

# The Influential Factors of Strategic Thinking at the Organizational Level

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## Abstract

Competition was previously defined based on time, space and resources, but it is increasingly determined as the quality of strategic thinking in terms of opportunities, core competencies and capabilities. Strategic thinking can be used in any organization seeking to gain a competitive edge. With a focus on improvement, often through creativity and innovation, strategic thinking builds a vision for an organization's future prior to the linear process of developing a strategic plan. This research was conducted to identify the factors that influence strategic thinking at the organizational level. Vital data were gathered through questionnaire by the sample of 150 respondent from the population of 270 top and mid-level managers of Shiraz municipality. Questionnaire validity was achieved by factor analysis and professor's opinion and it's reliability that counted by way of alpha cronbakh was evaluated 0.71. The results of empirical analysis provide evidence that the attitude of firm's management toward risk taking, the CEO's emphasis on strategic thinking, interdepartmental teams in the organization, reward systems and marketing and technological competency foster strategic thinking, in contrast, formalization and centralization in the organizational structure impede it. The results also show that market and technological turbulence foster strategic thinking at the organizational level.

**Keywords:** Strategic thinking , Organizational culture, Organizational structure, Competencies , Market turbulence

## 1. Introduction

Developing a management framework to guide strategic thinking in changing markets is increasingly critical for researchers and executives in coping with the complex and rapidly changing global business environment. New strategic thinking logic and initiatives require a conceptual framework to guide obtaining information, perceptive interpretation of strategic issues and trends, and choice of the right strategic initiatives (Craven et al,2005). Articulating strategic thinking as ends, ways, and means is only one step in a sophisticated intellectual process seeking to create a synthesis of consensus, efforts, and circumstances to influence the overall environment favorably while managing the risks involved in pursuing opportunities or reacting to threats (Yarger,2006). Therefore the importance of focus on strategic thinking at the individual and organizational level will be vivid.

This paper begins by highlighting the importance of strategic thinking and then proceeds by critically evaluating the strategic thinking literature. Our objective is to develop a revised conceptual framework to guide strategic thinking at the oranzational level and refresh the concept of strategic thinking and identify the influential elements. The framework is based on conceptual logic from multiple disciplines including marketing strategy and strategic management that links the firm's internal and external variables to strategic thinking. Next, each of the major dimensions of the conceptual model is examined. An inductive methodology to generate data related to strategic thinking practice is then outlined. The model is empirically analyzed using data, collected from Shiraz municipality. Finally, important implications of the framework are considered.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Definition of strategic thinking

Previous research provides different definitions of strategic thinking. Yarger (2006) asserts that strategic thinking is about thoroughness and holistic thinking that seeks to understand how the parts interact to form the whole by looking at parts and relationships among the effects they have on one another in the past, present, and anticipated future. Graetz (2002) defines the strategic thinking as efforts for innovation and imagination of the future which leads to a redefinition of basic strategies and even industrial businesses. Kaufman (1991) views strategic thinking as "practical dreaming" in the way in which people in an organization assess, view, and create the future for themselves and their associates by defining and envisioning results that add value. This

kind of thinking contributes to broad, general, overarching concepts that focus the future direction of an organization based on anticipated environmental conditions.

Bonn (2005) declares that strategic thinking is a continuous process which tries to remove the ambiguities and signify a complicated atmosphere. This process entails the analysis of the situation and also a creative combination of the results in the form of a successful strategic plan. The strategic thinking refers to a creative and diverse process which is related to the prospects and horizons of the organization managers (Heracleous, 1998).

Evans (2007) states that strategic thinking involves information gathering, analysis and exchange of ideas in the present state of the organization. Heracleous (1998) and Liedtka (1998) each view strategic thinking as a highly creative, innovative, and unconventional method of thinking. It should be viewed as “central to creating and sustaining competitive advantage” and is the tool to get done what most leadership competencies seek to move an organization forward, innovate, streamline, and evoke greater productivity.

