

Getting the timing right

Kairos as the rhetorical framing of time

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Published in:
Scandinavian Journal of Management

DOI:
[10.1016/j.scaman.2021.101167](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2021.101167)

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Lantz, P. M. V., & Just, S. N. (2021). Getting the timing right: *Kairos* as the rhetorical framing of time. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 37(3), Article 101167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2021.101167>

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Abstract

As organizational actors invoke *and* create the past, present and future of their organizational contexts in support of proposed decisions, the rhetorical framing of time is central to decision-making. To explain how such rhetorical framing occurs, this paper explores *kairos* as a conceptualization of the duality of encountering and enabling “the decisive moment.” Following a process of advocating a new IT strategy in a financial firm, we find that *kairos* appears when the rhetorical framing of time is consistent with dominant interpretations of the interrelations between the past, present and future of the organization. Thus, the paper conceptualizes *kairos* as constitutive for decision-making; only when the timing is right, will persuasive efforts prevail.

We see limits to what we can do with the foundational IT architecture. How many customers we can onboard, how many calculations we can make, how many processes we can run. We are not able to use data appropriately. All our systems communicate one to one, which means that if one system goes down, then all systems go down. [...] So, there are plenty of alarm buttons that light up right now without me being able to say that something will happen within one year or three years or five years. (Victor, Executive, Financial Firm).

With the above quote, Victor, the key informant in the 13-month field study reported in this paper, articulates a central empirical puzzle: how can organizational actors gain adherence to decisions that do not address an imminent threat?

If options are well known and the probability and utility of competing options can be calculated, decisions are easy—enter the data and let a machine decide (Gallagher, 2020). However, organizational decision-making is often beyond calculation (Anderson, 1983; March, 1994), evolving

around multiple uncertainties, outcomes, and interests that render future outcomes unpredictable. Organizational decisions “are not just occasions for deciding what to do next, but are more broadly about setting the strategic direction of the organization” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 733) and are fundamentally rhetorical; as particular options emerge and outcomes are intrinsically changeable and contingent, the more persuasive position prevails (Hoefler & Green, 2016).

Thus, we begin from the assumption that persuasive discourse plays a crucial role in organizational decision-making; it is by means of rhetoric that existing organizations change and new organizational forms arise (Brown et al., 2012; Harmon et al., 2015; Ihlen & Heath, 2018; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Further, a rhetorical approach to organizational discourse and decision-making emphasizes the “*strategic possibilities of discourse in action*” (Cheney et al., 2004, p. 6, emphasis in original). Traditional strategy literature portrays these possibilities as a linear progression (Chaffee, 1985; Porter, 1997); by means of planning, the strategist can ensure the success of the organization as it moves through chronological time. However, this conceptualization of strategy has not only been thoroughly criticized (see inter alia Vesa & Franck, 2013; Ericson, 2014; Steensen, 2014), it is also a rhetorical construct in its own right, as it furthers a particular view of strategy and brings it to bear on the reality it purports to describe (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011).

Seeking to develop the link between rhetoric and strategy, we advance a conceptualization of organizational decision-making that encapsulates the inherent uncertainty of deciding in due time by focusing on the rhetorical framing of temporality as the persuasive projection of the past and/or the future unto the present (Kornberger, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2010). More specifically, we focus on the discursive attempts of organizational actors to establish the present as the right time for organizational decision-making. Employing a classical rhetorical term, we conceptualize this process as the rhetorical framing of *kairos*.

Originally named from the Greek god of the favorable moment (Rämö 1999, cited in Garud et al., 2011), *kairos* has appeared in organizational research as “the experience of the opportunity-becoming-opportune” (Hjorth et al., 2015, p. 605), “a sense of timeliness or appropriateness” (Holt & Johnsen, 2019, p. 1562). Thus, organization and management scholars are aware of the concept of *kairos* (see also Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Garud et al., 2011; Dougherty et al., 2013), but it has mostly been used as a supplement or antecedent to event time (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016; Cuganesan, 2021).

This, we argue, means that studies of strategic decision-making do not sufficiently consider organizational actors’ persuasive use of organizational temporality. We begin our argument from a conceptualization of *kairos* as the *rhetorical* framing of time that both exploits and constitutes what organizational decision-makers come to view as the opportune moment for deciding. In the words of the rhetorical scholar Carolyn Miller (1994, p. 83), *kairos* “refers not to the specific responsiveness of discourse to situation but to the dynamic relationship between discourse and situation, to the qualitative nature of the situation itself as it is shaped in and by discourse.” We will develop this duality, *kairos* as both the right moment for rhetorical intervention and the moment made right by persuasive effort, in the context of organizational decision-making.

