

The Ansoff archive: Revisiting Ansoff's legacy and the holistic approach to strategic management

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound influence and legacy of H. Igor Ansoff in the field of strategic management. Ansoff, a Russian-American mathematician known as the father of strategic management, introduced groundbreaking concepts such as the Ansoff matrix and long-range planning. The Ansoff Institute's recent initiative to establish the Ansoff Archives at the University of Twente underscores his enduring impact on strategic management research. This archive aims to preserve his intellectual contributions and support future scholarship. The paper reviews Ansoff's seminal works, including his influential publication *Corporate Strategy* (1965) and discusses his holistic approach to strategic change, which remains relevant in today's dynamic organizational environments. By commemorating Ansoff's contributions, the paper highlights the importance of his strategic frameworks in guiding contemporary issue management amidst unprecedented levels of uncertainty and change.

KEYWORDS

Ansoff archives, Ansoff matrix, corporate strategy, long-range planning, strategic management

Key Points

- H. Igor Ansoff, recognized as the father of strategic management, made significant contributions to the field with the development of the product market strategies matrix for diversification (a.k.a. the Ansoff matrix) and various landmark publications, including the books *Corporate Strategy* and *Implanting Strategic Management*.
- The holistic school of strategic management, renowned for its effective handling of discontinuous change in turbulent environments, is widely celebrated. This approach, which integrates principles from cybernetics and complex systems management, originated in Lockheed's corporate development planning department in the 1950s.
- The Strategic Issue Management Systems (SIMS) emphasize a comprehensive understanding of organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and are theoretically linked to the System of Plans framework, developed at the Stanford Research Institute in the 1960s. Especially to the original SWOT analysis called the SOFT approach.
- The Ansoff Institute, founded to preserve and advance Ansoff's legacy, is branching out with the Ansoff Archives at the University of Twente. This initiative aims to perpetuate Ansoff's intellectual contributions and foster innovation in strategic management research.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Today, as organizations grapple with unprecedented levels of uncertainty and change (Ashta & Herrmann, 2021; Miller & Wang, 2024), Ansoff's strategic approach to issue management still serves as a guiding beacon (Davis, 2023). In 1992, upon the invitation of David Hussey, Ansoff contributed the inaugural article to the Journal of *Strategic Change*. He was delighted that the journal was intended to fill an important niche. "Among the great volume of papers on strategic change, one is hard put to find papers which are dedicated to the holistic perspective on strategic change" (H. I. Ansoff, 1992b, p. 7). This is an observation that is still true today. After more than 40 years, *Strategic Change* revived the journal's original vision and celebrates the contributions by both Hussey and Ansoff (Caputo, 2023). In order to preserve Ansoff's intellectual legacy, the Ansoff Institute was established (Hussey, 2001). After more than 20 years, the Ansoff Institute will be branching out and launching the Ansoff Archives at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. This initiative underscores a commitment to perpetuating Ansoff's intellectual legacy and fostering innovation in strategic management research for future PhD students and scholars. In this paper, we explore and review how Dr. H. Igor Ansoff influenced and shaped the field of strategic management.

H. Igor Ansoff, born in Vladivostok in 1918, was a Russian-American mathematician and a trailblazer in the field of long-range planning. He passed away in 2002. His contemporaries regarded him as the father of strategic management (*Strategic Change*, 2002; *The Economist*, 2008). Most scholars will associate his name with the Ansoff matrix (H. I. Ansoff, 1957) and his landmark publication *Corporate Strategy* (H. I. Ansoff, 1965). He is widely acknowledged for his pioneering work in the field of strategic management (Antoniou & Sullivan, 2006; Hussey, 1999a). In his own words, he favored describing his work as the "holistic strategic management of discontinuous change in turbulent environments" (H. I. Ansoff, 1993, p. 3). Ansoff regarded the book *Implanting Strategic Management* (H. I. Ansoff, 1984) as the pinnacle expression of his ideas and contributions (R. Ansoff, 2007).

In 1948, Ansoff completed his PhD in mathematics at Brown University and commenced work as a mathematician for RAND (H. I. Ansoff, 1960). He managed the acquisitions of technology and weapon systems for the U.S. Air Force. Ansoff's professional journey took a dramatic turn when he received an invitation from Dr. George A. Steiner in 1956 to join the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation Planning Department. Steiner had suggested to Robert F. Stewart, program manager and assistant to director L. Eugene Root, that Ansoff would be an excellent candidate for an external diversification project (Puyt et al., 2023). Following his initial job interview in 1957 with Robert E. Gross, the CEO of Lockheed, Ansoff's career as a planner swiftly ascended. He immediately immersed himself in the practical challenges of external diversification, likening the experience to "playing chess with companies" (H. I. Ansoff, 1992a, p. 11). The board of the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) hired Ansoff as "chairman of the advisory council to the Long Range Planning service" (H. I.

