horizon Scan (HS). While there is little consensus on precisely what constitutes a HS (Rowe *et al.*, 2017), it is generally described as a tool for systematically identifying environmental changes, emerging trends, risks and uncertainties for the purpose of developing appropriate organizational strategies for responding to them (Garnett *et al.*, 2016; Miles and Saritas, 2012; Rowe *et al.*, 2017). Because of its long-term orientation towards the future, it is considered to be a tool for enhancing strategic foresight (Miles and Saritas, 2012; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2013).

Building on the extant literature on the performativity of strategy tools, we unpack how they take on agency in their own right. We do this through a longitudinal study of the HS in a financial services organization. While there has been some literature that nods towards such a stance (see Giraudeau, 2008; Vaara *et al.*, 2010; Cabantous and Gond, 2011 and Kornberger and Clegg, 2011) by implying that material practices such as seating arrangements (Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002), PowerPoint presentations (Kaplan, 2011), graphs, data-packs, maps and spreadsheets (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013), and strategic planning documents (Vaara *et al.*, 2010) can have agentive qualities, there is still a paucity of understanding about how strategy tools, and particularly strategic foresight tools have the agentive ‘power to shape and reshape reality’ (Cabantous, Gond and Millo, 2014), and as highly contested space, strategic foresight of the future.

### *1.1 Aims, objectives, and purpose*

In this paper we aim to extend this line of theorizing by utilizing a performative perspective in which we conceptualize strategy tools as devices that ‘function as non-human actors actively involved in the making of the organisational realities in which they are used’ (Moisander and

Stenfors, 2009: 230), thus moving beyond notions of strategy tools as carriers of strategy theory (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006) to one where they have active agency. A performative lens highlights the agential role of strategy tools and views agency as the product of socio-technical *agencement* (Preda, 2007). According to Diedrich *et al.* (2013), a performative perspective provides us with an elegant avenue to gain new insights into classical organizational phenomenon such as strategy-making.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to reconceptualise the roles of strategy tools generally, and foresight tools specifically and to demonstrate that they are not just passive artefacts, but actively and agentially contribute to the work of strategy-making and strategic foresight. To do this, we use data from a three year (2012 – 2015) longitudinal study of a strategy process in a financial institution – an insurance company – based in the UK. We follow the company’s use of a strategy tool, the HS, in their strategy process.

### *1.2 Research questions*

The research question that this study addresses specifically is how do strategic foresight tools, such as Horizon Scans, take on agency to influence, and how are they in turn influenced by strategists during the strategy process? In order to address this research questions, we draw on the concept of performativity from economic sociology and the sociology of financial markets (e.g. Callon, 1998, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006) to further unpack and advance the empirically supported conceptual foundations of strategic foresight methods (cf. Wright *et al.*, 2013; Wright *et al.* 2017). Such a theoretical perspective enables us to move beyond the debate on the uses and usefulness of strategic foresight tools to actually understanding what they do as actors and how they do what they do.

### *1.3 Contributions*

In this study we focus on a scenario-based strategic foresight tool known as the Horizon Scan. A HS is a tool that, according to scholars, “aims to continuously and objectively explore, monitor and assess current developments and their potential implications for the future” (Rowe *et al.*, 2017, 224; also see Miles and Saritas, 2012; Ramirez *et al.*, 2013; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2013). Strategic foresight tools such as the HS are pervasive entities that span a variety of industries and organizations (Wright *et al.*, 2012; Wright *et al.*, 2013; Wright *et al.*, 2017). Our study shows five ways in which scenario-based HS contributes to the work of strategizing: First, it *enrols* participants into the process and set the scene for buy-in to be achieved. Second, it *temporalizes* by orienting attention towards the future, while simultaneously bringing the future into the present so that it can be acted on. Third, it facilitates collaboration, and *consolidates* authority over a theory of the future. Fourth, it works to *persuade* different audiences for different purposes. And fifth, it acts as an *activation device* stimulating action consistent with the anticipated future. More generally, we find that the strategic foresight tool is performative through shaping the strategy process.

Our study therefore contributes to the literature on strategy tools generally (e.g. see Jarzabkowsky and Kaplan, 2015; Vuorinen *et al.*, 2018), and strategic foresight tools such as the HS specifically (Garnett *et al.*, 2016; Miles and Saritas, 2012; Rowe *et al.*, 2017) by showing the dynamics of how such tools are performative. We develop an empirically informed argument that strategic foresight tools do not only shape the ways in which such tools are used, but these tools also take on agency, shaping the practitioners putting them to work. In this way, we extend theorizing beyond notions of performativity in the strategy tool literature that conceptualizes them as relatively instrumental and passive carriers of theory to one where they assume agency in nuanced ways.

#### *1.4 Structure*

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an overview of the literature on performativity and strategy tools, and subsequently, we outline our theoretical perspectives on performativity in the context of the current study. Following an account of our inductive, case-based research methodology, we present our findings from the study. In the final section, we develop the concept of an *activation device* to capture the performative dimensions of strategy tools. We conclude with reflections on the implications of these findings for the practice of strategy.

## **2. Conceptual overview**

### *2.1 Performativity in economic sociology, management and organization studies*

The notion of performativity finds its origins in linguistic philosophy. Austin identified that certain sentences are performative in that they do not simply state a fact or describe a setting. Rather, the utterance of a performative sentence ‘is the performing of an action’ (Austin, 1962: 6). For example, by saying ‘I do’ during a marriage ceremony is not a descriptive statement, but a performative one in which the actor *becomes* a married person. This idea of performativity has been used to explain the fact that economics, for example, does not just describe the economy as a representation would, but rather it plays an active part in actually bringing about the economy (MacKenzie, 2006). Callon (1998: 2) states that ‘economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions’. In distinguishing between self-fulfilling prophecies and prescription, which is a type of performance, Callon (2007: 325) argues that economics does not actually have to provide a description of reality, rather what it does ‘is to say what the economy is supposed to be and to propose solutions and devices to make it that way’. Callon’s thesis is not restricted to economic theory alone but to other aspects such as ideas, techniques and tools (Diedrich *et al.*, 2013).

According to Callon, performativity has certain underlying assumptions which include that “‘phenomena only exist in the doing of them” and “they have to be continuously performed to exist at all”” (MacKenzie, 2006a: 34). Utilizing such a perspective allows one to understand phenomenon such as power as being the consequence of collective action rather than it being the cause of collective action (Diedrich *et al.*, 2013). A performative lens also takes into consideration what Callon refers to as a socio-technical *agencement*. An *agencement* ‘has the same root as agency: *agencements* are arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending on their configuration’ (Callon, 2007: 320). This socio-technical *agencement* can be considered as the world within a theory or a tool. Therefore, in order for a theory to be performative, it must be able to create a socio-technical *agencement* that corresponds to it (Callon, 1998). Callon uses MacKenzie’s (2003) study of the Black and Scholes formula as an illustration of this concept, explaining that what Mackenzie describes is an example of how the world within the formula was gradually brought into being: ‘a formula that progressively discovers its world and a world that is put into motion by the formula describing it’ (Callon, 2007: 320).