In doing so, we suggest that rhetorical *framing* of the past is a key means of advocating present actions that will shape the future; that is, chronological time is not a given of the organizational context, but a rhetorical construct of organizational actors. Here, we view framing as a “rhetorical tool for resonating with an audience” (Giorgi, 2017, p. 733) and suggest that understanding persuasive attempts to establish *kairos* can contribute to existing knowledge of the temporality of organizational decision-making (Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013) by showing how rhetorical framing works to establish the conditions of possibility for the moment in which organizational decision-makers will, indeed, make decisions.

Our key empirical and theoretical concern, then, is with *how proponents of an organizational decision establish the present as the right time for deciding*. We examine this question through the study of a puzzling empirical context in which advocates of a new IT strategy in a financial firm advocate a decision that is not an answer to any apparent organizational need. More specifically, our case organization finds itself in a dilemma; on the one hand, the current ad-hoc approach to IT has served the organization well on its path of continued growth and prosperity; on the other hand, developing an IT strategy seems prudent, as the organization seeks to ensure future success. Against this backdrop, investigating how members of the case organization frame the need for an IT strategy can develop our understanding of the rhetorical framing of time as conducive to organizational decisions. By detailing empirical “encounters in organizations characterized by emergence, playfulness and inquiry, and the dynamics by which such events reach back into the organizational past while at the same time weaving the fabric of the future” (Hernes et al., 2013, p. 5), we aim to better explain “how actors engage with temporality to produce and reenact stability” (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016, p. 1031) and examine the “productive interplay between different temporalities, including how distant time orientations may be folded into the imminent and vice versa” (Hernes & Schultz, 2020, p. 17). Finding that the time is never just right, but has to be constituted in a process of continuous *timing*, we argue that *kairos* is central to what managers and other organizational actors actually do when making organizational decisions, especially when the proposed action is, indeed, a choice rather than dictated by necessity (Sonenshein, 2010). In such context, the rhetorical framing of *kairos* is a persuasive process of connecting strategic ambitions for the future with decision-makers’ perceptions of the past, thereby constituting the present as the right time for decision-making.

In the following, we first outline the theoretical foundations for our conceptualization of the rhetorical framing of *kairos* as constitutive of organizational decisions. Second, we present the empirical setting and methods of our field study and develop the analytical framework that will guide the subsequent analysis of the rhetorical attempts to establish the right time for decision-making, as identified in the

case. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications of the study, indicating how the collaborative character and contextuality of the persuasive process affect organizational decision-making, especially under non-urgent circumstances. In addition, we present a conceptual model that illustrates the confluence of the deliberate *and* emergent dimensions of kairos.

Theory: The rhetorical framing of kairos

In our work with the framing of time involved in organizational decision-making, we focus on the process prior to formal decisions. Here, actors perform strategic issue diagnosis so as to determine which developments and events merit organizational attention and should shape decisions (Dutton & Duncan, 1987). Working with the empirical phenomenon of how managers ‘decide to decide’, we aim our contribution at two particular discussions within the literatures on the framing of time in organizational decision-making; one concerning the collaboration involved in the successful framing of time, the other emphasizing the contextuality of this process. Thus, we focus on the fundamental question of how actors use temporality to create the conditions of possibility for organizational decision-making; how they frame the present as the decisive moment.

To situate our contributions, we will, first, foreground rhetoric (Kock, 2017) as a key constituent in the theory of process framing (Goffman, 1974; Benford & Snow, 2000; Giorgi, 2017) and, second, outline the role of temporality in organizational decisions (Hernes et al., 2013; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Finally, we introduce the concept of kairos, suggesting that it provides a particularly pertinent lens for studying the persuasive use of temporal frames in organizations.

The rhetorical framing of organizational decisions

Rhetoric, the art of persuasive discourse, enables communicators to convince audiences to think, feel, and act in accordance with the view of the communicator—and to follow the communicator’s advice when deciding on issues of concern that reside within “the realm of the uncertain” (Kock 2020, p. 288). According to Aristotle, “the orator must not only try to make the argument of his

speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right *frame* of mind” (1356a2, emphasis added).