Ansoff, 1982, p. 1). He already was "a consultant to SRI intermittently since about 1962 and had worked with our (LRPS) staff before that while still at the planning staff at Lockheed" (Royce, 1979, p. 6). Ansoff always had access to early publications of LRPS and actively participated as an author, consultant, and speaker at conferences. Another pivotal moment in his life occurred in 1961 during a family vacation to Cape Cod, where Ansoff realized the absence of any long-term career plans for himself. Motivated to pursue an academic path, he recognized the necessity of scholarly publications. Upon returning to work, he embarked on writing a book to codify and distill the insights accumulated during his tenure at Lockheed (H. I. Ansoff, 1991, 1992a). Subsequently, in 1963, he joined Carnegie-Mellon University, where he met his new dean Richard Cyert and other influencing scholars like Herbert Simon, Bill Cooper, Hal Leavitt, Vic Vroom, and others. In 1969, Ansoff became the founding dean of the new graduate school of management at Vanderbilt University. He moved to Europe in 1975 and worked at the European Institute of Advanced Sciences in Brussels and the Stockholm School of Economics. LRPS report 610, titled *Corporate capability for managing change* (H. I. Ansoff, 1978), is Ansoff's final contribution to SRI. In 1983, he moved back to the US and became a distinguished Professor of Strategic Management at US International University (which later became Alliant University). Ansoff had an extensive consulting career spanning over 35 years in 28 countries. He worked directly with the largest players in their respective industries. He visited the Japan Strategic Management Society (JSMS) for the first time in 1985 and became well acquainted with its founder, Professor Gen-Ichi Nakamura. As a result of their mutual respect, Ansoff eventually became an Honorary President of the Society (Hussey, 1999b, 1999c).

1.1 | The Holistic School of Strategic Management

Ansoff proudly aligned himself with the holistic school of strategic management (H. I. Ansoff, 1991). "...it is concerned with strategic behavior of a firm as a whole, starting with sensing the environment and ending with launching/divesting products/services or entering new/existing markets, acquiring/divesting technologies, creating the new relationship with the sociopolitical environment" (Ansoff, 1992a, p. 25). In the "Mintzberg-Ansoff debate" (Tsoukas, 1994, p. 761), Ansoff explains that the progress of this school can be assessed by comparing his books *Corporate Strategy* (H. I. Ansoff, 1965) and *Implanting Strategic Management* (H. I. Ansoff, 1984) 'Much of strategic management depends on ideas derived from cybernetics and the management of complex systems' (R. Ansoff, 2007, p. 5). To highlight one of the milestones of this school: "As already discussed in the book published in 1965 (H. I. Ansoff, 1965), this school enunciates a concept of strengths and weaknesses which was drastically different from that of the Design School" (H. I. Ansoff, 1991, p. 452). This is a direct reference to Stewart's SOFT approach (Stewart et al., 1965). The SOFT (Satisfactory, Opportunity, Fault, and Threat) approach was designed as a participative process by engaging all the managers of the firm to identify planning issues,

both in the present and in the future. This approach is the original SWOT analysis and was part of one of the earliest holistic planning systems called the System of Plans (Puyt et al., 2023). Both Ansoff and Stewart have a shared work history at both Lockheed and Stanford Research Institute (1957–1972) (H.I. Ansoff, 1987). John Argenti, a management consultant and reviewer for the Long Range Planning journal, published the second generation of SWOT analysis (Puyt et al., 2024), but Ansoff can be credited for publishing the third generation of SWOT analysis by incorporating the Eurequip¹ matrix (H. I. Ansoff, 1980) or Eurequip approach (H. I. Ansoff, 1984, p. 147) for impact analysis into his Strategic Issue Management System. “Since the matrix analysis is time consuming, it is best reserved for medium- and high impact T/O/S/W” (H. I. Ansoff, 1980, p. 147).

