

# Researching together: Aligning academic employees with the institution's research strategy

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Accepted 26 January, 2017

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## ABSTRACT

Research strategy is at the top agenda of universities' strategic planning. It has been argued that aligning employees' actions with the organisational strategic goals is one of most critical success factors of strategy implementation. Despite much discussion among scholars and practitioners, there is still limited knowledge on how universities can stimulate their academic staff members' commitment and willingness to engage in behaviours that contribute to the realisation of the institution's research strategy. With a qualitative approach and within a critical research framework, this paper aims to suggest ways to stimulate employee actions that is consistent with the company's strategy; that is Strategically Aligned Behaviour (SAB). The intention of this theory-building is towards bridging the gaps between research strategy formulation and employees day-to-day activities. Based on strategic alignment and research productivity literature, our paper submits that academics' strategic knowledge, research competence, autonomy and rewards play a role in stimulating SAB. Although, an increase in research outputs among African universities has been recorded in recent years, their endeavours to align all academic employees with the research strategy is crucial to the overall success of the institution strategic goals. By exploring the antecedents to stimulate SAB among academic staff members, universities are able to increase the amount of strategically aligned employees, embed research thinking in the daily routines of academics, and encourage a more action-related behaviour towards the implementation of a research strategy. There are avenues for more research in this area of inquiry. Hence, further research is recommended.

**Keywords:** Employee strategic alignment, strategically aligned behaviours, strategy implementation, universities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the debate about the quality and quantity of research output and the factors which influence the output of university lecturers (Yates, 2005; Goodyear, 2006; Hemmings and Kay, 2007). This is driven by studies showing that research and publication productivity is one of the most critical challenges confronting African universities today, not least in order to strengthen the research capacity needed to meet the demands facing the continent (Cloete et al., 2011). This challenge is not uniquely African, as growing the number and quality of researchers is an issue in many countries in other continents and therefore

universities across the world. The concern with African institutions is not only to increase universities, research outputs, but it also demands intellectual commitment and willingness of each academic staff member. Accordingly, universities have developed their research strategies, usually as part of the overall institutional plans in order to improve the delivery of research outputs so as to optimise funds from government or private agencies. A research strategy is necessary to ensure that an environment is created that fosters creativity, and promotes innovative scholarship that is transmitted during teaching. Moreover, 'the strategy ensures that research

remains central in the University's mission, and assists to enhance the capabilities of the academic staff to strengthen and maintain a record of research excellence' (Kiangi, 2005:3).

An increase in research outputs among African universities has been recorded, in recent years. Investigating the research publication productivity at eight African universities from 2001 to 2007, Cloete et al. (2011) confirmed that there is an increase in African universities, research outputs, albeit from a low base. Similarly, Schemm (2013) noted that from 1996 to 2012, the number of research papers published in scientific journals with at least one African author more than quadrupled— from about 12,500 to over 52,000. During the same time, the share of the world's articles with African authors almost doubled from 1.2% to around 2.3%. Research outputs among African Universities can significantly improve, but only if each academic staff member perpetual commits to execute their institutions' research strategy, through research and publishing. The challenge universities' managers are faced with is to ensure that all academic staff members are committed and willing to engage in behaviours that contribute to the realisation of the institution's research strategy. In order to overcome this challenge, there is a need for each individual academics' work behaviour to be aligned with their institution's research strategy. This paper responds to this challenge by providing insights on managerial practices that can stimulate behaviour among academics that are aligned with the research strategy and the implications thereof. Following Gagnon and Michael's (2003) viewpoint, we will term this type of behaviour as "Strategically Aligned Behaviour" (SAB), which is defined as "on-the-job actions that are aligned with the strategy" (p. 26).

To date, a significant number of researchers have recognised that aligning employees with organisational strategic goals is critical to the strategy implementation success (Boswell and Boudreau, 2001; Kundu and Katz, 2003; Amour, 2004; Crotts et al., 2005; Gottschalg and Zollo, 2007; Gagnon et al., 2008). Despite the stressed importance of employees' strategic aligned behaviour, linking research strategy with academics' behaviours has proven to be a challenging task (Hebriniak, 2008). Stiffler (2004) concurs that most institutions have no idea about how to establish links between employees work behaviours and institutional strategy.