## 2.2. Elements of strategic thinking

Prior research has suggested a number of key elements that are relevant to strategic thinking. Liedtka (1998) includes five specific elements; systems perspective, intent-focused, thinking in time, hypothesis-driven and intelligently opportunistic. In this study, systematic thinking, creative thinking, vision-driven thinking, and market-oriented thinking are suggested as the key elements of strategic thinking. Fig. 1 shows the strategic thinking elements.

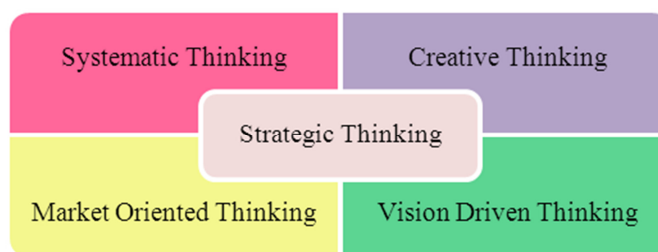


Fig. 1. The elements of strategic thinking

### 2.2.1. Systematic thinking

This kind of thinking simplifies organizations by helping them see the deeper patterns lying behind the events and the details” (Senge, 1990). He stated that any problem must be solved starting from the whole, one component can not be affected separately from other components. It helps to detect the order in the complexity and is more accommodating to human understanding of reality. Systematic thinking is a discipline for seeing the ‘structure’ that underlie complex situations (Senge, 2007).

### 2.2.2. Creative thinking

A prerequisite for new approaches and envisioning better ways is creativity, in particular the ability to question prevalent concepts and perceptions (De Bono, 1996). He asserted that “without creativity we are unable to make full use of the information and experience that is already available to us. This involves challenging the tyranny of the given by questioning prevailing beliefs or mental models in the organization (Gallimore, 1997).

### 2.2.3. Vision-driven thinking

Vision-driven thinking starts with a very high-level of the future rather than risking becoming attracted to and stuck in today’s problems. The vision-driven approach initially encourages broad, imaginative thinking and discourages tunnel vision and entrapment in details (Switzer, 2008). Collins and Porras (1998) showed that leaders of companies with a strong sense of vision placed great emphasis on building an organization that had a deep understanding of its reason for existence and its core values.

### 2.2.4. Market-oriented thinking

Narver and Slater (1990) stated that market orientation is a business culture in which all employees are committed to the continuous creation of superior value for customers. Findings suggest that a market orientation is positively related to business performance in all types of markets (Slater and Narver, 1994). Rivera (1995) defined market orientation as a strategy that is used to attain a sustainable competitive advantage.

## 3. Model and research hypotheses

In this study, previous research regarding the factors that affect strategic thinking have been reviewed. Liedtka (1998) suggests that the inter-related elements of strategic thinking when taken together can lead to significant positive outcomes in organizations, provided there is the accompanying supportive strategic planning context to encourage and enable the implementation of the fruits of this type of thinking.

Previous research on market orientation showed that market orientation is influenced by such factors as top management emphasis, risk aversion, interdepartmental connection and conflict and organizational systems

such as formalization, centralization, and payment system orientation (Moon,2013). The intent of strategic thinking is to more fully capture and analyse the relevant forces creating new market opportunities and business strategy requirements. (Craven et al,2005).

Our intention is to suggest tentative framework of conceptual handles as the basis for further research. At this stage based on data from this study and the strategy literature a tentative model that links a firm's internal and external variables to strategic thinking is proposed. Fig.2 depicts these relationships. Organizational culture, organizational structure, and resources/competencies are identified as the internal variables that influence strategic thinking at the organizational level. Market turbulence and technological turbulence are identifiable as the external variables that affect strategic thinking.