Beyond option pricing theory other studies in economic sociology, management and organisation demonstrate how entities such as ranking devices (Pollock and D’Adderio, 2012), technical analysis (Preda, 2007), business models (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009), rational choice theory (Cabantous and Gond, 2011), modularity theory (D’Adderio and Pollock, 2014), texts (Cooren, 2004) and strategic plans (Giraudeau, 2008; Vaara *et al.*, 2010; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011) are performative. In their study of business models used by entrepreneurs to establish a new venture, Doganova and Eyquem-Renault (2009) suggest that objects may be performative in different ways. They illustrate that the business model was performative in three explicit ways: as a performance, as a scale model, and as a role model. In the same way that strategy tools are said to be carriers of theory or knowledge artefacts

(Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006), Doganova and Muniesa (2015) further demonstrate that business models are capitalization devices that are carriers of a theory of valuation and by using such tools the world or theory within is performed.

## *2.2 Performativity and strategy tools*

More recently, studies drawing more explicitly on notions of performativity (see Gond *et al.*, 2016 and Cabantous *et al.*, 2018 for overviews) have shown how concepts such as rituals (ven den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2018), or strategy itself can take on agentive qualities, such as ‘with performing actions (e.g., insisting, explaining, forcing, or confirming) or, for example, benefiting from actions’ (Pälli, 2018: 449). These studies, however, negate the possibility that there are mutually constitutive movements that take place between the people that use the tools and the tools themselves. During these interactions anyone of the two entities may refute, or act in otherwise unexpected ways. The times when the tool refutes are some of the instances when we see them in action. Such objects ‘articulate actions; they act or they make others act’ (Muniesa, Millo and Callon, 2007), or they intervene to redirect action (Callon and Law, 1997). These instances and their implications for strategizing are still quite ambiguous within the literature. A performativity lens therefore highlights these instances. Callon (2007: 323) explains it this way: ‘performativity leaves open the possibility of events that might refute, or even happen independently of, what humans believe or think’.

By suggesting that strategy tools are performative we are, as MacKenzie (2006a) argues, saying that they do things; they exert certain performative effects (see Table 1 for a summary of MacKenzie’s distinction between levels of performativity). Such objects are able to induce certain types of behaviour or catalyse a collaboration or cooperation. According to Callon and Law (1997: 178), objects do not simply enable or constrain, they ‘intervene actively to push action in unexpected directions.’ Studies that portray strategy tools as malleable



*instruments*, used by actors ‘who have total control over their objectives and their actions’, therefore instrumentalize these tools (Callon and Muniesa, 2005: 1237).

### **INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Strategy tools, as Vuorinen *et al.* (2018) suggest, “both reflect and shape the current thinking on strategy in the field, in terms of how strategic thinking is materialized into tools, and what types of tools are being developed and utilized.” Recent studies drawing on a performativity perspective have begun to move beyond their instrumentality, arguing that they shape and are actively involved “in the making of the organisational realities in which they are used ” (Moisander and Stenfors, 2009: 230). From a Callonian perspective, then, for a strategy tool to be performative, it must create part of the world that it purports to describe through the act of describing it (e.g. Guérard *et al.*, 2013; Carter *et al.*, 2010). While there is a small number of studies that have begun unpacking the active agency of strategy plans (e.g. Giradeau, 2008; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011; Vaara *et al.*, 2010), communication practices (e.g. Pälli, 2018; Vásquez *et al.*, 2018), metrics, discourse and rhetoric (Laine *et al.*, 2016; Ottosson and Galis, 2011), and rituals (Van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2018) from a performativity of strategy perspective, there is a paucity of research into the performativity of strategy tools (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018).

Tools and other artefacts do not act in isolation from human actors (Callon and Muniesa, 2005); rather, both humans and artefacts perform collective action (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018). Such collective, or performative actions are important because they help to explain how strategy tools participate actively in the strategy process through their affordances (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001). Affordances are described as ‘functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object’ (Hutchby, 2001: 444). These functional and relational aspects do not determine the social;

rather they afford and at the same time constrain the social to a range of possible actions (David and Pinch, 2008). Performativity, as Cabantous *et al.* (2018: 414) argue, ‘encourages researchers to focus their inquiries on how strategy work is achieved when human and nonhumans interrelate in its unfolding’.

While there have been a small number of studies that have drawn on performativity to investigated strategy phenomena from a performativity perspective, the notion that strategy tools are not just passive artefacts, but can themselves exhibit agency remains a fertile area for further development. This is particularly the case for strategic foresight tools such as the HS. The HS is a strategic foresight tool whose usage is increasingly prevalent (Miles and Saritas, 2012). It has been described by Rowe *et al.* (2017) as involving the iterative exploration of the external environment through continuous information gathering, assessing the implications of this information for the future, and disseminating outcomes for strategy-planning perspicacity. Such descriptions imply the possibility that HSs themselves are not merely instrumental and passive in strategic foresight activities, but participate in such processes by producing a theory of the future that becomes embodied by practitioners and inscribed in strategy, thus exhibiting performative effects, and actively shaping affordances.

### 2.3 Summary

In summary, a performativity theoretical perspectives is based on a relational ontology that ‘rejects the notion that the world is composed of individuals and objects with separately attributable properties that “exist in and of themselves”’ (Orlikowski, 2010: 134). In this paper, rather than conceptualize strategy tools generally, and the Horizon Scan specifically, as instruments used by actors to achieve purposes that range from analytical to socio-political, or as representations, we view them as agentive in themselves, and able to actively contribute to the formation of a new entity or social reality (cf. Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Doganova and

Eyquem-Renault, 2009). In doing so, we address calls to further understand the performativity of strategy as it pertains to strategy tools (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018; Carter *et al.*, 2010). We focus specifically on scenario-based HS within a large UK-based insurance company as the empirical research context for our study (cf. Miles and Saritas, 2012; Ramirez *et al.*, 2013; Rowe *et al.*, 2017; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2013).

### **3. Methodology**

The empirical bases for the theorising of this study is an in-depth longitudinal case study of strategy-making within a leading UK financial institution – an insurance company called METALife (pseudonym) (Yin, 2009). The period of study was after the financial crisis – a three-year period from 2012 to 2015. The use of a single case study was pertinent because of the need to examine the everyday activities of the members of the strategy department (Kaplan, 2011). To refine our case-based approach, we drew on the idea of a biography of an object (Kopytoff, 1986; Appadurai, 1986), which involves tracking the life-cycle of the object and the practices around it (D’Adderio and Pollock, 2014). The case was, therefore, developed from a combination of semi-structured interviews, and *in situ* observation of the tool through a planning process (D’Adderio and Pollock, 2014).