A study by Cloete et al. (2011) on the academic core strength of the eight African universities provided us with valuable insights with regard to the challenge stated above. The eight African universities included in their study were: University of Botswana, University of Dar es Salaam, Eduardo Mondlane University, University of Ghana, Makerere University, University of Mauritius, University of Nairobi, and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). At the time of their study, with the exception of NMMU, all of those institutions were considered flagship universities and rated number one in

their respective countries. Moreover, according to Cloete et al. (2011), the universities' vision and mission statements as well as their research strategies had the following aims: to have high academic ratings, making them leading or premier universities – not only in their respective countries but also in Africa; to be centres of academic excellence which are engaged in high quality research and scholarships; and to contribute to sustainable national and regional social and economic development.

However, the findings revealed that there was no evidence that the eight universities, academic cores live up to the expectations contained in their mission statements and research strategies.

The importance of research and publication in the growth and development of academics cannot be overemphasized (Anunobi and Emerole, 2008). Hence, the overall aim of research strategy is to increase the research productivity and research quality of an institution. Publication productivity, because of its measurability (namely, number of publications), is usually used as an indicator of research productivity. With the assumptions that a flagship knowledge producer must produce research-based academic articles that can be published in internationally peer-reviewed journals and/or books. Cloete et al. (2011) investigated the research outputs of the eight universities mentioned earlier for the period 2001 to 2007. These universities set the target for permanent academics at one research article to be published every two years, which translates into an annual ratio of 0.50 research publications per academic. Cloete and others, revealed that with the exceptions of NMMU (0.31) and Mauritius (0.13), the ratios of the other universities included in their study implied that on average, each of their permanent academics are likely to publish only one research article every 10 or more years.

On that background, it is inferred that the increase of the research productivity at the universities, in particular those included in the study, can be attributed to an increase in the number of publications from a few academics only. From strategic alignment perspectives, this implies that a significant number of academics fail to engage in behaviours that contribute to the realisation of the research strategy and consequently, overall institution strategic plan. Hence, most academics work behaviours are not aligned with the institutional research strategy.

A perplexing range of studies has been conducted on the universities research outputs in Africa and elsewhere. A number of these studies compared research productivity across countries or academic disciplines, explore factors affecting research productivity of faculty members and their implications (Allison and Long, 1990; Baird, 1991; Shin and Cummings, 2010; Jung, 2012; Okiki, 2013; Cele and Lekhanya, 2014; Wadesango, 2014). Some other studies explored the impact of research leadership/management and research productivity (Bosch, 2011; Goodall et al., 2014). However, a limited knowledge on ways universities can

stimulate academic staff members' commitment and willingness to engage in behaviours that contribute to the realisation of the institution's research strategy, still exist.

The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the ways that managers can promote Strategically Aligned Behaviour (SAB) among academics. In so doing, the study explores internal reward systems and management practices, among others, that may promote academic staff members actions to be aligned with the research strategy. In the sections that follow, we briefly explain the methodology followed, define the concept SAB, highlights challenges of implementing the strategy, connect employees SAB with research strategy, and then finally, discuss ways academics SAB can be achieved in universities.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative paper. Within a critical research framework, we have used a combination of methods: literature study of relevant extant texts. It is important to disclose that the authors have included their emic perspectives in an unbiased manner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the presentation of our proposal, it is important to start our argument with a theoretical framework. For this purpose, we draw from the concept of strategic alignment. We expound on this, as well as other relevant concepts in the following sections:

### Defining strategically aligned behaviour

In studying the existing literature on employee alignment with organisational strategic goals, it can be observed that numerous authors have created and used different definitions according to their own understanding of employee strategic alignment. For instance, Boswell and Boudreau (2001) refer to the employees' understanding of the organisation's objectives and how to contribute to those objectives as "line of sight" (LOS). Gagnon and Michael (2003) define employee strategic alignment as the understanding, buying-into, and acting upon a certain strategy by employees. Van Riel et al. (2008) define strategically aligned behaviour as "on-the-job actions that are aligned with the strategy" (p. 1198). Other concepts, such as strategic consensus (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992) and strategic orientation (Parker et al., 1997), have also been used to refer to the understanding of organisational strategy by employees. Taking these prior definitions and considerations into account, we define strategically aligned action as employees understanding, buying-into, and behaving consistently with a certain