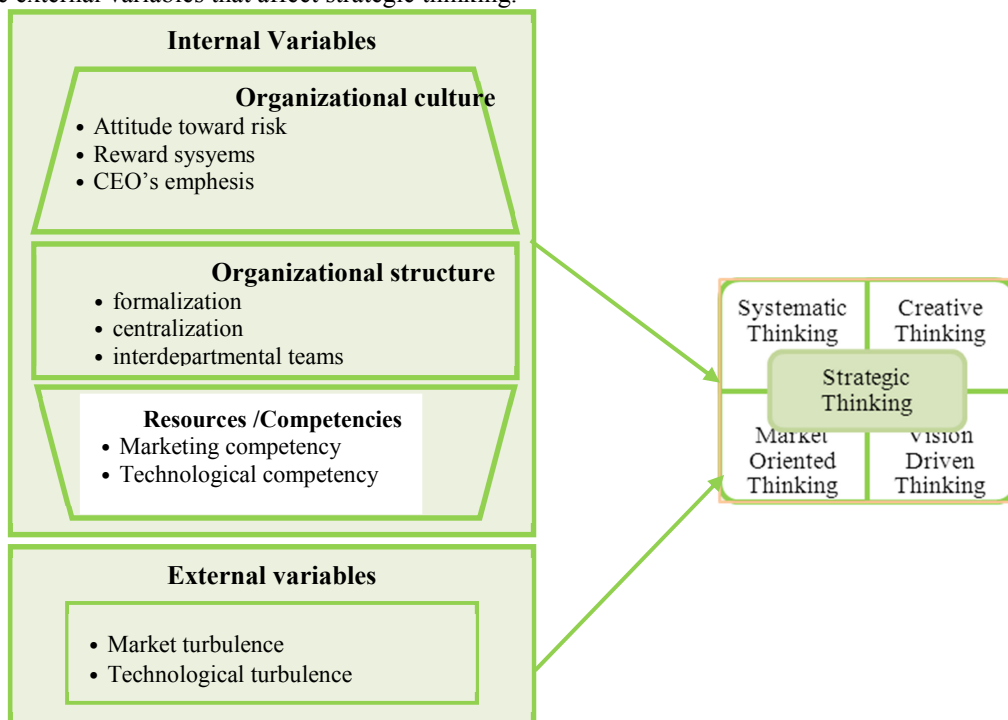


Fig. 2. A model to understand the antecedents strategic thinking

### 3.1. Internal variables that influence strategic thinking

#### 3.1.1. Organizational culture

The degree of strategic thinking depends on the presence or absence of some internal factors of the company. Belias and Koustelios (2011) realized that significant strategic or structural realignment cannot occur if it is not supported by the organization's values and behavioral norms. Allio (2006) stated that corporate culture is one of the ten big elements of strategic thinking.

Integrating into business strategy and corporate culture, risk appetite acts as a guideline for risk-taking activities. Keeping risk appetite in mind for business decisions and operations facilitates risk identification and monitoring (Shang & Chen,2012). It is expected that a high risk aversion in decision making will imply a lower volatility profit and other performance measures (Smith & Nina,2013).Top management's positive attitude toward change is essential to develop novel solutions (Moon,2013).

*H1: Top management's favorable attitude toward risk-taking has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

The reward and compensation system is a critical factor of organizational culture because it can either encourage or impede employees' actions (Hambrick & Snow, 1989). Reward systems are a critical part of any organization's design. How well they fit with the rest of the systems in an organization has an important impact on how effective the organization is and on the quality of life that people experience in the organization. Bonn (2005) declared that a reward system that includes long-term and qualitative aspects of executive performance can lead the organization to achieve its strategic objectives due to its influence on executive behavior.

*H2: Reward systems that include a high portion of long-term and qualitative aspects of performance has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

Slater and Narver (1994) showed that top management's emphasis on market orientation fosters the firm's market orientation. Systems perspective is the ability to connect the internal organisation with the external environment, to understand the nature of the business ecosystem, making horizontal and vertical linkages across the system from multiple perspectives (Bartelett,2001). A strategic thinker has a mental model of the complete end-to-end system of value creation, his or her role within it, and an understanding of the competencies it contains (Liedtka,1998). Thus, top management's emphasis on strategic thinking may encourage employees to take a holistic perspective and thereby foster strategic thinking (Moon,2013).