#### *3.1 Research Context*

METALife is the insurance subsidiary of a leading financial institution – STAR Group (pseudonym) in the UK. The insurance company itself has been in existence for over a century with offices spread across the UK. It has grown to more than six million customers, over two thousand employees, and offers products that range from life insurance to non-life insurance products such as annuities, home and motor insurance. Sales of products and services are carried out either directly, through intermediaries such as Independent Financial Advisors

(IFAs) or through other channels such as company agents. As a financial institution METALife's operations are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and must therefore comply with the stringent standards laid out by their regulators. Amidst the backdrop of the recent financial crisis, METALife went through a series of changes, most notably structural changes (both within the company and its parent company STAR Group), which included the appointment of a new group chief executive in STAR Group and a new insurance chief executive in METALife. With the introduction of STAR Group's new Chief Executive, who brought with him his own vision for the company and its business units, the strategy at METALife was changed in order to align with STAR Group's new strategy.

In addition to this, there was a consolidation of all of the insurance businesses within STAR Group. STAR's Life, Pensions and Investment business and the General Insurance business became one insurance business – METALife. Along with the merger of the insurance businesses came the union of the strategy departments within both businesses. As a result of this METALife's strategy department is the largest within the entire Group. The dynamics of strategy formation at METALife occurs through a process in which its strategy team work in collaboration with the CEO and executive committee members, made of several functional directors. For this research the emphasis is on how the members of the strategy department, headed by the Strategy Director (who is also a member of the executive committee), conduct the strategy process.

### *3.2 Data collection*

The data collection approach used was based on the biographical approach (D'Adderio and Pollock, 2014), which entailed following the strategy tool and therefore required us to be close to the strategists as they went about their daily practices during the strategy process (Kaplan, 2011). Therefore, the primary sources of data collection were 20 nonparticipant

observations of meetings and workshops, and 42 semi-structured interviews (See Table 2 for an overview of the study's participants).

In addition, secondary data was collected in the form of meeting documents, drafts of the horizon scan, PowerPoint slides used for presentations, documents used for workshops and internal archives. The use of these different sources of data allowed for the triangulation of data and thus enhanced the reliability of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interviews were held more than once with some members of the strategy department over the duration of the field study and the interviews lasted typically for an hour or beyond and were audio recorded and transcribed.

### **INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

Some interviews were held in meeting rooms while others were at the workstation of the participants and the researchers were able to watch as the strategists did their work. Most of the interviews that took place at the workstation of the strategists involved them explaining their work to us using the Word or PowerPoint documents they were working on either on their laptops or desktops. In addition, the first researcher was given a desk space within the strategy department and worked from there on different occasions and was therefore able to watch the strategists as they did their work and interacted with each other. Meetings and workshops observed were considered sensitive and audio recording was not permitted, as a result extensive field notes were made. Informal discussions took place after each meeting with the strategists that had chaired the meeting or facilitated the workshops. Notes taken during the observations were typed up within a twenty-four-hour period. We documented, for example, the conversations, the gestures of individuals as they spoke and listened and the interactions that took place.

### *3.3 Data Analysis*

The approach adopted for the analysis of the data was based on principles of induction and also included the use of existing theory (Kaplan, 2011; Werle and Seidl, 2015). This approach is similar to what is described as ‘iterative-theory’ building (Orton, 1997), or what O’Reilly (2012) describes as an ‘iterative-inductive’ approach (commonly used for ethnographic studies), which involved a back and forth movement between the data and theory (Johnson et al., 2010; Paroutis et al., 2015). The process entailed several rounds of coding and movements between the data, emerging themes and the literature. The analysis began during the data collection (O’Reilly, 2012; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013). Introductory visits to the company revealed a focus on the strategy tools, and the use of these tools as part of the practices of the strategy team during the strategy process was prominent. The research approach followed a multi-level analysis involving the strategy tool, the practices of the strategists and the strategy process. This was necessary in order to address the research questions.

A case summary of the strategy process was developed (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994; Miles and Hubberman, 1994; Langley, 1999), enabling the development of a thick description of the strategy process (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It also enabled the tracking of the strategy tool, and tracing the path of the tool and its interactions over time. Based on the research questions, the focus of the analysis was on the actions and interactions that occurred (Dietrich *et al.*, 2013), where action is not considered simply as what the strategists did, but what they did in relation with the strategy tool and vice versa. Callon (2005) provides an expression of ‘action’ that reflects that which was utilised in this research. ‘Action, including its reflexive dimension that produces meaning, takes place in hybrid collectives comprising human beings as well as material and technical devices’ (Callon, 2005: 4). Performativity is further argued by Callon (2005) to involve the assumption of distributed agency, where both ‘people and the tools that they use ... perform[...] collective action’ (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009: 1561). To highlight the performative roles of the strategy tool, the analysis also

involved looking out for instances when the strategists were passive and the tool was active (Callon and Law, 1997; Pickering, 1995). In addition to this, because the tool is conceptualised as both theory (as in a knowledge artefact) and device, instances when the tool was prescriptive and the strategists accepted the suggestions prescribed by the tool were also considered (Callon, 1998; Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Callon, 2007) and aspects of what the strategists did that interrelated with the affordances of the tool.

The first round of coding was done using an open coding approach, which was a bottom-up process in which a myriad of conceptual codes were generated (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). During this round of analysis, some concepts from the literature stood out on their own (O'Reilly, 2012). The analysis of the strategy process revealed issues related to participation, buy-in and political activity from the periphery (i.e. influencing the strategic direction). This phase was useful for identifying themes which may not have been evident through the use of a top-down approach. This also allowed for the identification of themes to pursue further in subsequent data collection and gaps in the data that required further explanations. This round of coding revealed codes that related mainly to the strategists and other actors involved in the strategy process.

The second phase of coding involved the use of an analytical lens (Cabantous *et al.*, 2010). The lens is a combination of several theoretical concepts based on the idea of devices, or the tool, and the notion of performativity (Chapman *et al.*, 2015). This was used to code the data using qualitative analysis software NVivo 10 in order to identify the performative roles of the tool, which was based on what these perspectives considered as being a performative role of a device. This enabled the generation of codes that highlighted what the strategy tool did in relation to the different actors – their active *agencements*, or configuring. The multitude of codes from NVivo 10 to Microsoft Excel were exported, and the data could be further sorted

by categorising the conceptual codes. Excel was then used mainly for the grouping of the codes. Coding moved back and forth between both technologies during this process.

This phase also involved constant comparison between data and the extant literature, and the conceptual codes that were developed from the coding were further categorised (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). From the literature devices are said to *enrol* actors (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009; Doganova and Munies, 2015), to *consolidate authority* by inducing behaviour or altering practices (Preda, 2006), and to *persuade* (Preda, 2007; Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009; Doganova and Munies, 2015). This phase of the analysis therefore involved comparing and contrasting the data in order to group concepts that were similar under the same category. The analysis also involved the creation of a new concept that encapsulated a group of conceptual labels (O'Reilly, 2012). Concepts that related to the future and looking to the future were grouped under the label – '*temporalizing*'. This label was developed in order to describe the 'future-looking' characteristic of the tool that emerged from the data. Codes that also related to the tool pointing or channelling attention at specific issues were categorised under this label as well. Categories were then clustered into *active agencements*, to signify that configurations involved a process, rather than a steady-state, and *performative agency*, where the theory of the future being generated by the HS was being acted on, or performed through its inscription in strategy. During the analysis, informants were found to describe the tool in ways that hinted towards the role of the tool, such as an '*activation*' device, a vehicle, a consolidation device. Some of these informant terms were retained and used as categories (cf. Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

### 3.4 Summary

In summary, four active agencements were identified including Enrolling, Temporalizing, Consolidating and Persuading. An addition eight categories where the HS took on performative



agency were also identified including inclusion, exclusion, future oriented, pulling the future into the present, sieving, consolidating, convincing and influencing. From our empirical analysis, the concept of a tool as an activation device was developed.

