IT-Business Alignment: Challenges and Strategies by IT Managers

Hosea Ayaba Ofe
Abstract

This thesis examines the challenges and strategies to IT-Business alignment from the perspective of IT managers. The increasing importance of Information technology (IT) to organizations in areas such as joint research and development (R&D), Open innovation, and the ever-changing business environment means that organizations need to reassess their IT and business strategies so as to remain competitive. This implies that organizations in general and business and IT professionals in particular would have to work together more often than before in strategic planning. This is not easy because these professionals with diverse viewpoints may understand IT and business quite differently. Using a qualitative research design in the form of semi-structure interviews with open-ended questions, findings indicate that communication, partnership, governance, and skills are major challenges and strategies to alignment. This study contributes to ongoing research in IT-Business alignment by indicating that challenges to aligning business and IT strategies such as communication should not be narrowly thought of to exist just between IT and business professionals, it is equally a main concern among IT professionals.

Keywords: Alignment, strategy, communication, partnership, skills, governance

1. Introduction

The importance of IT-Business alignment remains an undisputed consensus amongst information system researchers and practitioners for the past two decades (Robson, 1994; Luftman, 1996, 1999, 2000; Benko & McFarlen, 2003; Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993). Several of these studies have indicated that organizations cannot achieve a competitive edge and long-term survival if they fail to align their IT and business strategies. Failure to align business and IT strategies could result to a wide range of implications most especially pursuing a business strategy, goals and objectives that are not compactable with and supported by the IT strategy, and conflicting goals from IT and business professionals (Benko & McFarlan, 2003; Bush et al; 2009). Being a broad area of research, alignment has been referred to using various synonyms. Luftman, (2000) uses the term harmony, Evans, (2004) talks of fusion, Hu and Huang, (2006) uses the term strategic fit, Gartlan and Shanks, (2007) uses the term reciprocal and mutual goals, and Luftman et al., (1999) use the term cohesiveness and integration between business and IT strategies. In the broadest sense, IT-Business alignment from the synonyms above indicates an aspect of shared mutual interest in IT and business strategic planning for the benefit of the organizations as a whole. Ciborra (2000, p. 26) posits that despite the intriguing subject of alignment, it “will always be difficult to be achieved”, arguing that the IT-Business gap is getting wider. The reality in the field is that IT-Business alignment is drifting apart despite the numerous researches that have focused on building frameworks to foster alignment (Ciborra, 2000). IT and business alignment remains ever more challenging given that business and IT strategies evolve to meet with the dynamic threats and opportunities pose by the business environment (Luftman, 2003).
In spite being a well-recognized area of research in information system research (Prahala\-d & Krishnan, 2008; Bhide; 2008; Bush et al; 2009), a majority of prior research have focused on organizational and managerial factors affecting IT-Business alignment. These include lack of top management support (Luftman, 2000, 1999), poor prioritization of IT, complexity of organizational structures (Bush et al., 2009), failure of IT staff to understand business concerns, relationship management issues (Evans, 2004; Hu & Huang, 2006), and lack of a supporting governance structure (Smith et al., 2007; Mocnik, 2010). However, not much has been written on the challenges of IT-Business alignment from the perspective of IT managers of lately. Prior studies on alignment such as Broadbent and Weill (1993) focuses on organizational and managerial factors affecting alignment within the banking industry, Vander Zee and De Jong (1999) focuses on alignment challenges in the banking and food industry, and Bush et al., (2009) focuses on the health care domain. Not only have these studies been based in relatively stable environments and periods when compared to a rapid changing IT environment nowadays, changing events over the years in both the business and IT environment makes the relevance of such studies lacking in reflecting the challenges faced by IT managers in the alignment process.

Other stream of researchers have focused on building or extending alignment frameworks such as Hu and Huang (2006) using the balance score card, Reich and Benbasat (2000) using the social dimension alignment model, Henderson and Ventkakraman (1993) using the strategic alignment model and Luftman (2000) using the strategic maturity assessment model. To some extent, these models have not been applied considerably to reflect the current and changing dynamics and challenges to alignment faced by IT managers. Besides, its relative instability and increasing role in organizations, new developments in IT such as increased collaboration of IT organizations in joint R&D, open innovation, and platforms, make it a relevant concern to understand the perspective of IT managers with respect to challenges and strategies to alignment. Wood and Brown (2013) points out that the fast increasing levels of global business exert pressure on organizations in terms of how to use resources such as IT capabilities to respond to new challenges. Chan (2002) underscores the need for organizations to understand alignment as an unfolding process requiring decision makers to be on the watch for divergences and challenges. Luftman (2000; 1996), emphasizes that the changing business environment requires organizations to reflect on the appropriate way of linking their IT and Business strategies. Thus, this current research focuses on understanding the challenges and strategies to alignment from the perspective of IT managers and is guided by the following question;

*What are the core challenges and strategies to IT business alignment faced by IT managers?*

By understanding the above-mentioned question, this research contributes to the ongoing research on strategic alignment specifically related to IT, which has witnessed fast changes in aspects such as joint R&D, Open innovation, disruptive technology, and global business dynamics over the years. These changes in the business environment, posses both opportunities and problems that require organizations to reassess how they can utilize their IT capabilities and business resources to reposition themselves strategically to gain market
share. Generally, these changes may require IT managers, business managers, researchers and practitioners with often different viewpoints and knowledge expertise working together more often than before in developing business and IT strategies for the organization. Specifically, it may also pose problems or opportunities even for IT practitioners working with other IT practitioners given the increasing diversities in technologies. Besides, it may also be important to understand these challenges so that organizations are able to utilize their innovative IT capabilities fully to foster value co-creation. Understanding these challenges and strategies could enable various key stakeholders to understand how to tackle alignment and provide firms a competitive edge.

IT-Business alignment being a rather broad area of research, it is necessary that the scope of the thesis is kept within certain bounds. While it would have been a fantastic idea to collect detailed official archives on the business and IT strategic planning process from the interviewees to complement the interviews, it would have been difficult to get hold of all this information not just due to the time constraint but also most importantly due to problems of accessibility. The analysis, conclusions, and applicability of this study should therefore be interpreted in the context in which the research has been carried out.

The rest of this thesis is arranged as follows; Section two contains a review of related literature. Section three discusses the research methodology. Presented in section four are the results of the study. Section five presents a discussion of the results; closely followed is the conclusion and suggestion for future research. The thesis rounds off with a section on reference list and an appendix.

2. Related Literature

IT-Business alignment is a well-researched field with varied interwoven factors found to hinder or enable alignment. However, attaining alignment between IT and business remains ever more challenging (Luftman, 2003). This section of the thesis conducts a review of related research on the challenges and strategies identified by prior researchers. While discussing these challenges and strategies, we make a reflection on their relevance within the context of this study. Given that alignment is quite a broad area of research with overlapping definitions, the first part of this section provides an overview of core concepts related to IT-Business alignment within the context of this present study.