strategy. The concept of strategic alignment is not new in management studies. The problem of employees not being aligned with organisational strategies has history in management science. As can be found in the following examples, Barnard (1938) underlined the need for organisational members' contribution to higher-order organisational goals. Drucker (1954) developed management by objective theory, which establishes a hierarchy of objectives for employees within an organisation with the ultimate purpose being the strategic goals of the organisation. March and Simon (1958) deliberated on the need for employees to contribute to the strategic goals of the company. Some authors discussed the importance for shaping employee mindsets to support decision-making that is in line with an organisation's objectives (Mintzberg, 1987; Weick and Roberts, 1993). Kaplan and Norton (1992) developed a management system, the Balanced Scorecard, based on four perspectives, namely; financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth. This management system enables an organisation to set, track, and achieve its key business strategies and objectives.

Recently, the concept of strategic alignment has been used to describe individual strategic contributory behaviour (Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997; Boswell and Boudreau, 2001). According to Gagnon et al. (2008), employee strategic alignment occurs when the employee's behaviour corresponds with their organisational strategy. Concerning research strategy, this implies that academics' research strategic alignment occurs when employees understand and are able to enact the University's research strategy. However, failure to align employees with the research strategic goals leads to academics failing to engage in behaviour that contributes to the realisation of the institution's research strategic objectives (Boswell and Boudreau, 2001).

Individuals are strategically aligned with the strategy when their behaviours correspond with their organisation's strategy. In this case, if a research strategy for a particular academic institution is to increase the volume and intensity of world leading research across the whole of its field of study, an employee whose decisions and behaviour is aligned to the research strategy will identify issues of concern, decide to research the identified issues, disseminate the research findings nationally and internationally, and publish the research in world-recognised journals. Similar to Drucker's (1954) management by objective viewpoint, strategic alignment requires individuals within an organisation to think and behave in a contributory manner in order to execute the strategic goals of the organisation.

### Challenges of implementing institutional strategy

Strategy execution is a critical cornerstone and an ally in

building a capable organisation and the use of appropriate levers of implementation could be the crucial turning point in the development of an organisation (Crittenden and Crittenden, 2008). The success of an organisation depends, largely, on the implementation of strategies (Noble and Mokwa, 1999). However, Mezger and Violani (2010) argue that often there is a gaping hole between an organisation's vision and the day-to-day activities of an average employee, where the practical translation of a company's strategy should be. Pfeffer and Sutton (1999) concur that there is a large gap between what an organisation and managers know they should do in order to perform better and putting their knowledge into practice or implementing their ideas.

Furthermore, it is argued that the effectiveness of strategy implementation is affected by the quality of people involved in the process (Govindarajan, 1989). This viewpoint is echoed by Viseras et al.'s (2005) finding that strategy implementation success depends crucially on people. The focus on people is also emphasised by Pryor et al. (2007) who found that people are the process owners who perform work that is consistent with the principles and processes of an organisation to achieve its purpose. Similarly, Bossidy and Charan (2008) postulate that the execution of strategy involves understanding how to link people, strategy and operation. Myler (2012) sees it as an often-missing component that, if consistently applied, will dramatically enhance the progression of strategy creation, communication and execution has underscored employee strategic alignment.

### **Employees' strategic alignment with behaviour and research strategy**

The ability to align employees with the strategic goal has become a major component of strategy execution. The actual task of academics in the research strategy implementation is to make daily decisions and perform activities that contribute to the realisation of the university's research strategy. Therefore, academics' on-the-job actions have to be aligned with the institutional research strategy (Gagnon and Michael, 2003). A research by Guth and MacMillan (1986) suggests that employees and managers are motivated to implement the strategy more by their perceived self-interest than by the strategic goals of the organisation unless they coincide. Tien (2000) conducted a study of Taiwanese faculty and their motivations to undertake or carry out research. She found that faculty members who think promotion and satisfaction of curiosity are important tend to publish articles; faculty who want to demonstrate their mastery tend to publish books; and professors who care more about personal income are more likely to seek and receive grants. Hunter and Kuh (1987), in an earlier study, found out that prolific academic writers had at least five common personal characteristics namely: high