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1 Overview of the strategy process*

As at the start of the data collection META-Life's strategy was a focused participation strategy aimed at sustaining their existing position in the pensions and home insurance market and growing in two other specific markets. The organisation has a dedicated strategy team headed by a strategy director – Kenneth, who is also a member of the senior executive team, which is made up of the CEO and other directors. The strategy director has two direct reports that co-manage the members of the team: Austin, who is the head of strategic propositions and Roy who is the head of corporate strategy. The team engage in an annual strategy process, which is aimed at 'ensur[ing] that the existing strategy is still fit for purpose'. The process involved the use of a constellation of strategy tools and techniques, one of which was the HS. The HS is the 'initial phase of the annual strategic cycle and forms the basis for developing industry scenarios to test the robustness of [the company's] current strategy' (Strategic Horizon Scan document, 2014). The HS is a systematic approach to examine information about the environment in order to identify prospective opportunities or risks that may impact significantly on an organisation. It is commonly used within different industries as well as by government agencies. The scan was introduced to the organisation by the strategy director Kenneth who had used it previously during his days as a senior strategic planner in a major oil company. The scan is particularly useful mainly because it involved keeping watch for any changes in the environment that might blindside the organisation. As described by Kenneth: 'The Horizon scan was really something adopted from my days in [STOW Oil]... So, I thought

it sensible to make sure that we always had our eye on what was going on in the overall environment so we didn't get derailed by any of them.'

The process of scanning the environment involves identifying trends in the environment that could have significant implications for the organisation in the future. The insights from the process are distilled and translated into a set of strategic options, which are recommended to the senior executive team. The strategic choices made are embedded in the organisation's five-year plan and go through the processes of prioritization, pre-mobilization and mobilization and eventually lead to the adaptation of the strategy. During this strategy process, the tool was found to have played several performative roles which shaped the strategy of the organisation.

#### *4.2. Performative agency through enrolling*

The first role performed by the scan was enrolling participants, thus shaping the strategy teams' practice by framing who would be enlisted to participate in the strategy process and who would not. This role was performed through the strategists' interaction with the format of the tool, which is a modular framework of twelve lenses through which the members of the strategy team viewed the external environment: 'So, what we've done [is] we've looked at the whole insurance landscape through twelve different lenses – so customer lens, behavioural economics, intermediaries, economic environment, government and regulation, technology, operating models, competitors, distribution, taxation, capital risk management and people' (Senior Strategy Manager – Stephen). The use of tools during the strategy process would typically be done by two or three members of the strategy team; however, when it came to the scan the process required the participation of all members of the strategy department due to the extensive nature of the work, as described by the Head of Strategic Propositions:

*... So quite a long process and a good kind of team building process and challenging and I think just because of the breadth of the concept being covered, it would be unrealistic to think that one or two people could write it, it would just be too narrow and it wouldn't be well enough thought through (Austin).*

The activities involved in developing the scan also required the input of other actors outside of the strategy team. Specifically, Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) within both METALife and STAR that corresponded to the twelve lenses of the scan were enlisted to participate in the process. For example, the economics lens required the insights of the economics team, just as the taxation lens was directed towards the team that dealt with tax within the organisation. The manager who developed the people lens (also referred to as colleague) described how she collaborated with a group of senior managers from STAR's human resources team to develop her lens:

*The key people were the people from the Group HR resource and what we did was the HR director put me in touch with someone in their team and he managed to find three senior managers that were happy to come on ... to get their views on big trends around things like agile working and diversity and all sorts of interesting challenges that from a Colleague perspective the business is gonna face (Helen).*

While the tool seems to have enabled the inclusion of different actors from across the organisation into the strategy process temporarily, it inevitably also triggered a sense of exclusion and division in certain groups across the organisation who felt they should have been directly involved in the process (See Table 3).

### **INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

When asked about the process of developing his lens, one member of the strategy team passionately described a lack of integration, which was surfaced by the scan:

*The Horizon scan in previous years has really been done by ... people within the strategy team without an awful lot of engagement with some of the other key areas ... There are stakeholders engaged but I think one of the main ones that was excluded to a large extent in previous years was the RA team... Where actually you should be starting with the [RA] team (Gerard).*

Prior to the start of the scanning process, the strategists had a team meeting, which one of the researchers attended, where members of the team were able to select which lens of the scan they preferred to develop. The researcher as well as some other members of the team noticed the enthusiasm with which Gerard offered to work on the customer lens. It was only after the

first interview with Gerard that we identified that having ownership of this particular lens and the autonomy the modular format of the scan afforded, enabled the strategist to include those group of actors that had previously felt excluded from the process.

By prescribing who would be involved and enabling those that had been excluded access to the process, the tool consequently also shaped what information would be included and what would not be included. The ownership of a lens meant that the strategists could determine what they wanted to communicate to the senior executives. In Gerard's case he was able to give a voice to the actors that had previously been excluded.

#### *4.3 Performative agency through temporalizing*

After an iterative process of gathering, distilling, testing and further distilling, what the contents of the lenses show are pictures of a possible future. The scan, as Helen describes it, is 'future looking and future proofing'. The focus during the development of the lenses is on looking at the trends that are happening within the insurance industry and identifying opportunities and risks and in a number of instances extrapolating from the data, what the future might be:

*In the Horizon scan we ask: 'what's gonna happen in the next 10 years and how is that gonna impact us?' ... The Horizon scan is basically the only time in a year where you get to just sit down and think about things more broader – to think maybe 10 – 15 years ahead. You know cause it's very easy as a business to respond to the challenges of today without thinking about what are the challenges or opportunities of the future (Ralph)*

The strategy director also explains that the work of the scan is one that involves developing a picture of what the future might be, although a picture that is incomplete due to uncertainties, but nonetheless, they have to some extent an idea of what this picture may look like in the present. In effect, through the Horizon Scan, a theory of the future was produced, providing a bases for action in the present:

*The [process] goes from a sort of setting out what we think the future might look like through to securing the funding to do stuff... So within the scan we look for the long*

*term emerging trends and how they might impact the business and from that we get a very large number of areas of uncertainty (Kenneth).*

An example of one of the findings from the scan is the trend of ‘significant demographic and diversity changes within UK households’ (Strategic Horizon Scan document, 2014). This is said to be ‘a sort of societal structure change that is going to happen’ (Stephen) and will have significant implications for how the company will market its products and who they will appeal to in the future. Further down the strategy process, the outputs of the tool (supplemented with the outputs of other tools) will be translated into strategic initiatives, thereby altering the organisation’s activities and operations. Based on the scan, the future is no longer a distant occurrence waiting to be, but it has been made real and present. Knowing with precision what the future will be is unattainable and so to deal with, to some extent, the uncertainties associated with their picture of the future the strategists engage in a strategic risk scenario assessment. The risks identified during the scan work are assessed and possible scenarios of how these risks would unfold would be developed. The importance of looking into the future for these risks is described the scan coordinator – Stephen:

*I think it’s good to, if you’re a strategy function you really need to know what’s going on in your business and if you don’t have an eye on the future you could get surprised (Stephen).*

The scan is perceived as an important tool that ensures that the business is able to draw insights both from the present and the probable future. It gets the strategists thinking and therefore acting according to the future perspective they presently have (See Table 4).