2.1 Core concepts

Alignment has been defined from different perspectives; a sample of the papers reviewed refers to alignment in one or more of the following ways. Alignment strives to ensure a harmony between Business and IT by developing actions that enable the organization to respond to challenges and opportunities (Luftman, 2000). IT-Business alignment has grown significantly over the years because of changing business environment requiring organizations to constantly reflect on the appropriate way to link their IT and business strategies (Luftman, 2000; 1996). Focusing on actions that enables the organization to attain cohesive goals between IT and other aspects of the organization thus becomes important (Luftman, 2000). Gartlan and Shanks (2007) describes alignment as being a reciprocal
approach in the formulation of IT and business strategies to achieve cohesiveness. Broadbent and Weill (1993) stresses on the extent to which business strategies were supported and stimulated by IT. However, Henderson and Venkatraman (1993) refer to this view of alignment as the strategy executive perspective of strategic alignment, pointing out that this perspective of alignment is what is widely known. Henderson and Ventkatraman (1993, p. 480) view IT-business alignment as a “recognition of the external IT marketplace in terms of the scope of the technologies, the desired level of competencies, and the locus of governance”.

From the definitions above, we understand that an aggregated understanding of alignment exist between scholars regarding alignment as some sort of fit between IT and business strategy. However, what is not clearly explained is the degree of agility or which strategy takes precedence in the strategic formulation process. In this thesis, we use a blend of the definitions above to refer to IT-Business alignment as the harmonious fit between business and IT strategies to make the organization agile in responding to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).

Strategy has been defined as “A plan of action that would develop a business’s competitive advantage and compound it” (Henderson 1989, p. 141) addressing both organization’s external and internal business domain (Henderson and Ventkatraman, 1993). Henderson and Venktaraman (1993) refer to an external domain to pertain to the organization’s business environment and the decision making processes which makes the organization strategically distinctive from competitors in terms of branding and other forms of mergers. Internal domain refers to choices on organizational structure, acquisition, as well as core talents to achieve the goals of the organization (Henderson and Ventkatraman, 1993). Kaplan and Norton (1996) describe strategy as constituting a set of objectives and measures set by top management to reflect the future direction of the organization. From a business point of view, strategy has been defined as “Choices pertaining to product-market offerings in the output” (Henderson and Venktaraman, 1993, p. 474). As a tool for efficient allocation of the organization’s resources by top management executives who are involve in decision making to ensure compatibility with the organization goals, internal and external environment (Gartlan and Shanks, 2007). From an IT perspective, strategy has been defined by (Gartlan and Shanks, 2007, p. 115) to refer to “a strategic business tool used to structure a future path and addresses the use and management of IT resources, IT-Business relationships, and the flow and storage of information throughout the organization”. In this thesis we adopt a blend of the definition of strategy by (Henderson; 1989, p. 141; Henderson and Venkatraman, 1993, p. 474) referring to strategy as “a plan of action that would develop a business competitive advantage and compound it addressing both the organization’s external and internal business environment”.

In summary, we can understand from the above definitions that researchers have used different terms to refer to IT-Business alignment synonymously. Some of these terms include harmony, cohesion, reciprocal etc. An aggregation of these terms indicates that researchers share a near common understanding of IT-Business alignment. However, as to how the business and IT strategies can be fitted or integrated together effectively, is what researchers have not clearly discussed in the definitions. Researchers also do not clearly point out if one
strategy takes precedence over the other. Against this background of varied perspectives, we can suggest that varied challenges and strategies to IT-Business alignment are bound to exist as well.

2.2 Challenges and Strategies to Alignment

Studies on alignment have been varied, so too are the challenges and strategies. Smith et al.; (2007) conducted a study to understand how organizations work to enhance alignment between IT and business strategy using a focus group of 15 senior managers drawn from manufacturing, banking, automotive and insurance industries in Australia. The findings of the study indicated that IT managers still had the presumed responsibility of ensuring that they were understood by business managers and not vice versa. This indicated that the IT-Business gap was still an issue for IT-Business alignment. Among other factors found to challenge alignment by Smith et al., (2007) included; getting the right people to involve in strategy development, poor IT-Business partnership and lack of a supportive governance structure. Smith et al., (2007) findings are similar to a study conducted by Bush et al., (2009) in the health care sector using a sample size of 15 information system managers. Bush et al., (2009) findings indicated that ineffective communication was a major managerial factor which inhibited alignment between IT strategy and organization objective. Other inhibitors to alignment included; failure to involve key stakeholders in the decision making process, lack of a clear decision making process in IT investment, resistance to change, lack of top management support and complexity of the organization. Weiss et al., (2006) also indentify omission of key stakeholders as an inhibiting factor to alignment. Proposed strategies to enhance IT-Business alignment by Bush et al., (2009) include proper identification of organizational objectives, envisioned information systems, effective communication and top management support.

However, neither Smith et al., (2007), Weiss et al., (2006) nor Bush et al., (2009) address if there were any variations in the challenges faced or strategies developed by IT or business managers in dealing with IT-Business alignment. These studies do not also indicate how relevant were organizational and managerial factors when discussing IT-Business alignment in an unstable environment such IT which is characterised by uncertainty and rapid changes in technology. Attempts to understand IT-Business alignment challenges and strategies from organizational and managerial perspectives have also found interwoven challenges to IT-Business alignment. Gartlan and Shanks, (2007) using semi structure interviews to explore the challenges faced and strategies developed for alignment in Australian organizations and found out that organizational factors such as organizational culture, governance and firm wide active involvement affected alignment. On managerial factors, chief information officers (CIOs) were found to pay less attention to people factors such as communication and involvement in the formalization of business strategy. The above findings are similar to a study by Evans (2004) which was aimed at indentifying factors that affected Business-IT fusion using structured questionaires, a five point likert scale and a sample size of 115 managers. Evans (2004) findings indicated that lack of communication, people issues and poor knowledge transfer were the most significant stumbling blocks that IT managers pointed out for the lack of Business-IT fusion. Business managers on their part indicated that
lack of communication and poor knowledge transfer were the most critical factor for IT-business fusion. Broadbent and Weill (1993) study focused on an Australian bank showed factors such organizational structure and accountability as challenges to alignment. Kearns and Sabherwal (2006) study using a survey of 274 IT managers, indicated that centralization of decisions related to IT, affected IT-Business alignment indirectly through its impact on top management knowledge of IT and involvement of IT managers in the strategic planning process. Evans (2004), Reich and Benbasat (2000) proposed strategies such as effective communication and effective knowledge sharing between business and IT professionals to achieve IT-Business alignment.