standards for productivity, task oriented, curiosity, need for recognition, and adaptability (p. 454). Maureen Mweru, a lecturer in the educational psychology and early childhood studies departments at Kenyatta University, discussed 'why Kenyan academics do not publish in international refereed journals' (University World News, 2010). Mweru explained that, at the time of the study, academics were expected to publish only three articles within a space of three years to be eligible for promotion from lecturer to senior lecturer. Academics who publish for promotion eligibility stop writing from the moment they have the necessary number of articles published and many "do not feel the need to do the extra work" while 'a few academics argued that they were content and were not really interested in promotion because the university employed them on a permanent basis' (University World News, 2010).

Indeed, the above information suggests academics are motivated by their perceived self-interests to research and publish. It is likely that most institutional members will have their different personal goals, which they also wish to realise simultaneously along with the institution's strategy. Thus, it seems practically impossible that different employees' personal goals or interests will be congruent with the institutional strategic goals formulated by the top management team. This scenario poses a challenge for management teams to control and lead academics' behaviour, even under goal incongruence, to perceive greater utility in behaviour that is in alignment with the strategy and to behave accordingly.

Guth and MacMillan (1986) identified several sources of deviating employee behaviour. First, employees might be concerned that the outcomes of the institutional strategic goals will not satisfy their individual aspirations. Second, academics may perceive high risk of strategy failure. A study by Het (2006) found out that many academics lack confidence in their writing ability. The author further asserts that academics may feel that the quality of their work is not worthy of publication or they may believe that they have nothing new or insightful to say. A similar study by Lee and Boud (2003) found that writing actually generated fear and anxiety for a significant number of academics. Third, employees may perceive themselves to be incompetent or lack the required skills to execute the strategy. If employees do not feel that they have the requisite skills to implement the planned strategy, then they are likely to resist its implementation by deliberate actions or inactions (Heracleous, 2000). This explains McGrail et al. (2006) findings that a perceived lack of skill was found to be a barrier to publication writing.

In general, when the perceived degree of goal alignment is low, the individuals' commitment to the strategy will be low, and as a result, the amount of effort the employee would be willing to invest in implementing that strategy will also be low (Guth and MacMillan, 1986). Nutt (1986) suggests that managerial tactics and

leadership style can play a crucial role in overcoming the lower-level “obstructionism” that is predominant, to some degree, in many implementation efforts. On that note, we suggest ways that may stimulate academics’ interests in their university’s research strategy, so that they will make decisions and behave in a manner that is consistent with the institution’s research strategy; thus contributing to the realisation of the overall university’s strategic plan.

## DISCUSSION

### Achieving strategically aligned behaviour

From the aforementioned literature studies as well as from emic perspective, the achievement of a SAB that culminates into increase of quality research productivity or outputs will depend on the roles of some other factors (Figure 1).

These factors or enabling conditions are now explained separately. Even though we explain them individually, they may have overlapping influence on the overall goal.

SAB can be seen as a subset of two types of employee behaviours, namely; task performance or in-role behaviour, and contextual performance or organisational citizenship behaviour. Contextual performance refers to “activities that supported the social and psychological context in which the organization’s technical core is embedded”, while task performance refers to “activities that either supported or directly contributed to the transformation of the organisation’s inputs to outputs” (LePine et al., 2002: 53). The critical feature of SAB is that both of these types of behaviour contribute to the realisation of the strategy. However, Borman and Motowidlo (1997) argue that contextual performance is importantly different from task performance. For instance, task activities vary considerably across jobs, whereas contextual activities tend to be more similar across jobs. These activities involve discussing the strategy with others, coming up with initiatives that help implement it, and helping others to implement the strategy. These behaviours relate to contextual, rather than task performance.