Asserting the link between persuasion and framing, Aristotle’s work on rhetoric is a classical precursor to modern studies of argumentation, which shows how an issue may be given ‘presence’ through the selection of certain premises (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 116). This notion of shaping through selection is also at the heart of current developments of framing as an interdisciplinary and multifaceted analytical approach to processes of meaning formation, generally, and organizational decision-making, more specifically (for an overview, see Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Across studies that view framing through a lens of rhetoric (Kuypers, 2010), communication (Entman, 1993), social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000) and strategic change (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Kaplan, 2008), frames are found to define and diagnose problems and causes, make future prognoses, provide solutions and/or make moral judgments, thereby motivating action.

Within organization studies, rhetorical framing is a well-established concern (for a recent review of how language in various forms, including rhetoric, discourse, and narratives, shapes action, see Lockwood et al., 2019). Even in studies that do not explicitly link the two, we see a clear association between rhetoric and framing. For instance, Kaplan’s (2008) work on framing contests provides an incisive analysis of how organizational actors seek to persuade each other (for an explication of the link between framing contests and rhetorical processes, see Just & Mouton, 2014). Conversely, Suddaby and Greenwood’s (2005) study of rhetorical strategies of legitimacy underlines that “rhetoric is attentive to interpretations of agency and change” (p. 51), focusing on “...linguistic devices by which actors manipulate the degree of uncertainty implied by an innovation” (p. 59). Pointing out the affinity between linguistic devices and framing contests enables us to view rhetorical framing as the instrumental *and* constitutive processes of legitimating organizational change (Patala et al., 2019).

Accordingly, the “systematic use of a set of keywords, catchphrases, metaphors, and idioms [may] provide an interpretive frame of reference for a change” (Logemann et al, 2019, p. 3). This interpretative *and* interactional understanding of framing (Reinecke & Ansari, 2020) emphasizes the processual dynamics that involve “rich discursive contexts characterized by a multiplicity of frames” (Giorgi & Weber, 2015, p. 334), including diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that aim at generating collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615). This matches the rhetorical understanding of framing in which frames diagnose and make salient a past or present exigence, i.e. “an imperfection marked by urgency” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). Based on the diagnosis of a situation, proponents of a decision can suggest and substantiate a course of action (prognosis) that might resolve the diagnosed imperfection, thereby motivating collective action on the part of those affected by and able to resolve the issue.

In sum, rhetorical framing may be defined as the process by which actors select salient aspects of the decision-making context to promote their own interpretation of that context and, hence, forward their preferred decision as resonating with decision-makers (Kuypers, 2010, p. 300; Giorgi, 2017, p. 733). This definition alerts us to the inherent temporality of organizational decision-making—and to the rhetorical framing of time as central to such processes.

The temporality of organizational decision-making

To unfold the relationship between rhetorical framing and time, let us first examine the role of temporality in organizational decision-making. Here, we initially define temporality as the “negotiated organizing of time” (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016, p. 1009) that establishes “ongoing relationships between past, present, and future” (Schultz & Hernes, 2013, p. 1). This definition alerts us to the distinction between chronological or linear *clock-time* and non-linear *event-time* (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Slawinski & Bansal, 2012; Kim et al., 2019), which are both central to the organization of time (Geiger et al., 2020).

Such organization of time as it unfolds chronologically *and* marks out events, brings us to the concept of rhetorical framing of temporality. Or, more precisely, to the issue of how actors may frame chronological time in such a way as to link past, present and future, establishing ‘now’ as the moment for decision-making. Here, Suddaby, Foster and Quinn Trank’s (2010) concept of rhetorical history is pivotal. Within this conceptualization “history is assumed to be more biased by the present and future than previous views of history have allowed, and the construction of any particular history is deliberate and strategic” (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 31). As strategic actors construct the version of organizational history that may best serve their agenda, the past becomes a potential tool for advocates of stability (‘let us continue on the successful path of our predecessors’) as well as change (‘let us not repeat the mistakes of the past’). Interestingly, while the notion of rhetorical history implies close attention to the “strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm” (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 157), less emphasis is placed on how temporality itself is rhetorically constructed. This conceptualization of the rhetorical use of history, then, involves a quite instrumental view of rhetoric (and language, more generally) that locates agency with the rhetorical agent rather than dispersing it across rhetorical processes.