As seen from the above, managerial and organization challenges to alignment remain wide, indicating that IT-Business alignment remains a complex issue to be dealt with at both organizational and at the management level as well. The reviewed literature also shows that IT and business managers face common challenges to alignment notably communication and knowledge sharing. Attempts at using or extending alignment frameworks to achieve alignment have also indicated a wide range of interwoven and complex challenges to alignment. Vander Zee and De Jong (1999) study based on providing a framework for the integration of IT-Business alignment uses the balance score card as a framework. The study concluded that top-down IT-Business alignment process easily failed due to lack of flexibility at lower levels of the organization. Supporting this view, Weiss and Thorogood (2005) argues that alignment is often discussed in a top-down approach, making it a challenging task at lower levels of the organization. Similar to Vander Zee and De Jong (1999), Hu & Huang (2006) uses the balance scorecard on a study focused on achieving sustainable IT-business alignment. The research findings indicated that relationship management and communication were major factors that influenced IT-Business alignment. Hu and Huang (2006) suggested that the balance scorecard could be used as a platform to improve the communication between IT and business managers.

### 2.3 Summary

From the literature reviewed, it indicates that alignment is a continuous process rather than an event for organizations and is challenged by complex factors having no fixed solutions. The literature also indicate consensus among researchers on the importance of alignment triggered by aspects such as increasing changes in the business environment and the role of IT in organizations nowadays. The literature also indicated varied definitions to alignment and strategy. Researchers are however unanimous on the idea that alignment involves some sort of fit between business and IT strategies. Broadly speaking, the challenges and strategies discussed above can be generalized using managerial and organizational factors (Bush et al., 2009; Evans, 2004, Smith et al., 2007; Broadbent and Weill, 1993) and those involve in extending alignment frameworks such as balance scorecard framework (Hu & Huang, 2006; Vander Zee and De Jong, 1999), the strategic alignment perspective (Henderson and Ventkraman, 1993).

However, Luftman (2000) has been more elaborate by grouping these challenges and strategies under six major criteria in an interactive framework termed the strategic alignment maturity assessment model. Given that some aspects of this framework may
partially inform the data collection process for this study in terms of formulating the semi-structure interview guide, it is necessary that we briefly discussed the criteria. The six alignment criteria in the model include communication maturity, Competency/value measurement maturity, governance maturity, partnership maturity, scope & architecture maturity and skill maturity. Luftman (2000) identifies communication as a core enabler or inhibitor of IT-Business alignment. Ineffective communication negatively affects IT-Business alignment in terms of poor knowledge sharing between Business and IT managers. Other dimensions of communication include understanding of business by IT and vice versa. As regards to competence/value measure, Luftman (2000) points to it to refer to those competencies that makes a firm distinct from competitors involving aspects such as assessment review, service level agreement, IT metrics and business metric. Governance involves how the relationship between key stakeholders and partners is being managed. It also involves how managerial and IT issues are handled in terms of IT selection, responsibility and accountability. Partnership maturity refers to the relationship that exist between the business and IT managers. Some properties of this criterion include the role of IT in strategic business planning, level of trust between business and IT professionals etc. According to Luftman (2000) a partnership between IT and Business professional should evolve to a level where trust exist and the participation of IT managers and business managers in strategy formulation. Skills maturity refers to aspect such as change readiness on the part of professionals to training, education, innovation, hiring and firing of human resources of the organization (Luftman, 2000).

3. Research Method

This section of the thesis is concerned with the research methodology utilized in this thesis. The section begins with an explanation of the authors preconceptions, closely followed is an outline of the qualitative research strategy used for this thesis. In addition, we have a subsection on data collection, data analysis and a section on the quality criteria for this study. In the course of the discussions in this section, methodological choices and motives for such choices are argued for as well.

3.1 Preconceptions

Bryman and Bell (2007), Saunders and Thornhill (2009) point out that research can be influenced by preconceptions such as the author’s background experience and personal values. These preconceptions can influence choice of research area, research strategy and interpretations of results (Bryman and Bell, 2007). My interest to conduct a thesis in IT-Business alignment stems from my prior interest in business strategy. In the first place with a prior knowledge in finance, I felt lacking in the area of information technology, so when I enrolled for the IT management program I was fascinated by how a combination of IT and business knowledge would provide me with a broader view when identifying and approaching problems. Thus, I do realize that my preconceptions have played a role in my choice of this research area and possible interpretations of the results. Notwithstanding, my
preconceptions should equally provide me with valuable insights when discussing the research results and throughout the research process.

3.2 Research Approach

Research approaches vary greatly, but could be grouped in one of following categories; deductive or inductive, quantitative or qualitative, or mixed research methods (Bryman and Bell, 2007). These various approaches influence the epistemological and ontological stance of the researcher. Saunders and Thornhill (2009) argue that none of the research approaches has an absolute advantage over the other but rather certain research questions are best answered with certain research approaches. This is similar to Strauss and Corbin (1998) argument that each research strategy should be recognized as contributing to the research process in a unique way. The divide between qualitative and quantitative research can be contrasted in terms of many aspects, however this is not discussed in this thesis. This study uses the qualitative research strategy.

Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 10-11) describe qualitative research to refer to “any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or means of quantification”. Strauss and Corbin (1998) go further to point out that qualitative research is often carried out with the purpose of discovering concepts and relations from data collected from the field, using techniques such as interviews, focus groups, archive, emails etc. A qualitative research strategy was chosen in this study over other approaches because the challenges and strategies of IT-Business alignment which is the focus of this study could be best answered using this approach which requires collecting rich empirical and firsthand knowledge from the field. As pointed out by (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) qualitative research can be best suited to understand issues about experiences, social interactions cultural phenomenon, and organizational functioning. Given that this study aims to develop deep knowledge and understanding related to IT managers’ experience of IT-Business alignment, it was thus necessary to settle for this approach. Some drawbacks of this strategy discussed by Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 404) include the risk of going “native”, the risk of committing “descriptive excess”, the subjective and impressionistic nature of the research findings and a lack of transparency in the research process. These drawbacks have been taken into keen considerations throughout this thesis to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings.

Research philosophies are an important part of research that influences the choices made by the researcher. This research adopts the epistemological view of interpretivism. Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 1) describe epistemology as “the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired”. The interpretivist’s view assumes that through interpretation of the interaction of research participants can we understand or gain knowledge about the research topic. Bryman and Bell (2007) points out that seeing the social world through the interaction of the research participants provides rich data because the research participants are capable of influencing the research results in one way or the other. Some peculiar qualities attached to qualitative research discussed by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) involves conducting a research in a naturalistic setting, using an interpretive approach to understand social actions, values and the beliefs of research participants. As such, by deploying this perspective in this research, we think that interacting with research participants would provide us with holistic and rich
data that we can use to draw meanings from the research participants about the challenges and strategies they face in IT-business alignment.