Research has shown that the organisation’s internal reward and control systems determine the degree to which employees attach importance to the institution’s strategic objectives (Strahle et al., 1996), and are motivated to behave in accordance with the organisation’s strategic objectives (Gottschalg and Zollo, 2007). In addition, these organisational systems are also believed to determine the degree to which employees are likely to actually behave in accordance with the organisation’s strategic objectives (Besser, 1995; McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). Van Riel et al. (2008) found that three types of managerial efforts are necessary for SAB to occur. These are efforts by management to: stimulate motivation among employees;

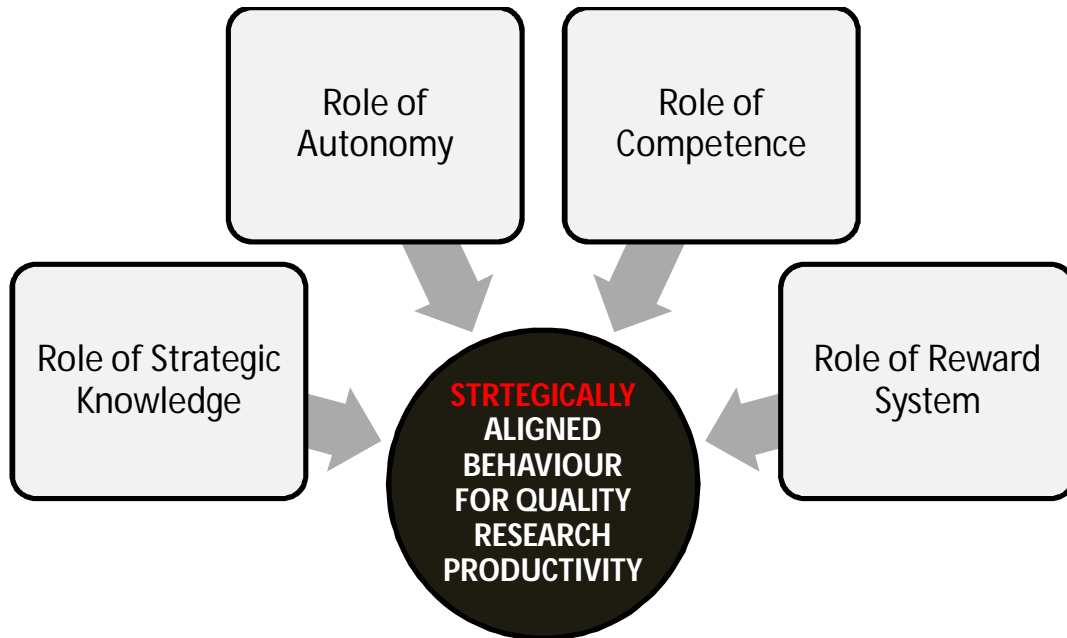
to inform employees about the strategy, providing a rationale for the strategy and an open communication climate; and to develop employees’ capabilities. Each of these has an influence on SAB. Accordingly, Blumberg and Pringle (1982) assert that motivation, capability, and opportunity are all necessary for employee performance.

Some studies have shown that the degree to which senior management supports the company’s strategy influences the degree to which individual employees accept the strategy (Caldwell et al. 2004). Furthermore, Schneider et al. (2003) found that employee training and development enhances employee understanding of the organisation’s strategy, while Lee and Miller (1999) found that training and development can enhance the effectiveness of strategy implementation at the aggregate firm level. Previous studies have also shown that the amount and accuracy of information concerning the strategy affect the degree of strategic consensus (Rapert et al., 2002) and the overall success of strategy implementation at the firm level (Hambrick and Cannella, 1989). Moreover, internal communication is often mentioned as one of the key factors contributing to such a strategic orientation of employees (Boswell and Boudreau, 2001). According to Hansson and Mårtensson (2011), the SAB by non-managerial employees generally require three factors to occur, namely; autonomy, ability and motivation.

The way employees are managed, is critical to the success of a firm (Barney, 1991). This view suggests that employees possess the inherent potential to carry out a given strategy, which may need to be stimulated by the leaders. Based on the reviewed literature, we posit that there are four essential aspects for the promotion of SAB among academics. First, academics need to understand the research strategy and the expected suitable actions required in order to execute the strategy. Secondly, they make judgments and use discretion to engage in “strategically appropriate” behaviours directed by the institution research strategy. Thirdly, an academic must possess the required skills to execute the research strategy. Fourthly, an academic must be motivated and willing to execute the strategy, in order to engage in the research strategy execution. Thus, we conclude that the prerequisites for stimulating SAB among academics are academics’ research strategic knowledge, discretion, competence and motivation.