*H3: Top management's emphasis on strategic thinking has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

### **3.1.2. Organizational structure**

Organizational structure is a framework that gives the management the power to delegate authority and supervise them (Elsaid et.al,2013). Organic structures are fitted for the strategic thinking because they increase interaction and communication and encourage providing new ideas. On the contrary, mechanical structures prevent communication and exchange of ideas (Iran-Zadeh et al., 2008). From the perspective of organizational structure, Pandelica, and Dumitru (2009) show that formalization and centralization are organizational structural characteristics that prevent market orientation because tasks and affairs are highly formal, information network is limited and duties have been divided based on circles.

*H4: Formalization in the organizational structure has a negative impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

Olson, Walker, and Ruekert (1995) show that high autonomy in the firm is positively related to radical product innovation. Bonn (2005) notes that the involvement of middle managers in the strategic decision-making process fosters strategic thinking within an organization. In organic structures communication network goes through bottom to top, top to bottom and horizontal paths and individuals are allowed to have active contribution in decision making process (Robbins, 2008). In these organizations, more attention is on creativity and innovative activities. In an organization with a mechanical structure, low level staffs are not allowed to participate in decision making process. (Nezami et al,2014).

*H5: Centralization in the organizational structure has a negative impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

Inter-departmental collaboration describes the exchange of information and the coordination of activities across interdependent organizational units (Eisenhardt,1995). It increases firms' innovation performance because it fosters information exchange, enhances the number of potentially useful ideas, increases flexibility of the workforce, and improves functional performance of new products (Troy et al., 2008). Matsuno et al. (2002) demonstrates that departmentalization is negatively related to market orientation. Thus, to encourage the generation of ingenuity and creativity from all individual employees, interdepartmental connections or teams should be arranged (Moon,2013).

*H6: Interdepartmental teams in the organization has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

### **3.1.3. Resources/competencies**

From the horizon of resources and competencies, (Mildred et al.,2008) stated that competitive advantage results from the use of resources and capabilities to generate differential satisfaction in profitable markets. Song and Parry (1997) identify marketing and technical skills and resources as sources of competitive advantage for succeeding in new product development. The basis for a competitive advantage often lies in the resources and abilities that are already available. Begin by taking a critical look at the existing resources and product/service offerings (Ehmke,2005). The company's orientation towards the market is constantly associated with innovation and competitiveness (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990).

Strategic thinking is the basis of development in business of today and is consistent with social transformations, technological achievements and the demands of developing competitive environments (Smith, 2002). Accordingly, development of an organization merely does not depend on managers, their decisions and thoughts, but it depends on their technical, human and perceptual skills (Hosseini, 2007). Technical skills have positive and significant effects on the level of strategic thinking of managers (Namazi and Shafiei,2014). In addition, Song and Parry (1997) show that a project's fit with the firm's technological skills and resources is

positively related to proficiency in the technological development stage of newproduct development.

*H7: Marketing competency in the organization has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

*H8: Technological competency in the organization has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

### **3.2. External variables that influence strategic thinking**

Prior research on market orientation has acknowledged that external environmental factors influence the firm's market orientation and business performance (Moon,2013). The external environmental context has a significant effect on decision making and innovation (Waddock and Isabella,1990). Research has established a significant positive relationship between environmental uncertainty and organizational innovations such as changes in organizational form, strategy, and culture (Damanpour,1996). Uncertainty in the environment has often led to greater innovative behaviors within the organizations (Tornatzky et.al ,1990). Lattimer (2008) argued that the depth of business uncertainty influences the need for strategic thinking.

Market turbulence is evidenced by instability and lack of clear direction in a market. Turbulence raises uncertainty about the outcomes of business activities and denies information and direction needed to reduce risk in decisions (Knight, 1921; Keynes, 1937). Turbulence increases the need for rapid innovation but it concurrently forces manager to make risky investment decisions (Calantone, et.al., 2003) and often leads to rapid entry of firms and products in markets, while simultaneously leading to the exit of some companies and products. Kim et.al. (1998) show that turbulence in the market and technology strengthens the market orientation-innovativeness relationship. Gatignon and Xuereb (1997) also demonstrated that when market demand is uncertain, firms with high technology and market orientation achieve better innovation performance. Considering that the nature of strategic thinking is the management of chaos and complexity, environmental uncertainties are likely to be critical factors of strategic thinking (Moon.2013).