Ontology on the other hand seeks to answer the question “what is the nature of reality” (Creswell, 2007, p. 17). The ontological perspective utilized in this thesis is the constructivist view. Thus we believe social phenomenon for example the challenges faced by IT manager in IT-Business alignment can be best understood from the interactions with the managers who are directly involve in the process of alignment. We also think that such challenges are not fixed but they vary between managers. Creswell, (2007, p. 20) points out that constructivism and interpretivism often go hand in hand. “The social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections in the social world” (Bryman and Bell, 2007, P. 402).

3.3 Data Collection

Strauss and Corbin (1998; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) points out that there are various ways in which data can be collected for a qualitative research, this includes in-depth interviews, observations, focus groups, etc. Data collection for this thesis was done primarily using in-depth interviews, arranged in a semi structured interview guide. Besides its flexibility, which makes it particularly advantageous, interviews were also used because of the nature of the research question that needed interaction with managers to understand their view of the challenges and strategies to alignment. As pointed out by (Schultze and Avital, 2011) interviewing engages the interviewee directly and provides the researcher with rich contextual and firsthand account of the participant’s experiences and interpretations they attach to the issue under study. Interviewing is also a widely used qualitative data collection technique in information system research (Schultze and Avital, 2011; Gartlan and Shanks, 2007). The structure of the interview guide was partially informed by theory and related literature. This involved framing questions around major challenges identified in prior literature and the six alignment criteria discussed in the literature review section. These questions were open ended to allow participants freedom to discuss what they considered important to them. Through follow-up questions, participants were able to express their own viewpoints relating to the challenges and strategies to alignment. Schultze and Avital (2011) points out that a framework that guides the interviewing process should enable respondents to effectively articulate their viewpoint and experiences while allowing flexibility and freedom of expressions. This is in line with Bryman and Bell (2007) who argue that the interview guide should be formulated in such a way that it makes it possible for the researcher to be able to actually understand the world of the interviewees related to the question under investigation.

Overall, five participants were interviewed for this study. This involved an academic staff who at the same time worked as an IT consultant, four IT related managers with varied specialization. We got access to these participants using referrals (snowballing). We used this technique because of the initial lack of contacts who could helped linked us with these participants. So once we interviewed the initial respondents, we asked for their help in identifying other persons who could provide us with information relevant for the research question. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) points out that snowballing is particularly a good sample
technique when the sample population is small and dispersed, though they make no specification as to what constitute a small population. However, one disadvantage of this technique is that diversity within the target population is compromised (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). By using snowballing, it provided us with participants who had an adequate knowledge about the research topic. We conducted the interviews with the IT consultant and one IT manager on site while the other interviews were negotiated and took place within the school premise in group-rooms booked at the university Library. Averagely, the interviews lasted between 20 to 38mins. Before the interviews began, participants were made to be aware of the essence of the research. They were equally assured that in the final copy of the thesis their responses were to remain anonymous. Following a semi structure interview guide that was prepared with open-ended questions and partially informed by theory, the interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks and were audio recorded with the aid of a sound recorder. This can be summarized in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Participants</th>
<th>Role of participant</th>
<th>Duration of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>IT consultant/academic staff</td>
<td>29mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>IT manager/data analyst</td>
<td>25mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>IT manager/programmer</td>
<td>35mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>IT manager/customer relations</td>
<td>38mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>IT manager/system developer</td>
<td>20mins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: List of Participants, respective IT roles and interview duration*

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted alongside the data collection process. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded. The interviewing process ended when we felt that new data from the field did not bring forth new information or dimensions in the research question. At the end of the fifth interview, we felt that new data did not provide any more clues to the research question. The coding process was partially informed by theory and related literature. This involved formulating semi-structured interview guide with open-ended question revolving on various aspects of the six major alignment criteria identified in the literature. However, this does not mean that data were forced into categories as participants during the interview could as well discuss on what they saw to be challenging to them. As such, the use of the semi structure guide was simply to provide some framework for the interview. Schultze and Avital (2011) point out that a framework can guide the interviewing process to enable the respondents to articulate their viewpoint and experiences effectively while allowing for flexibility and freedom of expression. Although informed by theory during the data analysis phase, we had an open mind when developing the codes so as not to leave out some major categories that had not been identified by prior literature. Thus while guided by theory, we as well allow the data to “speak for itself”. The initial coding process began by going through the transcribed interview line-by-line (open coding). Further, using axial coding we looked keenly for similarities, differences, and variations in the dimensions concerning the core challenges and strategies to alignment faced by the
participants. This resulted to the merger of some codes that were similar. The various codes and dimensions emerging from the data were grouped further under major categories. With the guide of selective coding, major themes that emerged as core challenges and strategies to alignment for IT managers included communication, partnership, governance, and skills. (See appendix 1 for the themes).

3.5 Quality Criteria

The applicability and relevance of quality criteria in qualitative research have been widely contested (Creswell, 2007; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Spencer et al. 2003, LeCompte and Goetz, 1982; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A key criterion considered relevant in this study is trustworthiness that can be subdivided into credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Bryman and Bell, 2007). To achieve credibility in our research findings we ensured that we inquired repeatedly from the research participants to ensure that what we actually understood is what they meant. As such, we assured respondents that the interviews were to remain anonymous and in some cases, we allowed the audio records for them to listen to ensure that the transcribed texts was not in contrast to their expressed opinions. Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 396) refer to this as “respondent validation”. By doing this therefore, the research participant would have the option of readjusting or completely taking away some initial comments they can make. In the context of qualitative research, transferability refers to the context in which the research findings can be applicable or valid. The research findings are thus limited within the context of this study. In this thesis, I have attempted that the research process is as clear and transparent as possible to enable readers to clearly understand how the research process was conducted, how data was collected, analyzed, why certain research methodological choices were made and how the conclusions were arrived at.

4 Results

This section of the thesis describes the research results under the various conceptual themes. Challenges and strategies to alignment are jointly described under each of the themes that emerged in the coding process.

4.1 Communication

Communication was a major challenge described by the research participants to affect IT-Business alignment. Participants described that effective communication was hindered because of the lack of understanding of IT by business professionals and vice versa. The participants described that they had a hard time understanding clearly, what business professionals wanted. IT managers described that business managers/professionals’ concerns and expectations were often vague and unrealistic and showed little appreciation of the role of IT professionals in the organization. Participants described that business managers presumed that they were often right even when they were unable to express business issues in an IT perspective adequately. Participants described that communication
between business and IT managers was often poor at the beginning. Responding to what aspects challenged them most in IT-Business alignment; participant (1) had this to say.