### Role of strategic knowledge in achieving SAB

Given the focus of SAB on employee understanding of institutional research strategic objectives and how to contribute to those objectives, receiving information about those objectives is important. Communication efficacy is essential in promoting a shared strategic knowledge. Maxwell (2009) states that having “wonderful synergy can often occur as the result of shared thinkers” (p. 98).



**Figure 1.** Key role players towards SAB for quality research productivity.

Clear, cohesive communication of the vision and objectives of an organisation is necessary for optimal productivity to be realised. Kotter and Rathgeber (2005) point out that when employees are encouraged to participate in collaborative, interactive discussion forums in harmony with the institution's vision, they are motivated to apply the organisational vision to their tasks. Good team relationships allow team members to give and take advice from one another, making it easier to appreciate the team's combined responsibility towards the task (Doz and Kosonen, 2007).

Schneider et al. (2003) found that employee training and development enhance employee understanding of the organisation's strategy, while Lee and Miller (1999) found that training and development can enhance the effectiveness of strategy implementation at the aggregate firm level. Previous studies have also shown that the amount and accuracy of information concerning the strategy affect the degree of strategic consensus (Rapert et al., 2002) and the overall success of strategy implementation at the firm level (Hambrick and Cannella, 1989). Moreover, internal communication is often mentioned as one of the key factors contributing to such a strategic orientation of employees (Boswell and Boudreau, 2001).

Van Riel et al. (2008) affirm that managerial efforts to inform employees about the organisation's strategy, as well as their role in implementing it, significantly increase SAB. This finding is consistent with Boswell's (2006) finding that employee understanding of their role in the research strategy implementation significantly influence their affective commitment to the institution. However, an understanding of the strategy as such does not influence

employee commitment. Equally, previous studies have shown that the degree to which management supports the company's strategy influences the degree to which individual employees accept the strategy (Caldwell et al., 2004) but not to the performance of individual employees in implementing the strategy (Noble and Mokwa, 1999). This means getting employees to understand the strategy might not be sufficient to promote employees' strategically aligned behaviour. Thus, to translate research strategy into tangible results, academics must not only understand the University's research strategy, they must accurately understand the actions aligned with realising that strategy (Boswell and Boudreau, 2001).

Earlier, it was mentioned that the behaviours of employees that are the most essential for implementing the strategy are not part of routine behaviour, and cannot be exactly prescribed. Academics are independent agents. As a result, they may not always engage in such behaviours that are not readily defined by their job description or tightly monitored, though critical to achieving strategic success. It will be challenging for the management to monitor employees' actions that cannot be easily specified (Barney, 1991). Thus, it becomes imperative that, during the times when appropriate behaviours cannot be defined, more understanding of the research strategy and the required behaviour lead to improved outcomes as academics will be more likely to "do the right thing" (Kristof, 1996).

Among the reasons for poor research attitude by academics, is that they "fail to understand the purpose of research, its limitation or how it might be effectively used" (Powell, 1997). That is, to achieve SAB, academics need a thorough understanding of the overall direction of the

company and key strategic initiatives; need to recognise the context of why the research strategy was formulated; and need to understand how it will be implemented (Parisi and Adl, 2012). Therefore, in order to stimulate SAB, managers should inform employees about what the strategy entails on an abstract level and about the way in which they can contribute to its implementation.

### **Role of autonomy in achieving SAB**

Strategy implementation studies have shown that granting employees considerable autonomy, responsibility and discretion in strategy implementation leads to enhanced implementation success. Donaldson (2008) contended that feelings of autonomy and responsibility ultimately drive employees' motivation to perform. Autonomy refers to the feeling of choice and discretion (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Boswell et al. (2006) suggest that part of giving employees the means to impact strategic goals entails involving them in the decision-making process. Thus, if employees are given the opportunity to participate in the functioning of the organisation and encouraged to find ways to make it successful, they may be more likely to understand the organisation's mission and how their actions contribute to it. In addition, Nutt (1987) found that implementation styles based on cooperation rather than edicts, thus transferring some decision-making authority to relevant employees proved to produce nearly double success rates as compared to the edict style.

The act of involving employees in decisions related to research activities can enhance SAB by linking employees with the broader functioning of the institution with regard to research strategy. If employees are given the opportunity to participate in the functioning of the organisation and encouraged to find ways to make it successful, they may be more likely to understand the "big picture" and how their actions contribute to it. Employees who demonstrate greater alignment with organisational goals are often given more opportunities to become involved in future decision making processes (Yukl and Fu, 1999).