The stage-of-growth analysis concerning the evolving roles in management functions, which Ansoff and Stewart discuss in 1967, highlights how the planning function progresses from implementation cycle, control cycle, extrapolative planning to its most advanced stage: organized entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial planning (H. I. Ansoff & Stewart, 1967). These foundational ideas were theoretically developed, empirically tested in 420 firms around the world, and statistically validated over a period of 25 years following the publication of the Contingent Strategic Success Formula (CSSF). This formula captures the strategic behavior of a firm to optimize profitability and states: “*For optimum profitability the levels of both the strategic aggressiveness and general management responsiveness of the firm must be aligned with the environmental turbulence level*” (H. I. Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993, p. 14). The levels of environmental turbulence are categorized into five levels. Extrapolative planning based on historical success can be maintained if the turbulence of the environment is between levels 1 and 3. Anticipating new and unfamiliar risks with turbulence levels between 4 and 5 requires entrepreneurial planning. This entails real-time response, issue management, and surprise management. Follow up research made an adaptation of the CSSF for SME's (Kipley & Lewis, 2009).

The intellectual legacy of Ansoff is still celebrated today (Martinet, 2010; Moussetis, 2011). Martinet pays homage to Ansoff's work in Europe, codified in his books: *Strategic Management* (H. I. Ansoff, 1979) and *Implanting Strategic Management* (H. I. Ansoff, 1984). These books provide tools and techniques which address the challenge posed by discontinuous change, turbulence, and threats and opportunities in different kinds of Environment Serving Organizations (ESO). Moussetis appreciates the intricacies of Ansoff's work as “...a giant puzzle that requires assembly to see the entire picture and how all the pieces work together.” “...any attempt to provide an assessment of the holistic picture of strategic transformation without all the pieces is simply an incomplete attempt and unjust to Ansoff's approach and work” (Moussetis, 2011, p. 119). The Ansoff matrix still attracts a lot of interest (Demir et al., 2017; Geissdoerfer et al., 2018; Schommer et al., 2019). It is still considered a foundational theory for corporate diversification theory.

His advancements in strategic foresight, particularly his concept of recognizing weak signals within the environment or strategic turbulence, are widely acclaimed (Carbonell et al., 2015; Holopainen & Toivonen, 2012; Thorleuchter et al., 2014). This marks the culmination

of his career journey. The genesis of these concepts can be traced back to his tenure at Lockheed's corporate development planning department, where it all began. There was a need for practical tools and applications appropriate for the varied levels of complexity of the environment when an ESO faces increasing levels of complexity and uncertainty in doing business which is ever-escalating. This is where Ansoff's contributions lay: How to assess and interpret the external environment and develop the appropriate responses to be successful not just for today but in the foreseeable future. Ansoff pioneered machine-aided and computer-processed approaches (ANSPLAN) to assess an organization's strategic positioning in complex environments in addition to in-person or group activities. Those focused on diagnosing an organization's degree of alignment of an organization with its environment, along with the steps that it needs to take to succeed in it. Other tools address issues that an organization will face in interpreting the correct strategic issues at hand and the targeted competitive position an organization is to take. For example, the threat/opportunity analysis and the opportunity/vulnerability profile (H. I. Ansoff, 1975; Hurd & Riggs Monfort III, 1979). Yet, other tools address the management's capability and design to fit the environmental complexity. For example; Environmental Monitoring, Strategic Diagnosis, Strategic Segmentation, Strategic Business Area Attractiveness, Issue Impact Analysis, Target Competitive Position, Technology Forecasting, Change Management, etc. The intriguing part of Ansoff's tools are that they do not only concentrate on ‘hard’ strategy components but also on the “soft skills” needed. The “soft skills” tools include the managers' and the organization's capabilities needed to implement strategies necessary in attaining successful strategic positioning. Most tools stood the test of time and are still used, or are modified by consulting firms and organizations alike. These tools, when applied and modified based on size and application, allow organizations a range of potential strategic responses, along with the matching organization's capabilities for successful implementation. They give organizations a strategic edge in successfully taking advantage of the present strategy while successfully positioning in the future.