“I think understanding the expectations of the business perspective from the IT perspective is difficult. It was equally a problem for me to understand what they [business professional] actually expected because they actually gave vague responses. For example, when they say something, they implicitly assume that what they have said is concrete but I was more focus on understanding what they said in terms of the IT perspective. They think that when they say something, they implicitly assume that their viewpoint is concrete and must be done that way irrespective of what IT could achieve at that time.”(Participant 1)

Participant (1) equally described a situation where it was difficult for him to understand what the business manager actually meant. He described a situation where there was a problem with analyzing some technical data, but the business professionals were unable to adequate explain the problem. This is how he described it.

“For example last year a bank contacted me about some problem with the data in their system [...] When I told them to describe the [type of] data they couldn’t describe the data fully, they couldn’t describe the problem, but they kept on insisting that they had some problem with the system…..I didn’t expect them to be experts in this”

Participant (3) when responding to a similar question on what challenged IT-Business alignment, his response was.

“The business guys are more abstract and it is more challenging in the beginning to understand the business people. These things come up because at the beginning there is a challenging task to communicate effectively”. (Participant 3)

All participants agreed that effective communication was of necessity to achieve alignment. However, as to how this could be achieved, participants did not fully describe any concrete or formal measure that could be taken. They stressed that business professionals should be explicit on how they expressed business objectives. Business professionals should be able to appreciate the viewpoint of IT professionals. Responding to what strategy could be developed to enhance communication; participant (3) had this to say.

“As I have told you, business managers and IT managers are like one hand needing the help of each other, they should communicate. Unless you have a 100% communication with the business people then it would be a total failure at the end from the top to the lower level of the company. My suggestion is that business professional should be very explicit and clear in their explanation. I know this day everything is possible, they shouldn’t believe that IT would solve everything”. (Participant 3)
For participant (2) responding to the strategy to improve communication, he described that the organizations often prepared seminars and meetings during the year during which lengthy discussions are made engaging the departments and functions across the firm to share experience. He equally stressed on the point that business professionals should be able to understand some basics about IT to reduce the difference that arises due to lack of understanding of IT. This is what he said.

“If they had like some experience about the basics of IT in the company then it would be good, the problem that we see is that those Business guys are not familiar [with] some basic understanding of IT….. To enhance communication, the company often organizes meetings for staff members. During these meetings we learn a lot from each other. We equally have an annual meeting at the end of the year where all the staff meet from all the departments and share their experience about challenges and what they learn, however we think that the meeting is often long overdue because we need more”. (Participant 2)

Participant (5) also described that the top management often had a very narrow view of what IT meant. He described a situation in which the top management wanted to integrate the telephone system with other systems that were not feasible given the achaic nature of the telephone system that was used in the company. He described that for communication to be improved so as to foaster alignment, they needed to have a top executive in the organization who understood both IT and business very well. This is how he described the situation.

“I really think that they should make sure they have someone who is pretty high up in the management level who understand both IT and Business. Take for example the owner said that he wanted the system to be integrated with telephones, something that was not just feasible given the very old nature of the lines we had. I said ok!! At this point it became so clear to me that he was just thinking of it from some other narrow perspective”. (Participant 5)

Then he continued

“And they should try to think of it as a whole system, I think they just see it as technology, That you just put it in, and you get some output, I think they really need a strategy for integration. They don’t really have the knowledge to understand the wider impact of the IT in the company”. (Participant 5)

As can be seen above, we can summarise that participants were unanimous that communication was a major problem that affected IT-Business alignment. Participants described that lack of understanding of IT by business managers and top executives contributed to ineffective communication. Participants equally described that improving communication could be better achieve by letting business managers and top executives to be aware of basic aspects of IT.
4.2 Partnership

Describing the level of partnership between IT and business professionals specifically on relationship and shared goals, it showed there was still a gap in shared goals in the relationship between IT and business managers. Some of the participants described that discussion involving both IT and business professionals were often long and hardly involved compromise, as professionals were unwilling to accept the role of the other perspective in the discussion and strategy formulation process. Participant (1) had this to say when asked about the level of partnership, conflicting and shared goals, between the business and IT professionals.

“…. There was always a conflict because business guys [managers] felt that IT managers weren’t just real to understand them. So when they meet they have a conflict of idea, they hardly compromise or easily get to a conclusion. Business managers think that their expectation are not easily meet and believe that IT managers ought to follow their guidelines. (Participant 1)

However, not only was there a sense of uncompromised in the role IT should play in the strategic plans of the organizations, participants described that IT played more a secondary role in the strategy formulation process. Almost all the participants agreed that IT strategy was considered only after the business executive had clearly drafted down business objectives and other measures of performance. IT was then considered to evaluate how it could be utilized in the process to provide the firm achieve those targets or play some support role. Concerning the role of IT in the strategy formulation and planning process, participants shared these views.

“First of all they [business executives] developed their plan, and then they ask for support from IT. But for general business, the IT acts a support function. I think that the IT function acts more like a support. My opinion is that both parties should appreciate the concepts on both sides. (Participant 1)

“It is the business strategy that drives the IT strategy most of the time, the problems come from the business, the major activities comes from the operations so IT comes more like a supporting role in the business”. (Participant 2)

Another participant when asked about the level of partnership between the IT and business professionals, described that relationship management was a crucial factor which affected IT-Business alignment. He described that the IT department was often alienated from the rest of the organization. This separation of IT from the rest of the organization made relationship between IT and business professionals not well developed, as IT professionals met business professionals only when there was a problem that business professionals could not solve. In addition, IT managers and departmental heads had the presume responsibility of convincing the business managers on the value of the IT for the organization.
“The relationship is more like we have an IT related problem but we have an IT section, yeah they can handle it, instead of letting the people who experience these problems to be able to solve the problems. The IT section or department is very alienated from the whole organization even the personnel.......... and the IT people need to convince as much as the business people by making efforts to sell the business value of the program. They actually need to sell this program.” (Participant 4)

Asked how partnership could be improved, participant (4) emphasized that good relationship management was very critical for alignment. He described that by letting key stakeholders and staff in the organization to understand how and what activities were performed in the organization, it encouraged collaboration and knowledge sharing between stakeholders. He went further to describe that because of the lack of involvement of major stakeholders in the strategic planning process, it hindered alignment because some stakeholders felt that something new had been imposed on them, and they develop mechanisms to resist the change. This is how he described the importance of relationship management as a strategy to foster alignment.