#### **INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE**

For example, managers from the team describe findings from the intermediary lens that relates to how and where customers will seek advice concerning insurance products in the future. Historically, customers were able to get advice on products such as protection products by walking into a bank and speaking to an adviser. However, this has now changed and the

strategists highlight within the scan document that these changes brought on by the Retail Distribution Review ‘has left an advice vacuum for millions of customers’ (Strategic Horizon scan document, 2014). As Austin explained:

*So, one of the conclusions we came up with was that where, how and when people access advice is changing... So, where are people going to go for advice now? And that would be someone like myself, I would call myself a mass market customer, where am I gonna go? Well potentially in the future you'd go to your employer. (Austin)*

The scan also provides avenue whereby the strategists reflect on their current practices and further juxtapose the present with the future. This leads to learning and subsequently changes in their activities and in what the organisation does. We observed from the data that both the findings from the scan and the process of doing the scan work contributed to a shift in the mental models of the strategists. The HS triggered thinking from a future perspective. As one manager described, the scan is a period in which they pause and reflect on what they do vis-a-vis the future and consider adapting their activities and operations based on the future perspective.

*The Horizon scan is basically the only time in a year where you get to just sit down and think about things more broader – to think maybe 10 to 15 years ahead ... So what we'll be looking to do and what I'll be looking to do is try to get some more strategic longer term insights. The Horizon scan is a time to sit down and see how the business might evolve. (Ralph)*

An example of the content of the scan impacting on the way the strategists viewed the world is that the findings from the scan prompted a reflection and challenged their existing ways of thinking, this led to a redefinition of who their target customers were and consequently a redefinition of their propositions and whether or not there was a fit between their existing products and their target customers. Based on this finding from the scan the strategists asked themselves:

*So, it's asking what does this mean? Are we actually reaching the right people? Our propositions, do they fit the needs of our customer base? Are we representative of our customer base? So, it's just about challenging whether or not we need to think about*

*different niche segments emerging rather than actually thinking of you know just the traditional insurance customers (Stephen).*

Here we see a shift from viewing customers as one homogeneous group who require insurance products to understanding that there are different niches of customers and each niche requires a slightly different product from the traditional one-size-fits-all products offered by the company. We find that the future perspective generated by the scan plays a role in triggering this change in the way that the strategists view the world and consequently respond to it. As the Strategy Director mentioned, the outputs from the scan work include such ‘stories of how the world might emerge’. All the information developed from each lens is submitted to Stephen, who consolidates all of the findings into one document. Further distillations took place in which five key trends were highlighted from across the twelve lenses, three of which were referred to as Mega trends.

#### *4.4 Performative agency through consolidating*

After the development of each lens a consolidation process took place where each strategist sent their respective lenses to the member of the team tasked with the job of coordinating the scan work. Rather than a process that involved the negotiation of their different interests of the strategists, the modular format of the tool allowed it to hold the differing interests of the strategists together. The tool had already framed what would be in and what would be out. This meant that during the convergence phase of the process, it minimized the need for any explicit contestation. Within this configuration of both human and non-human actors, the modular format of the scan enabled it to act like a repository – a type of boundary object that enables heterogeneity. Such objects enable individuals with different interests to work together without the need to negotiate their different interests or purposes. As such, during the consolidation process, the strategists engaged instead in a collective process of refining each lens, by acting as a sounding board for each other: ‘[The] Horizon scan [is] very

iterative and collaborative. So, we all as a team spend weeks getting together ... discussing it...' (Roy).

The apparent lack of conflict within the team was also due to the scan being a product of the authoritative sources mentioned earlier. The understanding that each member of the team had engaged with SMEs across the organisation, also mitigated the rise of any significant disagreements from within the team.

The latter process of developing the scan, before being presented to the senior executive team, included a distillation process, as the strategists referred to it. This involved the selection of a small number of agendas or themes that would be specifically highlighted to the senior executive team. This distillation process was done by the strategists in charge of coordinating the scan work and the two heads of the strategy team – Austin and Roy. The other members of the team allowed the process of distillation to take place without any further politicking activities. As Helen explained when asked about the outcomes of the presentation of the scan to the senior executives:

*I don't know. I generally don't. I prepared the summary of what were the three big implications for [my] topic area. In terms of what went into [the senior team] and what came out again I haven't seen that so I'm not sure.*

Whilst some actors involved in the development of the different lenses of the scan were cognizant of the fact that the findings from the scan work would inform the senior executives' decisions a few were oblivious of how the outputs of the scan would be used. A manager explains, using an example, how the findings from the scan shapes the company's strategy: 'It [i.e. the scan] will influence hopefully what we actually do – as in our strategy' (Ralph). And the strategy director reiterates this by stating that the results of the scan work and the other tools will 'drive the strategy' (Kenneth).



While working on her lens, a manager comments on how the scan is a tool that enables them to channel people's attention towards specific issues: 'So, I'm probably picking up on existing themes but actually if we sieve them into this process we can make sure that insurers can start thinking about them and what we do about them' (Helen).

This 'sieving' of specific themes into the lenses of the scan was also carried out by other members of the team as well, in order to point the executives in a specific direction (See Table 5).

### **INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE**

This is also expressed by the strategy director in an informal conversation. He explains that in the final document that will be sent to the CEO and executives, 'they will make very clear sets of recommendations' which essentially represents implicitly that 'this is the decision that we [i.e. the strategy team] want'.

Although a distillation process existed, all the lenses were submitted to the senior executives in a long document and a short form summary document. However, the themes that had been selected as major trends were made more visible both in the long and summary documents and in the power point slides presented by the strategy director to the executive team. The goal for the strategists was to ensure that their agenda got the attention of the senior executive team one way or another – either as a theme or a major theme.

#### *4.5 Performative agency through persuading*

The HS was presented to various audiences and groups in METALife by the strategists. In doing so, the HS itself performed the role of convincing and justifying, depending on who its audience was.