*H9: Market turbulence has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

*H10: Technological turbulence has a positive impact on strategic thinking within the organization.*

## **4. Observation and results**

The present study is considered as an applied survey research. The aim is to examine the relationship between firm's external and internal variables and strategic thinking at the organizational level through descriptive and analytical methods. In fact, these methods were mainly used to examine the research variables in a descriptive and analytical way to identify the relationship among them in the Iranian Society, especially, in Shiraz municipality of Fars Province. Thus, the main goal of this study is to investigate the factors that influence strategic thinking at the organizational level. The research population consisted of all of the official top and mid-level managers of Shiraz municipality of Fars Province. The population size of respondents was 270 consisted of top and mid-level managers. According to Kerjisy and Morgan table, the sample size of employees was estimated 160.

The analysis was conducted through SPSS program using the sample of 150 returned questionnaires. Strategic thinking questionnaires were distributed among top and mid-level managers, respectively. They had a 45-day deadline to complete the questionnaires, and this was determined in order to prevent any negligence and to ensure the accuracy of the answers. The questionnaires were distributed after homogenizing the sample. The questionnaire was a standard questionnaire designed by the researcher Byeong-Joon Moon. The questionnaire was consisted of two parts: internal and external factors with 33 indices of strategic thinking in 11 parts (attitude of firms' management toward risk taking, CEO's emphasis on strategic thinking, interdepartmental teams in the organization, marketing competency, technological competency, formalization , centralization in the organizational structure , market turbulence and technological turbulence). Its content and face validity were both confirmed by some scholars of strategic thinking. Using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=0.71$ ), the questionnaire's reliability was confirmed.

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of each of the constructs are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire

Row	Construct	Alpha's Cronbach
1	Attitude toward risk	0.776
2	Reward system	0.716
3	CEO's emphasis	0.763
4	Formalization	0.721
5	Centralization	0.746
6	Interdepartmental teams	0.742
7	Marketing competency	0.666
8	Technological competency	0.733
9	Marketing turbulence	0.779
10	Technological turbulence	0.739
11	Strategic thinking	0.839

The results obtained from demographic statistical data of respondents are shown in table 2.

Table2. measuring the descriptive indexes

Specification	Statistical indicators	Frequency	Frequency %
Gender	Male	104	69.3
	Female	46	30.7
	Total	150	100
Age	20-30	35	23.3
	30-40	84	56
	40-50	31	20.7
	Over 50	0	0
	Total	150	100
Education	Diploma	13	8.6
	BS.c	53	35.4
	MS.c	78	52
	P.H.D	0	0
	Not mentioned	6	4
	Total	150	100
Work experience	1-5	30	20
	5-10	46	30.6
	10-15	31	20.7
	15-20	28	18.7
	20-25	8	5.3
	Over 25	0	0
	Not mentioned	7	4.7
	Total	150	100
Organizational position	Top manager	1	0.7
	Mid-level manager	73	48.7
	Supervisor	74	49.3
	Not mentioned	2	1.3
	Total	150	100

The main results were obtained from one-sample T-test , Kolmogorov-Smirnov and regression. Due to the nature of the study and after consulting with statistics experts, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to ensure the normal distribution of data ( $P < 0/05$ ). The p-value of each of the constructs was bigger than .05, as shown in table 3, and thus the normality was acceptable.

Table 3. test result -Kolmogorov-Smirnov

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test												
		Attitude toward risk	Reward system	CEO's emphasis	Formalization	Centralization	Interdepartmental teams	Marketing competency	Technological competency	Marketing turbulence	Technological turbulence	
N		150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	3.28	3.28	3.93	3.71	3.75	3.50	3.26	3.62	2.78	3.18	3.52
	Std. Deviation	.317	.527	.414	.598	.485	.570	.674	.608	.763	.650	.710
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.383	.193	.257	.206	.170	.298	.263	.227	.159	.269	.207
	Positive	.250	.193	.157	.160	.115	.298	.263	.155	.128	.124	.207
	Negative	-.383	-.138	-.257	-.206	-.170	-.269	-.157	-.227	-.159	-.269	-.205
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		4.689	2.364	3.149	2.522	2.083	3.650	3.226	2.784	1.943	3.297	2.538
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000

Table 4 consists of some information about mean, degree of freedom and confidence intervals of research variables including internal and external factors influence strategic thinking at the organizational level.