### **Role of competence in achieving SAB**

A widely recognised antecedent of employee behaviour is the degree to which employees are competent in performing their jobs (Vroom, 1964; Peters and O'Connor, 1980). These capabilities may include skills, habits, and tacit or explicit knowledge (Schmidt et al., 1986). Van Riel et al. (2008) found that managerial efforts to stimulate the employee capabilities that are needed to implement the company's strategy had a substantial effect on SAB. Their finding was consistent with the finding of Lee and Miller (1999) that competence

development efforts increase the success of strategy implementation. Blumberg and Pringle (1982) predicted and Pringle (1994) found that capacity and willingness are generally more important drivers of performance. Therefore, employee training and development is critical to guaranteeing that they can work efficiently and effectively (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009). In an effort to stimulate SAB among academics, training and development refer to an ongoing process for employees to attain or disseminate information and techniques, as well as describing or learning the behaviour required to successfully execute the institution's research strategic objectives. Additionally, training and development are fundamental components of the socialisation process, which would help in the overall development of employees (Noe, 2004).

Training will engage employees and limit isolation so that they can work collaboratively to achieve the goals and objectives of the organisation (Derouin et al., 2005). There is ample evidence that collaboration is a key factor influencing research productivity, and academics that prefer independent or collaborative work tend to show differences in productivity as measured by research publication (Katz and Martin, 1997). This may be because communication enhances productivity by providing ideas, detecting errors, and promoting competition for rewards (Pelz and Andrews, 1967). Furthermore, Kyvik (2003) advise academics to recognise that writing is not a mechanical skill, but rather it is a process that clarifies and explores relationships between ideas and can be improved by learning from others, collecting pointers from colleagues about better ways to write and by practicing writing.

Highly productive faculty members seem to have self-perceptions that reinforce their scholarly work (Blackburn et al., 1991). Perry et al. (2000) also noticed that newly hired professors were more prolific when they had a "perceived control entity," meaning a positive self-perception about their ability to produce research. Moreover, this perceived control can be potentiated or belittled by the community of scholars at each university, leading to higher or lower levels of productivity.

### **Role of reward systems in achieving SAB**

From the needs theory perspectives, challenging, interesting and meaningful work allows employees to fulfil higher order needs such as self-esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954; Alderfer, 1972; McClelland, 1985; Herzberg, 2003). Similarly, proponents of the work design theory, such as Parker et al. (2001) advocate that jobs that are meaningful, interesting and challenging motivate greater effort and enhance employee satisfaction. Ryan and Deci (2000) propose that when the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are fulfilled, employees are more likely to be intrinsically



motivated and to internalise external goals and objectives.

According to the stewardship theory, employees are motivated to work on behalf of the organisation by intrinsic rewards - which include opportunities for personal growth, achievement, affiliation, and self-actualisation - as well as by content-related values, such as delivering a public good (Davis et al., 1997). These authors attributed these behaviours to the higher order needs on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Furthermore, the reference to the theory of Maslow suggests that basic needs such as physiological, security and belongingness need to be fulfilled before people will be in a position to act on the other, higher level needs. Generally, employees will be very concerned with physiological needs such as adequate wages and stable income and security needs such as benefits and a safe work environment. Consequently, employees whose lowest level needs have not been met will make job decisions based on compensation, safety, or stability concerns. Also, employees will revert to satisfying their lower level needs when these needs are no longer met or are threatened (such as during an economic downturn). Conversely, threatened stewards will resort to defensive and opportunistic behaviour - for example, the absence of strategic knowledge, commitment and engagement with the strategy may lead to greater frustration due to the inability of the employees to effectively contribute towards desired outcomes. Providing the right working conditions for employees is then logical and critical. Hence, it is critical that managers try to remove the barriers that prevent workers from fully actualizing themselves (Schillemans, 2010).

Creamer (1998) warns that policies and rewards are important, but does not determine individual research productivity: institutional policies and practices contribute, but not determine, whether a faculty member initiates and sustains a substantial record of scholarly publishing. The institution plays the most significant role in helping a faculty member to sustain a commitment to publishing through a work assignment. Time devoted to research and interest in research is stronger predictors of career research productivity than the institutional reward structure, including salary (p. 4).