Through a careful, iterative process, the HS was used by the strategy team to both capture the attention of its audience and convince the audience to act. The distillation process that took place led to the selection of five key trends from across the twelve lenses. The trends drawn from the scan and their implications for the organisation were presented to the CEO and the other senior executives as a comprehensive long document titled the ‘Chairman’s letter’. The production of the long document and the slides involved multiple back and forth movements of framing and reframing the documents during and following strategy meetings with the strategy director. One of the managers recounted the process of developing the documents:

*... We would then go and have a debate with Kenneth and say here’s our findings, here’s our recommendations and then we’d have a debate with him about whether he thought those were the right areas as well ... So multiple reviews, I think we’re on version thirty or something of the draft ... given all the SMEs and internal reviews that we had. (Austin)*

The plot or scenarios crafted within the documents were framed in such a way that it highlighted potential predicaments that desperately required choices to be made and action to be taken. A member of the strategy team describes how the scan engages in ‘forcing the hand’ of the executives to take action in response to the implications of the trends found in the environment that could impact on the business:

*The scan sort of forces the hand to say, for example, “look other markets such as digital [are] becoming progressively more important and so we need to do something. (Agaba).*

The act of developing the document and the PowerPoint slides was an event in which both the scan and the strategists changed. The meticulous back and forth development of the documents served not only to convince when the documents got in front of the executives but it also did a work of refining the thinking of the strategists. An illustration of this is when the strategists had an idea of what the document should be and they shaped the document in that form but whenever they presented the work to the strategy director and it was made evident

during the meetings that the contents of the document needed to be adapted, they went back and made the changes. The numerous iterations that took place in making the changes to the document allowed for their thinking to also be adapted. This was made evident by the strategy director:

*I think the long document was really to force clarity of thinking ... If you have to tell a story a very logical story as to why trends we see at the moment leads to implications that we're asserting, then I believe, particularly, a long form document is a very good way of forcing that logical thinking. Almost everything in strategy is about process because it is the process that refines your thinking and I would say the same for most of the business modelling work which is done as well. So the process is at least as important as the output. (Kenneth).*

The documents also made specific agenda more visible to the senior executives and directed their attention to the specific strategic option the strategy team desired that they choose. The strategy director explained that in the final document that would be sent to the CEO and executives, '[we] will make very clear sets of recommendations' which indicated that 'this is the decision that we [i.e. the strategy team] want'. The strategy director explained that the recommendations presented 'forces a decision' to be made by the executives. Without the recommendations the information presented to the senior team would simply be viewed as insights from the analysis, but by including the recommendations in the PowerPoint slides, the executives are in a way being signposted towards making a pre-determined choice.

During the executive meeting, both the HS and the strategy director made a case for why the company should choose the specific strategic directions being recommended. The narrative form of the scan, which is a future-focused 'series of stories of how the world might emerge' (Kenneth, Strategy Director), induces expectations within its audiences about a desired future state.

*What we would tend to do through the strategic work is take [the CEO and executives] through the scenarios. We wouldn't take them through the long document, although ... that would be available to them. What's really interesting for them is ... the implications*

*of what [the scenarios] are for our strategy, is what matters and so that is what [the strategy team] tried to draw out in the conclusions (Kenneth).*

Through its linguistic repertoire, such as scenarios, illustrations and metaphors (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010), the scan acted as a persuasive device. However, this work of convincing may not always be successful or go as planned and in such instances, the strategists would have had to consider a modification of their actions (Callon and Law, 1997). Depending on the response from the executives, the recommendations made could either be agreed upon or further information may be requested for by the executives. For example, one manager gave a hypothetical scenario of the outcomes of the meeting the strategy director had with the executives. The executives might have argued that the findings were ‘great but it’s five years out and we don’t need to respond to it now. Let’s watch what competitors are doing, monitor it and revisit it in 12 months’ time’. In this case, the strategy director revealed that the recommendations made had been accepted by the senior management team.

After the presentation to the senior executives, we found that the tool moved around the organisation convincing other audiences for different purposes. This role of convincing is important especially within a context where divisions compete with each other for investment funds from the corporate centre. Although METALife has its own strategy, it is still constrained by the resources available within the Group. In order to obtain funding for strategic investments, all of STAR’s divisions go through a bidding process during the year. They all had to make a strong case for why their projects deserved a portion of the limited resources managed by the central team in STAR. After this bidding process a prioritization process also takes place within STAR in order to determine which projects will be granted funding. The funds were necessary to realise the strategic options that had been agreed by the senior management team in METALife. To access the funds, the strategists translated the scan into a business case and a pitch to support their argument for the need for the five strategic options they had proposed.

*So, insurance owns its own strategy but has to work within the constraints of the investment funding available. So, anything we want to do, we have to pitch for investment funding and actually put a business case together to say this is why this is a good thing to do. And that will be compared against other parts of the Group. (Stephen)*

This high-level business case was carefully crafted in such a way that it was convincing enough to ‘sell the message’ to its audience, as one manager commented. Although the iterative back and forth movement of developing the scan was a long extensive process, it was crucial for the crafting of a compelling persuasive device. While the scan is qualitative, as Ralph noted, the strategists also had to translate their findings into numbers through the use of a cost benefit analysis. In addition to including quantitative elements to the document, it also contained case studies to ‘bring some of the themes to life’ that had been identified during the scan work. For example, at the time of the study the strategists had identified a key theme that related to value chains. The document highlighted an imminent increase in the pressure on value chains and the key implications of the trend for STAR’s value chain. This theme was animated by the use of a case study of a competitor that focused on how the company had handled the constraining pressure on their value chain. The document also included graphs and visual aids that clearly illustrated the cases. The scan, case studies and numbers underpinned the argument made in the document thereby creating a narrative intent on persuading its audience (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010), particularly within the context of competing projects (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009).

*Group has to prioritize its resources across all of its component parts or all of its divisions and functions. So, there’s a significant prioritization exercise for Group that narrows it down to a series of moves that the Group wants to make of which, insurance, if it’s done its job well and if we’ve sold the message and the investment story well, then we get a reasonable share of the Group’s prioritization (Roy)*

At the start of the strategy process the strategists mentioned that the process was to ensure that their existing strategy was fit for purpose. The outcomes of the process was a need for both continuity and renewal. The strategic options recommended confirmed META-Life’s existing

focused participation strategy while also advocating for the adaptation of certain components of the strategy, in this case aspects of META-Life's four main markets needed to be adapted.

So, the strategy ... has been refreshed and we've had to make some choices about markets and priorities as a result of this exercise ... We've actually ended up with more funding as a result of this exercise than we had in the last round (Roy).

Once again, we find the scan moved around to convince its audience. It moved from convincing the senior executives in META-Life to convincing executives within STAR.

#### 4.6 Activating

In order to continue to track the scan's outputs, we visited METALife during the implementation of the strategic choices, to find out what had happened to the five themes. We found that the five themes had been compressed into four themes and were used whenever the strategists communicated the strategy to audiences across METALife. This highlighted that beyond moving around to convince, when the scan was presented it performed a role of justifying the decisions that had been made concerning the strategic direction of the organisation.

*The themes kinda persisted all the way through ... So, whenever we did any articulation of the insurance strategy, why we should follow that path, we would replay the themes as context material so to give people the context. (Roy).*

We find here that rather than being retired to some cabinet in an office or a folder on a computer desktop, as many of such documents do, the themes from the scan work continued to perform the role of an activation device.

*The scan, in triggering change, points or channels the attention of the strategists and senior team towards specific issues. It consolidates all that they believe they need to take into consideration. 'The scan is a document that starts to set out areas we need to be looking at strategically ...' (Ralph).*

This work of the tool channelling attention towards specific issues is prominent within the data.