Table 4. test result (Mean , degree of freedom)

T-test						
Test Value = 0						
	T	Degree of freedom	P-value	Mean difference	Confidence interval 95%	
					Lower band	Upper band
Attitude toward risk	126.602	149	0.000	3.278	3.23	3.33
Reward system	76.255	149	0.000	3.280	3.20	3.36
CEO's emphasis	116.189	149	0.000	3.927	3.86	3.99
Formalization	75.892	149	0.000	3.700	3.61	3.80
Centralization	94.631	149	0.000	3.750	3.67	3.83
Interdepartmental teams	75.318	149	0.000	3.504	3.41	3.60
Marketing competency	59.211	149	0.000	3.260	3.15	3.37
Technological competency	72.896	149	0.000	3.620	3.52	3.72
Marketing turbulence	44.707	149	0.000	3.748	3.66	3.91
Technological turbulence	59.791	149	0.000	3.176	3.07	3.28

As shown in table 5 ,the p-value of each of the constructs based on one-sample T test ,was bigger than .05, thus the hypothesis were supported.

Table 5. test result of hypothesis

		constructs	P-value	result
Internal factors	Organizational culture	H1: Management attitude toward risk has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
		H2: Reward system has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
		H3: CEO's emphasis has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
	Organizational structure	H4: Interdepartmental teams has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
		H5: Formalization in the organizational structure has a negative impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
		H6: Centralization in the organizational structure has a negative impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
	Resources/competency	H7: Marketing competency has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
		H8: Technological competency has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
External factors	turbulence	H9: Market turbulence turbulence has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported
		H10: Technological turbulence has a positive impact on strategic thinking	0.000	supported

Figure 3 shows the standardized path coefficients of each constructs.