In order to develop new ways of theorizing for strategic management, it might be prudent to fully understand the history of old theories (Suddaby et al., 2011; Wren & Bedeian, 2023). As researchers, we are encouraged to revisit planning research from the twenty-first century, especially strategic systems, strategic issue management systems, and strategy tools (Laamanen, 2017). But also to teach the historical context of ideas in business schools (Tennent, 2021). This is needed, since many companies still use theories (or variations) from the 1960s. Some even have the original documentation stored away in their corporate archives (Bucheli et al., 2023; Puyt et al., 2024). With the advent of generative artificial intelligence, strategy tools that have endured various management fads and fashions (Johanson et al., 2023; Madsen & Slåtten, 2015; Røvik, 2011) are now being conflated with the underlying theories behind these tools. But, any tool without clear instructions for use (or evidence of effectiveness) is basically useless. Therefore, it is fundamental to study classical theories along new changes and paradigms. Ansoff is more relevant today in applying what organizations need to do to be successful in highly

turbulent environments. Ansoff's work is more relevant today due to the increase of discontinuities in the environment (Fox et al., 2024; Zwank et al., 2023).

1.2 | The Ansoff institute

Established in 2001 in collaboration with the US International University/Alliant University in San Diego, the Ansoff Institute aims to lead in research by pioneering and innovating new Strategic Management technologies, subsequently translating these advancements into practical applications (Hussey, 2001). Its mission is to educate members and communities on the latest thinking and techniques in the field of strategic management. The Ansoff Institute is moving to the University of Twente in the Netherlands. This will give better coverage and presence in Europe as well as the US. The Ansoff Institute's efforts continue to add to the body of knowledge in the field of strategic management.

1.3 | The Ansoff archive

To commemorate his groundbreaking contributions and to foster ongoing advancements in strategic management research, the "Igor Ansoff Strategic Management Award" was established in 1991, sponsored by Coopers & Lybrand N.V. (later PriceWaterhouseCoopers) and the Faculty of Technology and Management at the University of Twente (Long Range Planning, 1997). At the same time, Ansoff received an honorary doctorate from the University of Twente (Moëd, 1990; U-Today, 2022). His intellectual legacy consists of seven books and more than 120 published papers together with a collection of conference materials. The Ansoff Archive was founded at the University of Twente with the purpose of enhancing its role as the custodian of Ansoff's legacy. The best available annotated bibliography of Ansoff's work (Cowan, 2007) provides an overview of all publications, including materials from his consulting practice, including the ANSPAN. Feel free to reach out to us directly if you have any materials you would like to contribute to the Ansoff Archive. The University of Twente Academic Heritage website can be found here. The list detailing the Ansoff collection is available for consultation and review. Readers are warmly encouraged to enrich the Ansoff legacy by contributing relevant materials to the Ansoff Archives.

1.4 | Future projects on the Ansoff legacy

At the end of this biographical review, we would like to announce a call for papers regarding the lasting impact of H. Igor Ansoff's intellectual legacy. We pick up on Ansoff's observation about the future of research: 'But I am concerned that is management academia fails to develop a breed of multidisciplinary complexity synthesizers, and fails to legitimize and encourage research on holistic theory building, the bulk of academic contributions becomes increasingly more peripheral

to the key problems which confront managers in the 1990s' (H. I. Ansoff, 1992b, p. 28). We aim to engage with the so-called 'Ansoffians' (former DBA students from H. Igor Ansoff) as well. This special issue welcomes theoretical, empirical, experimental, and case study research contributions. These contributions should clearly address the theoretical and practical implications of Ansoff's work. Both conceptual and empirical works are welcome. Once the articles have been reviewed, we also aim to organize a conference.

2 | CONCLUSIONS

H. Igor Ansoff's contributions to the field of strategic management are both foundational and transformative. His pioneering concepts, particularly the Ansoff matrix and his approaches to long-range planning, have left an indelible mark on how organizations navigate strategic change, still nowadays. The establishment of the Ansoff Archives at the University of Twente signifies a commitment to preserving his intellectual legacy and fostering continued innovation in strategic management research. This initiative not only honors Ansoff's groundbreaking work but also provides a valuable resource for future scholars and practitioners aiming to address contemporary challenges in strategic management. Ansoff's holistic perspective on strategic change, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and adaptable strategies, remains highly relevant as organizations today face unprecedented levels of uncertainty and complexity. By revisiting Ansoff's seminal works and their lasting impact, this paper underscores the enduring value of his strategic frameworks and launches an initiative to revive research in these directions. The ongoing efforts to document and expand upon Ansoff's theories ensure that his legacy will continue to guide and inspire strategic management practices in the years to come, reinforcing his status as a visionary thinker whose ideas have withstood the test of time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be made available on a discretionary basis.

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ENDNOTE

ⁱ The French consulting firm Eurequip introduced the confrontation of T/O and S/W in what is known as a 'croisement' matrix (H. I. Ansoff, 1984).

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