As Agaba commented:

*It [the scan] starts the process of identifying the big options for the business ... it needs to be played back to the executives as a trigger point for areas to think about. And the final horizon scan document was really good, [it] was really pictorial and had good examples of digital ... The scan does force the issue a little bit. (Agaba, Senior Strategy Manager)*

As an activation device it triggers the start of an event or change by first channelling the attention of the strategists towards specific issues and then it sets things in motion by also prescribing what should be done and as the strategist asserts, it forces the issue. He reiterates this work of forcing the issue: ‘The scan sort of forces the hand to – say for example – ‘look other markets such as digital [are] becoming progressively more important and so we need to do something...It is an activation device that keeps things ticking ...’ (Agaba).

The strategist uses the term activation device as a metaphor to describe the scan as a tool that triggers or sets things in motion and keeps the process going. He also shows by using the phrase ‘forces the hand’ – that the scan is not simply pointing at an issue but it is also prompting the strategists to act, and by responding to the prompts, the scan can therefore be seen to have initiated the start of the adaptation of the organisation’s strategy. The actual strategic options developed show the organisation’s responses to the prescriptions of the scan. However as aforementioned there have been instances in the past where the senior executives chose not to respond to a particular theme found but decided that the strategy team monitor the finding and revisit it after a specific period of time.

## **5. Discussion**

In this study, we set out to respond to the research question of how strategic foresight tools such as the HS take on agency to influence, and how they are in turn influenced by strategists during the strategy process? Through an inductive study of a HS at MetaLife, a UK financial services company, we drew on a performativity perspective to identify four ways that the HS was actively performative (e.g. Cabantous et al., 2018; Callon, 1998; 2007; Mackenzie, 2006).

They included enrolling, temporalizing, consolidating and persuading. In doing so, we have addressed calls to “understand the effects that strategic tools and concepts have on making the world they describe” (Carter et al., 2010: 582), and to “support empirical investigations of the “making” of strategy that would encompass a whole range of human actors... and non-human actants, such as strategy tools and frameworks” (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018: 413). In contributing to the literature on strategy tools generally, and strategic foresight tools specifically, we also extend the literature on performativity and economic sociology by adding a fifth level of performativity – active performativity – to that of Barnesian, counter, generic and effective performativity outlined by MacKenzie (2006). We do this through the conceptual development of an activation device.

Our study therefore moves away from focusing on what strategy tools are used for and how they are used, and adopts a performative perspective that emphasises the agency of non-humans (Callon, 1998, 2007). Such a performative approach departs from a representational view (Pickering, 1995), and considers the relationship between strategy theory, whether in the form of tools or concepts, and strategy practice (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018). This view of strategy tools requires an understanding of how the features of the tool shape action in particular ways (Muniesa, 2008). According to Callon and Law (1997: 178), objects do not simply enable or constrain, they ‘intervene actively to push action in unexpected directions’. From this vantage point, we considered the dynamics of how strategy tools as activation devices are performative and thereby play an active role in the formation of strategy (Muniesa, 2008). In so doing, we address the call by Cabantous *et al.* (2018: 413) for studies that ‘follow all the (human and non-human) actors who participate in the making of strategy’. We contribute to the sparse literature on the performativity of strategy tools, and particularly strategic foresight tools such as the HS (e.g. Garnett *et al.*, 2016; Miles and Saritas, 2012; Rowe *et al.*, 2017), by demonstrating how



they are performative within a financial institution. We show how tools actively do more than had previously been portrayed within the extant literature (Giraudeau, 2008).

We extend the small number of studies in the strategy literature that have recently begun to examine how strategy tools are performative (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015; Vargha, 2018), by illustrating that what strategy tools are, and consequently, what they do, changes as the strategy process unfolds. While tracking the trajectory of the HS, we found it transformed progressively along the way and these transformations were accompanied by changes in the role of the scan (Busco and Quattrone, 2014). This is because ‘agencements are arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending on their configuration’ (Callon, 2007: 320). This indicates that what tools do is not only based on their affordances (i.e. the agency they make possible), as indicated by previous studies, but by the sociotechnical *agencement* the tool is a part of and its context (Latour, 2005; Callon, 1998, 2007; Quattrone and Hopper, 2006). As the strategy process unfolded we identified four main ways that the HS assumed agency in its own right culminating in the construction of the future produced by the tool. Taken together, its performativity as an agentic device ultimately served to activate the strategy process.

### *5.1 The interconnected roles of a HS as an activation device*

The HS strategic tool assumed agency and shaped the way that strategy-making unfolds in four ways. They include: reconfiguring power relations by including and excluding participants through *enrolling*; *temporalizing* the probable future in the actionable present; *consolidating* interests and managing the tension between competing agendas; and, circulating across and beyond the organisation in order to *persuade* its audience (see figure 1 for a schematic framework).

## INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

We developed the concept of an *activation device*, which encompasses the different roles of the tool and is linked to the work of the scan as a catalyst that sets things in motion (Callon, 2007).

### 5.1.1 Enrolling

The process of strategy-making is one that requires the collaboration of actors from across an organisation (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). Our findings suggest that tools curate such collaborations by formatting a setting and thereby influencing the relations of the human actors through their inclusion or exclusion (Kaplan, 2011), which we label *enrolment* (Callon, 1998). While the tool organised participation around strategy-making (Henderson, 1991), it generated a tension between including and excluding groups in their strategic conversations. Scholars of strategy-as-practice argue that socio-material arrangements may exclude certain actors from participating in strategic conversations because they constitute power relations and therefore determine who participates in the process (Balogun *et al.*, 2011; Kaplan, 2011). While our study supports this argument, we also find that tools temporarily alter existing structures – they reconfigure power relations and thereby enable the inclusion of actors from the periphery that would otherwise have been excluded from the strategy process (Regner, 2003). We show that the reconfiguration of power relations altered who the ‘powerful actors’ were (Cabantous and Gond, 2011). This suggests that the influence that tools have on the actions of human actors may not always be that ‘[t]ools are powerful to the extent that they map on to (or can be adapted to) the existing interests of the dominant actors in an organisation’ (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015: 544; Kaplan, 2011). In our study, while the CEO and senior executives of META-Life were the ‘dominant actors’ in the organisation’s power structures, the strategists were able to

circumvent the interests of these dominant actors, allowing the process to be bottom-up as opposed to top-down.

### 5.1.2 *Temporalizing*

The HS not only produced a representation of the insurance industry, but through its production developed a theory of the future and drew it into the present so that it could be ‘performed’. The references by managers referring to the future and what they assume it will be illustrates the work of the scan as *temporalizing* that which is at a distance, channelling the attention of its audience towards specific issues (and consequently not others), and making them actionable. In this case, it was about bringing the future into the present and consequently inciting a reaction to this probable future. In this sense, the HS was not simply a tool for generating deeper insights into future uncertainties, but it was in fact helping to create the future that it purported to be interrogating.