“I think good relationship management should be very instrumental in achieving alignment. This could make the whole company align, because the various departments and stakeholders are able to understand what is taking place in the whole organization. This leads to better knowledge sharing between the various stakeholders in the company............ If there is a good relationship within the whole company its is much easy to translate new IT innovations into the company without causing disruptions.”(Participant 4)

The he continued;

“This lack of involvement of the staff makes Staff and personel build some resistance to changes to IT and they just develop their own solution based on their on personal understanding. I think there needs to be a good relationship in the whole company and make IT visible across the whole company than making it as a separate section. This makes it impossible to blame the IT section, instead you just have to do it [to] solve the problem yourself without taking it to IT section”.(Participant 4)

From the above description by participants, we can summarise that partnership between IT and business professionals remains a key challenge to alignment. As described by participants there was poor partnership between business and IT managers as IT managers were not involved in crucial decision making. They also described aspects such as resistance to change, and alienation of the IT department from the rest of the organization. As a strategy to solve this problem, participants described that relationship management was important and the need to make the role of IT visible across the organization.
4.3 Governance

IT managers described how top management excluded them from key managerial and governance issues. One IT manager described how much frustrated he was with a decision by a top management executive to abruptly choose an alternative IT system (reservation system) after they had been working with another system for many months. His frustration was not just that the decision was made abruptly, he was frustrated that they had not been consulted on an issue in which they were specialist in. The participant described that top management had not even reflected on how fit or integrated was the new system that was bought. They felt that top management had not consider them as valuable assets in the decision making process, they felt uncountable for an area that they needed to be responsible for. He went further to describe that top management had not prioritize the strategic role IT played in the organization. This action made them to develop some sort of resistance to change because they felt that issues were being imposed on them. This is what participant (5) said when describing how frustrated he was for not being consulted on an issue in which his expertise was required.

“I can’t deny that they [top management] are really talented persons in business in many ways, but I just don’t get the room to let them understand my views on some of the strategic planning and big changes which I think they don’t have the knowledge to accurately deal with. For example we have been working on this system for about two months, we had talked to external customers about the project. One day, one of the top managers came and said, If the top manager] had lunch with a certain guy yesterday, then I decided to buy a new system [reservation system] for the company........” (Participant 5)

Then I [participant 5] said to myself,

“That was not good because they [top management] had not prioritize a strategic plan on how we were going to integrate this system with the rest of the systems in the company. No one had thought about the strategic role of this system and how we were to fit these things together. We had to cancel what we had spend time doing. In that decision I was definitely sidelined by the management. Someone should have asked me at least the strategic role of the system. In that decision I was not involve in, that was not good”(Participant 5)

However, participant (5) equally expressed the views that not only were IT managers frustrated by the action of top management sometimes; business managers as well faced the same challenge. In some cases, the top management made decisions without having the involvement of lower managers who understood most of the reality on the ground. This left some lower level business and IT managers alienated. This is what he had to say about the behavior of top management.

“I work really close with the business manager as well because he understands quite much IT. Even the business manager whom I work very closely with is
also frustrated that he is sometimes left out of crucial decision making by top management". (Participant 5)

Participant (4) described that the top-down strategic planning process was a hindrance to alignment. Participant (4) described that the inability of lower level managers to be involved in the strategic development process was not good. His concern was that the top-down strategic planning process did not reflect the reality on the ground. He criticized the fact that top management was often detached from the challenges faced in the day-to-day interaction between IT and business staffs. Participants described that business managers overestimated their knowhow even in technical areas that they were little informed about. The IT managers also decry the lack of their involvement in some issues that they consider important. Participants were bitter about this not only because they were not involved in the decision making process, but because those who made the decisions did not have the appropriate knowhow. This is what participant (4) had to say when asked about how involved IT and lower managers were in strategic planning.

"Why does the top management don't get to involve the lower managers in the strategy formulation process when the problems are often faced by staff at the lower level. I think the IT strategy somehow should be more feedback driven starting at the lower management. Business managers think that they know everything about the business. But to implement and understand how IT can help the business grow, the Business managers actually lack some vital knowledge about this. So I think that it's important that IT managers be part of the top management to develop the strategy". (Participant 4)

Participants complained about the centralization of decisions relating to aspects such as IT investment. As far as budgetary constraints were concerned, participants equally describe the tedious process they had to go through. To them the process was unnecessary. They had to adequately convince and negotiate the budget allocation for the IT department with the business professionals on IT related investments which they did not adequately understand. They described that IT budgets for the company were often not specify. Therefore, IT managers had to spend time “running” behind the business executives. As described by participant (4) when asked about the nature of the partnership between business and IT professionals, had this to say

“I don’t understand why top management keep a tied hand on everything. For example the top management does not give them[IT managers] the authority to handle those problems themselves that concern them financially. May be, this could be because the top management feels that they have invested so much in the IT section and they aren’t seeing how much the IT section is contributing to the company. Also budgetary constraints hinders alignment because the IT department is subject to lots of process[es] inorder to get the budget both at the functional level, departmental and they even have to make all efforts to
In summary, majority of participants shared the view that top-down strategic planning did not foster alignment. They described that top management executives were often detached from the daily realities that affected lower level managers in their daily operations. This also involved centralization of decisions related to IT investment and rigid budgetary control for IT departments. Participants were also bitter about not being included in key decisions which concerned their area of expertise. As a strategy to solve this challenge, participants proposed the development of a business and IT strategy that is feedback driven starting from the bottom to the top.

4.4 Skills

In addition, the ever-changing nature of the IT environment was a challenging factor mentioned by participants. They describe that not only was it a problem working with business professionals, it was equally a problem working with other IT professionals. Participants described that IT experts had to improve on their skills to meet with innovations and to adapt to new training and education in the field. Participant (1) described that the exponential growth of IT and the fact that a wide range of IT specialists were often used for a single task made it challenging among them to work smoothly. Participant (1) even described that the wide diversities of the IT, made it even harder sometimes to figure out what exact IT strategy was appropriate to solve a particular problem. Arguing that business professionals due to their poor perception of IT often made this complicated. A challenging hurdle for IT-Business alignment was the lack of training for professionals to be able to accept the contribution of IT and business in the success of the organization. This is how he described it.

“I think this exponential growth of IT is a problem for professionals working together. Even within the field of IT, IT professional are also experiencing this problem within themselves because within your small area of expertise you still need to figure out how to work with business professionals. With huge number of people working in various directions, it becomes difficult because Business may often approach a wrong IT person to do a job in which they want. Business professionals should actually understand the limitations of the ITsystems. I think that is the problem with IT, with many number of people working together”.(Participant 1)

When asked about what strategy could be put in place to solve this problem, participants described that it was important for both business and IT professionals to be involve in some sort of basic training of IT, emphasising that they do not need to be programmers but should have a broader perspective about IT as a whole. Another participant indicated that business professionals should have some basic knowledge and training on how IT operates. They should get some education on what is happening in the company and be updated about current developments in both business and IT.
“If they had some understanding of IT, I think that would actually change their view of IT, in my opinion, they don’t think about integration, they have a narrow view of IT, they just see it as technology. They don’t really have the knowledge from an IT perspective. I don’t think actually that they need to be programmers, they just need some basic knowledge of the systems as a whole” (Participant 5)

Participant (2) also shared a similar view.