Academics can be motivated by external and internal factors. Tien and Blackburn (1996) studied the relationship between rank and faculty productivity to see whether the promotional rank system motivated faculty members to produce more or less research. They found that tenure is not the only or most powerful motivator for faculty members to produce, and, in some cases, at even higher levels. They concluded "that motivation toward research productivity is neither purely intrinsic nor purely extrinsic. Rather, both appear to operate depending upon the circumstances of the individuals, their values, and the social situation of the moment" (p. 19).

Van Dyne et al. (1995) posit that work environment

factors that meet employee needs for achievement and control provide a sense of responsibility, promote general satisfaction and commitment to excellence and good performance, and are therefore likely to encourage employee alignment and engagement with the organisational strategy. From strategy implementation perspectives this implies that an employee may find the inherent meaningfulness of their jobs to be an incentive for forwarding the firm's strategic ideals. That is, employees may be personally motivated to attain the company's strategic goals based on the belief that they are helping to advance cherished ideals, and advancing such goals is internally rewarding and thus, intrinsic motivation becomes another drive for SAB (Boswell et al., 2006).

Leaders instil intrinsic motivation in followers by designing work and organisational processes that provide meaningful responsibility for outcomes (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). In doing so, they enable and motivate followers to take personal responsibility for their actions. Incentives such as praise, realisation, acknowledgment and reputation are important to enable employees to derive intrinsic benefits from valued end (Van Slyke, 2006). Moreover, the reviewed literature shows that through training and development opportunities, managers can cultivate self-efficacy and self-determination among employees. Through self-efficacy and self-determination, the reward systems inspire employees not only the belief in his or her ability to perform, but also the desire to accomplish the task (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003).

It is worth noting that having a motivated employee, whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, does not automatically guarantee that employees will actually perform the work, let alone behave in a strategically aligned manner. This means that it is possible that a motivated academic's work activity may not be consistent with the university research strategic goals and objectives. Further, research indicated that the degree to which managers engage in the different types of effort influence each other. Thus, managerial focus on stimulating only one type of effort on its own may not influence SAB among academics.

## CONCLUSION

There is a growing interest in aligning employees with the strategic objectives of the organization (Gupta and Govindarajan, 1984; Boswell, 2000). In this paper, we reviewed the literature on employee strategic alignment and research productivity, and suggested a conceptual framework for stimulating SAB among academics. In so doing, we extended the current understanding of the strategic management of academics by exploring the antecedents for stimulating research SAB among academics. Our discussion suggests that being aware of



the institution's research strategy is not sufficient to evoke research SAB among employees, that is, to stimulate academics to conduct research and publish. It is also important, if not more important, for academics to understand the required actions and how to contribute to the realisation of the institutional research strategy. This means that institutions should look beyond simply communicating their research strategy and the required actions on how to contribute, and focus on whether employees are willing to take personal responsibility for the institution's research productivity. Some of the ways universities can create employees' SAB may include programs that encourage employee participation in decisions that affect the institution and their jobs, provide research training and development, and implementing employee collaboration initiatives aimed at clearly linking employee behaviours to firm success. Moreover, it is important that managers design reward systems which can derive more intrinsic benefits among academics, but must also ensure that extrinsic benefits are properly aligned with the research strategy to secure a lasting effect.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, we have suggested the antecedents for aligning academics' work behaviour in relation to research strategy. Thus, there is a need to develop a coherent, empirically testable theoretical framework of research strategy implementation through academics Strategically Aligned Behaviour (SAB). It is necessary in order to systematically address the management control and reward systems that can promote individual academic staff members to use their discretion and take initiatives to perpetual conduct research and publish. Our study can provide several starting points for both a wider and deeper understanding of the specific context of academics where the antecedents for stimulating SAB can also be extended to include multiple types of antecedents. Future research can also empirically test the impact that strategic knowledge, competence, autonomy and rewards have on academic staff members to conduct research and publish.

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**Citation:** Kapaanda, L. N., and Benedict, O. H. (2019). Researching together: Aligning academic employees with the institution's research strategy. *African Educational Research Journal*, 7(4): 220-230.

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