For example, one of the big themes, according to the strategists, was the rise of digital that had been identified in the scan work. The strategists translated this finding to a strategic initiative that related to their home insurance market (one of the markets aforementioned in their strategy). By November 2015 this initiative, referred to within META-Life as project ‘Saturn’, was already underway and was in its second phase with an executive sponsor (a member of the executive committee), change managers, project managers and other actors involved in its implementation. This work of the scan that prescribes and incites actions is a form of performatio: ‘Prescription is simply a particular case of performatio ...’ ‘It is frequently mobilized to describe the mechanisms through which a conformity between ... theory and ... reality is achieved’ (Callon, 2007: 326, 324). However, it is important to note that although we found the strategists acting in line with the future image portrayed by the scan, we know from previous scan exercises that there are unexpected external events that may arise.

These events most often lead to an overflow (Callon, 1998), whereby the strategists may diverge from the future image portrayed by the scan. Such instances are as Garud (2018: 503) argues: ‘inevitable ... over time’.

### *5.1.3 Consolidating*

Kaplan (2011) argued that managers engage in cartographic practices, whereby the material features of PowerPoint, in her study, enabled the establishment of a boundary that kept competing actors and ideas out of what would be considered as part of the strategy. Our findings suggest that instead of enabling conflict, modular strategy tools such as the HS may act as repository boundary objects that facilitate heterogeneity (Star and Griesemer, 1989). In our study, the scan not only brought together different actors, it *consolidated* different ideas and supported the strategy process by holding the different interests together. As Star and Griesemer (1989: 410) explain, a repository boundary object is ‘built to deal with problems of heterogeneity caused by differences in unit of analysis ... It has the advantage of modularity’.

The tool also facilitated heterogeneity by establishing the criteria for what should be considered as strategic (in our case the study of a ‘mega trend’) and can therefore shape the strategic direction of the organisation. The procedural requirement of the tool called for the distillation of the consolidated information into trends that would have a significant impact on the organisation. The trends, the corresponding implications and recommended actions were made more pronounced than others not considered to be strategic according to the criteria (Pickton and Wright, 1998; Werle and Seidl, 2015). By setting the criteria for selection, the tool guides the actions of the strategists, not in a deterministic way but through creating a boundary within which they deliberate about what should be strategic and what should be backgrounded (Callon, 1998; Muniesa, 2008).

### *5.1.4 Persuading*

As an authoritative document (Vaara et al., 2010), crafted from various authoritative sources such as data from the ONS and subject matter experts across and beyond the organisation, the performative effects of the HS, we found, were not only a result of the legitimacy gained from the reputation of the sources as Ligonie (2018) showed, but it is also a result of the material feature of the tool - in this case the narrative format of the tool (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009; Perkmann and Spicer, 2010). The crafting of the document with a format that consisted of scenarios, case studies, graphs and other visual aids led to the development of a *persuasive* device. Such texts are ‘narratives designed to convince’ (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010: 273). They perform a role of convincing its audience in order to enrol and mobilise the resources needed to construct the future the tool advocates (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009). The narrative format of the scan not only sought to ‘entice’ and ‘create legitimacy’ for what it proposed, but it also provided ‘recipes that instruct practical action’ (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010: 264).

The first instance of this work of persuading is noted when the findings from the tool were presented to the CEO and executives of METALife, there the scan (which had now been translated into strategic options) worked alongside the strategy director to convince their audience of the need to accept the options they were recommending. The second occurrence we identified was after the senior team had approved the recommendations and a business plan was put together using the scan, the business plan was submitted to METALife’s parent company – STAR in order to bid for funds to be used to develop the strategic options identified. At this point the scan engaged in the work of competing against other business plans from the other business units owned by STAR and convincing the corporate centre of the value of investing in the strategic options proposed. As a manager explained, they had to make a strong case for why what they were proposing would be more beneficial to STAR than other projects proposed by other business units. In the third instance of convincing, the scan was mobilised

whenever the strategy (which had now been adapted) was articulated. The scan was used to justify the decisions that had been made (Kornbeger and Clegg, 2011).

## 5.2 Summary

In summary, the study of META-Life's strategy process demonstrates how strategy tools do more than aid decision making or act as carriers of strategy theory (Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Vargha, 2018). It builds on and extends previous research into the performativity of strategy tools (Cabantous *et al.*, 2018 and Vuorinen *et al.*, 2018) by demonstrating that the HS was not simply a 'technology of rationality', but it contributed to the formation of a new social reality (Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009). This is particularly salient for strategic foresight tools such as the HS, and the practitioners that use them, because it suggests that such tools not only aim "to continuously and objectively explore, monitor and assess current developments and their potential implications for the future" (Rowe *et al.*, 2017, 224; also see Miles and Saritas, 2012; Ramirez *et al.*, 2013; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2013), but indeed play an active part in creating *their* future. Callon's (1998, 2007) notion of performativity takes into consideration the agency of non-human entities such as strategy tools and allows us to utilize the concept of a socio-technical agencement to get a better understanding of how the strategy tool was able to shape the strategy process within the organization through an 'active' performativity (cf. MacKenzie, 2006).

## 6. Conclusion

The recent literature on strategy tools maintain that tools enable strategizing practices. However, it is how they enable these practices, whether instrumentally or as active participants

that we focus on in this work. What we show in this study is that strategy tools can be conceptualized as actors that actively shape the process of strategy making rather than being used instrumentally for the shaping of the process (Callon, 1998). The HS in our study took on agency as an activation device in four ways: by enrolling, temporalizing, consolidating and persuading. Based on the performativity lens we are able to see the strategy process and its outcomes as a product or consequence of the collective actions of both the managers and the strategy tool rather than the cause of the actions (Diedrich *et al.*, 2013), as the extant literature on strategy tools show. We illustrate how tools are more than carriers of strategy theory; they are performative precisely because they take on agentive qualities within an organizational setting and therefore contribute to our understanding of how strategy knowledge comes into being and is performed.

Our findings show that the material features of tools serve as the mechanisms through which they are performative. Therefore, strategists and other practitioners may benefit from the use of tools that have a modular format and therefore afford distributed thinking and interactions that span across different hierarchical levels and functional boundaries. Such tools that afford a collaborative effort are beneficial for tasks that require idea generation, the achievement of buy-in and the management of the tension caused by conflicting interests. They also help to shed light on how strategic foresight tools such as the HS tools shape the present by drawing in the future so that it can be acted on, and in doing so, created.

As with any case-based empirical research, this study is not without its limitations. One such limitation of this study is that we focused on a single strategic foresight tool. Future studies would benefit from examining how constellations or systems of tools interact with users and thus influence different aspects of the strategy making process. In addition, while we would argue that the performativity of strategic foresight tools such as scenario-based horizon scanning are transferable to other contexts, this study is a single case study that inevitably limits

the generalisability of its particularities. Future studies may also want to investigate the performativity of other types of tools through comparative case-based research designs or studies that incorporate wider samples of organizations and industries.

In conclusion, to paraphrase Mackenzie (2006), strategic foresight tools are not just “cameras’ that record a lived reality passively, particularly as it pertains to the future, but “engines” that intervene with agency in the production of such realities.



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