“If they [business managers] had like some basic experience about how IT operates in the company then it would be good, the problem that we see is that those Business guys are not familiar with the operations of the company. As I told you if the management can adequately train managers on IT, some misconception about IT....” (Participant 2)

As a summary, skills remain a major challenge to alignment. Lack of training by business professionals in aspects such as IT integration was pointed out. Lack of training and education on IT provided business professionals with a narrow understanding of technology. As a solution to this problem, participants described that business managers weren’t suppose to be programmers, but they needed to have some familiarity on IT through training.

5. Discussion

This study was motivated by the need to understand the challenges faced and strategies developed by IT managers to achieve IT-Business alignment. IT managers were chosen in particular because of the increasing and changing nature of IT in the areas of innovation, joint R&D, collaboration, and global business dynamics. These changes necessitated the need for organizations in general and IT and business managers in particular to reconsider and refigure new ways of using IT capabilities and business resources to respond to problems and opportunities. Besides these developments, the increasing use of IT in industrial settings unlike decades ago meant that there was need to understand how IT managers in particular collaborated with non-IT managers such as business managers to responded to this new role played by IT in organizations. Besides being an equally unstable and volatile area of concern, prior literature on IT-Business alignment had focused on managerial and organizational factors affecting alignment in rather stable environments. Thus to fulfill this objective, we went into the field using a qualitative research strategy to get the personal experiences of IT managers through interviews. Partially informed by theory and related literature, the results of the interviews are discussed below under the major themes of Communication, Partnership, Governance and Skill. The challenges and strategies are discussed jointly under the various themes.
5.1 Communication

Prior research on IT-Business alignment singles out communication as one of the most critical challenges (Hu & Huang, 2006; Evans; 2004). Until date, communication remains one of the most important challenges to IT-Business alignment as described by many participants in this study. Participants described that this gap in communication was mainly because of failure to understand IT by business professionals and failure by IT managers to get a firm grip of business. This lack of understanding from both sides manifested in the form of poor description of requirements, which affected communication between business and IT managers in the strategic planning process. As described by research participants, business professionals due their poor understanding of IT portrayed a rather poor perception and vague description of the organizational objectives from an IT perspective. However, the empirical data indicated that IT managers had the presumed task of ensuring that they were understood by business professionals and not vice versa. This view is supported by Smith et al; (2007) study of 15 senior managers which indicated that IT managers still had the presumed responsibility of letting business managers to understand their ideas and not vice versa. However, participants fell short of pointing out elaborate or formal measures taken to solve the communication challenge. The main strategy described by participants was that improved communication was the most reliable strategy to resolve this challenge, through understanding of IT by business managers and effective knowledge sharing. This view is shared by Evans (2004), Reich and Benbasat (2000) who proposed strategies such as effective communication and effective knowledge sharing between business and IT professionals.

One challenging aspects of communication which prior literature on alignment has not paid much attention to was the ineffective communication that equally existed among IT professionals. While current research on alignment has narrowly view communication as a gap between IT and business professionals or non-IT professionals, the empirical findings indicated that there is a growing gap as far as communicating among IT professionals is concern. This aspect of alignment has attracted less attention in current research. This may suggest that alignment as discussed would gradually be a more subjective issue based on how it is view and by whom. The issue of communication being a challenge within IT professionals and their peers may be attributed to the emergence of diverse technologies and the rapid innovations in IT. Also, the fact that the IT environment is often labor intensive requiring a high level of knowledge expertise of professionals having diverse viewpoints may also account for this communication gap. Take the case of software developers using various programming language from Java script, CC+, and other advanced computer language. This means that this group may not only be challenged communicating with business professionals, they may equally get it uneasy dealing and communicating with other IT specialists as well. This thesis highlights that alignment should not be view strictly as an IT-Business divide, it should be viewed in such a way that it takes into cognizance aligning the various technologies within the company.
5.2 Partnership

Building a good partnership between IT and business professionals was also important to achieve alignment. The results indicated that business strategy was often more of interest for organizations than IT strategy. Participants described that the aspect of fusion or integration in alignment was achieve by first developing the business strategy then followed by the IT strategy and not vice versa. The results indicate that while IT plays a pivotal role in the strategic planning process, it remains the executive perspective discussed by Henderson and Ventkatraman (1990) in the strategic alignment model (SAM). This perspective of IT-Business alignment focuses more on allowing the business strategy to drive and shape the IT strategy. Henderson and Ventkraman (1993) argue that this perspective of strategic alignment is the most widely known and that it uses a top-down formulation approach. This view also supports the argument made by Evans, (2004) that achieving a fruitful partnership between IT and business goes beyond strategic alignment; it involves making IT an integral part of the organization referring to this as fusion. What is interesting here is that while one would have expected that IT play a primary role in driving strategy formulation given its wide usage in business operations, it only came in secondary after performance indicators or business projections and the business strategy have been drafted.

Chan (2002) is also of the opinion that improving informal structures within organizations such as relationship building between IT and non-IT professionals helps to reduce partnership problems which may arise due to lack of effective communication. The question here is whether we can actually controlled alignment especially when changes in IT and business environment are frequent. Ciborra, (2000, p. 26) assertion that it “will always be difficult to achieve” alignment, indicates that alignment is rather not a fixed process but a continuous process that needs to be constantly reviewed to reflects changes in the business environment.

5.3 Governance and Skills

The lack of involvement of key stakeholders in the strategic planning was a major challenge to IT-Business alignment described by participants. Lack of involvement of key stakeholders affected alignment negatively given that stakeholders with poor knowledge of IT made key strategic decisions. Omission of key stakeholders in the decision making process made lower level managers develop some sort of resistance to change given that they felt alienated from the whole process. They developed the feeling that something “foreign” was imposed upon them. This view is supported by a study conducted by Bush et al., (2009) which found out that failure to involve key stakeholders in the decision making process, lack of a clear decision making process in IT investment, resistance to change, lack of top management support, lack of resources and the complexity of the organization adversely affected alignment. This view is also shared by Vander Zee and De Jong (1999) who points out that exclusion of key stakeholders and a top-down alignment process easily failed due to lack of flexibility at lower levels of the organization. Poor knowledge of IT, alienation of the IT function, negatively affected alignment through difficulties in cross-functional training and job rotation in the organization between IT and non-IT professionals. This helped to widen the IT and business divide. Participants shared the concern that centralization and the top-
down strategic planning process do not reflect the reality on the ground, given that top management was often not in touch with the challenges faced in the day-to-day interaction between IT and business staffs. This view is shared by Kearns and Sabherwal (2006) study of a survey of 274 IT managers, that indicated that centralization of decisions related to IT, affected IT-Business alignment indirectly through its impact on top management knowledge of IT and involvement of IT managers in the strategic planning process. This view also strengthens Weiss and Thorogood (2005) argument that alignment is often discussed in a top-down approach making it a challenging task to implement in very unstable and lower levels of the organization. In addition, the results indicate that IT managers had the presume responsibility of convincing business managers of the value of IT. This view is also supported by a study carried out by Smith et al., (2007) of 115 senior manager in Australia which found out that IT managers had the presumed responsibility of understanding the business operations and convincing senior management of the value of IT for the organization and not vice versa.