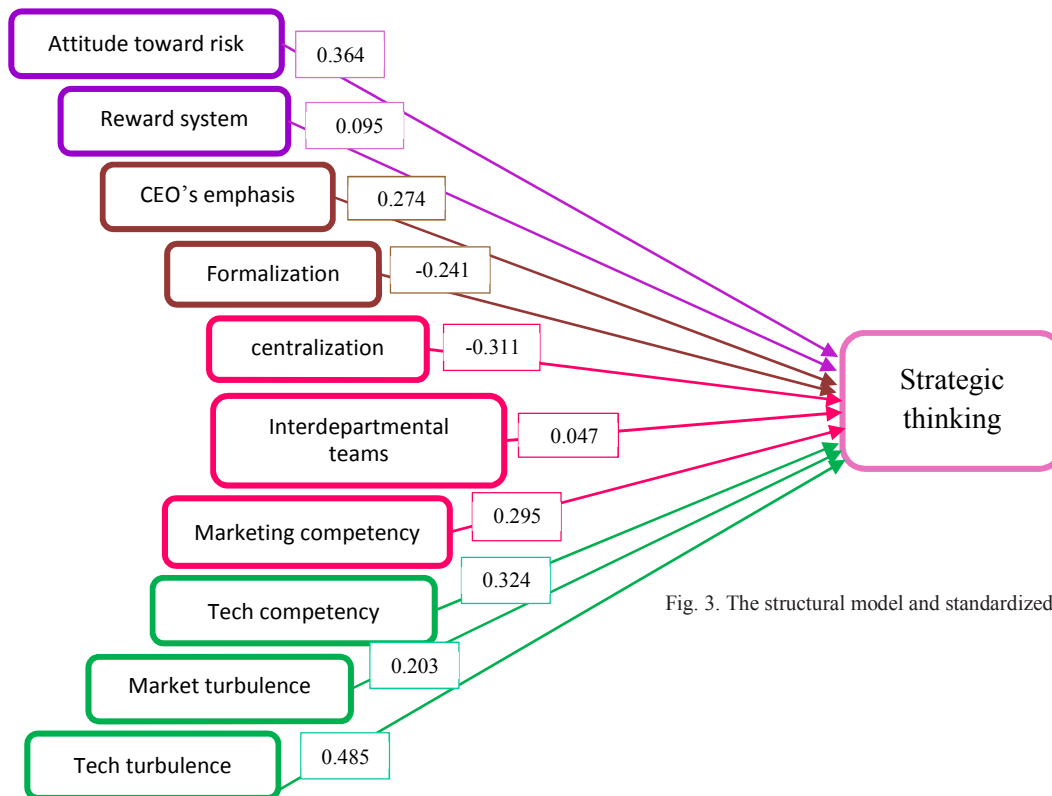


Fig. 3. The structural model and standardized path coefficients.

Table 6. Standardized Path Coefficients Of The Structural Model

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		
		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		Beta		
1	Attitude toward risk	.364	4.755	.000
2	Reward system	.095	1.164	.246
3	CEO's emphasis	.274	3.460	.001
4	Formalization	-.241	-3.018	.003
5	Centralization	-.311	-3.985	.000
6	Interdepartmental teams	.047	.575	.566
7	Marketing competency	.295	3.756	.000
8	Technological competency	.324	4.170	.000
9	Marketing turbulence	.203	2.528	.013
10	Technological turbulence	.485	6.751	.000

a. Dependent Variable: strategic thinking

The final goal of this study was to determine the influential factors of strategic thinking at the organizational level in Shiraz municipality of Fars Province. In this regard, as shown in table 6, the results of standardized path coefficients showed that, strategic thinking has a significant and positive relationship with attitude toward risk ( $\beta=0.364$ ), and thus it supports H1. Also, its relationship with reward system ( $\beta=0.095$ ) supports moderately H2. Strategic thinking positive link to CEO's emphasis is significantly and positively supported H3 ( $\beta=0.247$ ). However strategic thinking negatively relates to formalization and centralization ( $\beta=-0.241$ ) and ( $\beta=-0.311$ ) which support H4 and H5, respectively. A positive direct link between strategic thinking and interdepartmental teams ( $\beta=0.047$ ) is found, and therefore, H6 is supported. Strong indications for the positive effect of marketing competency ( $\beta=0.295$ ), technological competency ( $\beta=0.324$ ), marketing turbulence ( $\beta=0.203$ ) and technological turbulence ( $\beta=0.485$ ) are identified to support H7, H8, H9 and H10, respectively.

### 5.conclusion and future work

Nowadays, since the structures and functions of organizations in the field of urban management and municipal



obligations have become more complicated, municipality as an organization providing urban services for the city residents, in order to have a successful performance, should be able to provide comfort and security of citizens. The proper and efficient functions of these organizations will contribute to give citizens a chance in governance, perform related activities and increase citizen's satisfaction. The results of this study are somehow in conformity with the findings of Hanford (1995), Liedtka (1998) and Goldman (2008). The results confirm the usefulness of our conceptual framework for understanding the relationships among a internal and external firm's variables and strategic thinking.

In particular, the data on firms' internal and external variables and strategic thinking examined here clearly support the following conclusions. First, organizational culture, such as the management's attitude toward risk taking and CEO's emphasis on strategic thinking, influences the firm's strategic thinking. The importance of management attitude toward risk taking confirms Dewar and Dutton's (1986) notion of the role of management attitude toward change in radical product innovation. Second, our findings suggest that organizational structure, such as formalization and centralization in the decision-making structure, and interdepartmental teams, influence the firm's strategic thinking.

### Discussion

In General, for strategic thinking at the organizational level among senior managers, we recommend organizations to form the strategic thinking union. Such a forum should compare managers of different levels that regularly meet in a reasonable period of time. The activities of the strategic thinking union should focus on investigating topics that of great significance for the organization in the following 5-10 years. The ideas and opinions of members of the proposed strategic thinking should be presented to the senior management of the organization. It helps them to see the strategic issues from different perspectives and to challenge the common mental models of forces in the organization.

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