The results of this study shed some interesting insight on IT-Business alignment. It indicates that many of the problems that actually challenge IT-Business alignment revolve around people issues. This may suggest that technical issues such as architectural integration, managing emerging technology and architectural transparency are indirectly caused by failure to handle people issues such communication, partnership, skills and governance properly. Thus, it is important that organizations actually develop solutions to tackle the right problems by going after the right causes. This may involve tackling issues that help to widen the gap between people related problems in the organization. From the results, we can also understand that IT managers seem not fully involve in the decision making process as they would have expected. This made them felt relegated to the backyard. This issue seems related to the failure of IT and business professionals to fully appreciate the value of each other in the organization. This problem may be caused by lack of cross-functional rotation in the organization for IT and business professionals to have an overview of the role of one another in the organization. The inability of IT professionals to handle relationship issues has also been identified by Patching and Chatham (1998) who argue that IT managers are often lacking in people skills and are “political naive” in their ability to handle people issues and relational issues. While the reviewed literature does not give much detail as to why IT managers were poor with people issues, one may suggest that it could be the nature of their work, which requires concentration and less time spend dealing with people issues such as communicating. As concerns the issue of rapidly changing developments in IT, it could require that IT managers remain as much updated as possible with developments in business and IT. This would not only make them useful for the organization, it would also help to reduce the communication gap between other IT professionals indicated by participants in this study. By building good relationships, the IT and business managers can best appreciate each other perspective, this may go a long way to further understanding between IT and business professionals when they communicate.
5.4 Summary

Overall, we can summaries that challenges and strategies to alignment remain ever wider. However, the main categories of challenges and strategies include communication, partnership, skills, and governance. The challenges to alignment discussed above are rather influenced by people than technical issues. Communication wise, alignment is challenged because of the poor understanding of IT by business managers and a lack of understanding of the role IT plays in the organization. Concerning partnership, alignment is challenged by the poor partnership that exists between IT and business professionals caused by factors such as poor perception by business professionals of the role IT plays. This involved the lack of involvement of IT managers in the strategic planning process. Concerning governance, aspects such as poor prioritization of IT, top-down strategic planning process, and centralization of decisions in IT related investment affected alignment negatively. Concerning skills, business professionals lacked the necessary training to be able to make broad decisions on IT related issues such as strategic integration. Strategies proposed by IT managers to solve these challenges include better training for business managers to understand IT, involvement of IT managers in the strategic formulation process, bottom-up and feedback driven IT and business strategies, and inclusion of key stakeholders in the decision making process.

5.5 Conclusion and Suggestion for further research

Research on IT-Business alignment has been numerous so too have been the findings. Undisputed is the fact that prior studies have demonstrated the importance of IT-Business alignment. In addition, prior researchers have pointed out a number of enablers and inhibitors to alignment. Some have focused on creating frameworks to facilitate the achievement of alignment; others have focused more on managerial and organizational factors that hinder alignment. Keeping with the pace of developments in IT and the increasing role IT plays in businesses, not much had been done to understand the challenges of IT business alignment from the perspective of IT managers of lately. In addressing this current problem given the ever-changing nature of IT, this thesis focused on IT managers/professionals. Major themes that hinder or foster alignment include communication, partnership, governance, and skills. These core challenges/ strategies are intertwined. Ineffective communication between business and IT managers, caused by factors such as lack of understanding of IT by business professionals, poor knowledge sharing, goes a long way to affect the partnership between IT and business professionals in the form of negative perception of IT by business professionals and less involvement of IT in the strategic planning process. Poor partnership and communication negatively affected governance through aspects such as poor prioritizing of IT in the decision making process due to lack of involvement of IT managers in the strategic planning process. Lack of communication, partnership and governance, affects skills negatively through its impact on managers in the form of resistance to change, trust and lack of cross-training between IT and business professionals. Overall, these challenges are interwoven and thus insulating the impact of individual factors would be tricky. This chain of interwoven factors affects alignment negatively and the improvement on these factors enhances the alignment process.
Thus from this set of processes, one can conclude that alignment is mostly affected by human relations problems than the technical related problems.

Given the interrelated nature of these factors, it is very important that in trying to attain alignment or develop strategies, organizations should develop a broader perspective to treat the challenges all together not as single-out factors that affect alignment individually. Thus understanding these challenges to IT-Business alignment enables stakeholders to understand that that while individually they contribute to an organization’s success, achieving sustained alignment between IT and business requires working together harmoniously with a holistic view in approaching and identifying problems.

While this research was focused on understanding the challenges to IT business alignment from the perspective IT managers, mentioned must be made of some limitations of the present study. In the first place, it would have been necessary to get the viewpoint of business professionals as well. This might have provided the research with a balance view of the challenges and strategies developed by these set of actors to alignment. Given that developments in IT are not limited only to IT managers but equally to the business as a whole, I am suggesting that future research should be carried out to understand the challenges to IT-Business alignment from both business and IT managers. This could provide valuable insight to organizations on how to utilize their IT capabilities and business assets to make organizations smarter. A comparative research could equally be carried out to understand unique strategies or models for various industries to attain alignment that reflects the current changes in the business environment in these industries.
References


Chan, Y. E. (2002) “Why Haven’t We Mastered Alignment? The Importance of Organizational Structure.” MIS Quarterly Executive, (1)2, pp. 97-112


Appendix 1: Interview Guide

**Governance:** This theme refers to the involvement of stakeholders such as IT managers in the strategic planning process. It includes aspects such as prioritization of IT, involvement of IT managers in decision making in control of IT investments and the management style adopted in the strategy formulation process (top down or bottom-up). To explore this theme question such the involvement IT managers in the development of the business and IT strategies in their organizations.

**Communication:** This theme refers to the level of understanding of business by IT managers, knowledge sharing and how effective are ideas exchange between IT and business professional and even between IT managers and other IT managers. Questions such as the level of communication and how effective communication was achieved and measures taken to improve effective exchange of idea relates to this theme.

**Partnership:** This refers to the aspects relating to the relationship between IT managers, business managers and other professionals. This equally involve aspects such as the perception of IT by business professional and the role IT managers play in development of business objectives.

**Skills:** This theme refers to the level of skills of participants in other knowledge areas. It include aspects such as training, change readiness and the level of awareness of IT managers of other aspects in the company.