However, rhetorical framing is both a strategic and emergent process, and explaining this duality has been a key concern of rhetorical studies (Leff & Utley, 2004). Here, discussions concerning the instrumental and/or constitutive character of rhetoric in relation to time are often tied to conceptualizations of the rhetorical situation, defined simply as the context of a persuasive attempt. On the one hand, this context may be understood as a given; the situation that communicators seek to address and to which they must adapt to achieve their persuasive ends (Bitzer, 1968). On the other hand, it can be viewed as a rhetorical construct in and of itself; the result rather than the starting point of rhetorical interventions (Vatz, 1973). Beginning from these extremes, current research underlines their interrelation; any specific moment in time is always both a given and a construct, and rhetorical agency is both *formed by* and *formative of* meaningful relationships (Just & Berg, 2016).

Thus, the rhetorical understanding has become aligned with sociological conceptualizations of the temporally embedded process of social engagement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Or, paraphrasing Marx and focusing on the context of organizational decisions, we might say that decision-makers make their own decisive moments, but they do not make them as they please. As such, both the persuasive construction of temporality and the experience of situated activity that fosters agency are highly rhetorical processes, and the question of when and how the instrumental and emergent dimensions of these processes converge emerges as key to understanding and practicing decision-making. This takes us to the classical concept of *kairos*.

Kairos as the rhetorical framing of time

Kairos, most readily translatable as the right time or ‘opportune moment’ for accomplishing a communicator’s persuasive intent (Sutton, 2001), combines the two extreme understandings of the rhetorical situation, as it denotes both the time that is right for speaking and the time made right by speech (Kjeldsen, 2014). *Kairos* is often opposed to *chronos* or chronological clock-time and, as such, connected to event-time; this is how organization studies have usually adopted the concept (Dougherty et al., 2013; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). However, the issue of how one seizes the opportunity or gets the timing right may involve clock- as well as event-based arguments, positioning the right moment on a time-space-continuum as well as in the here and now. Thus, “...people enact both chronologically based temporal structures and those shaped kairotically by the people’s sense of opportunity at hand” (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002, p. 690).

Kairos appears within *chronos* and *chronos* may be used rhetorically to create *kairos* (Hawhee, 2002). Or, as Bisbee (2018, p. 495) explains, “a discourse characterized by *kairos* attempts to make the interior of the text the exterior of the audience’s world and heighten an audience’s sense that *this* moment is the right moment for the course of action or judgment being proposed.” Rhetorical appeals to ‘the right time’, that is, work both *in* and *through* time: “the kairotic dimension of discourse offers both assurance about the unknown by extrapolation from the here and now and also control of the

uncertain by opportunistic shaping of both present and future.” (Miller, 1994, p. 92). In this sense, the rhetorical attempt to establish *kairos* both extends the present into the future and shapes the present to match a desired future. Creating *kairos* is certainly a deliberate effort on the part of the actor, but the realization of such strategic intent (the actual creation of *kairos*) is an emergent matter, as actors cannot control the uptake of their rhetorical frames (Miller, 2007).

Within management and organization studies, conceptualizing the interrelations between instrumental and strategic uses of temporality is an ongoing and contested matter. For instance, Garud, Gehman and Kumaraswamy (2011) apply the concept of *kairos* directly in their study of sustained innovation in 3M, concluding that “*kairos*-driven moments of serendipity did not lie outside or apart from *chronos*-driven moments of routine work; in fact, they were created in and through those moments” (p. 761). Similarly, Dodd, Anderson and Jack (2013) show how family firm managers apply linear chronologies in their constructions of meaningful events: “stretched out to ever embrace the heritage of the past, and always anticipating the trans-generational future, the family firm exists by making these ever present” (p. 44). By drawing on economic intertemporal choice theory, Nadkarni, Pan, and Chen (2019) conceptualize temporal framing as the selective shaping of timelines, while Crilly (2017) distinguishes between ego-moving (actors moving towards the future) and time-moving (the future moving towards actors) frames. Working within the empirical context of the financial sector (in which our study is also situated), Garcia-Lorenzo (2020) argues that “...the past was brought differently into the present by different organizational groups depending on the future each group imagined, counteracting the impact of a generic management narrative” (p. 9). Similarly, Luisiani and Langley (2019) argue that achieving strategic coherence within an organization is both a prolonged and collective socio-material activity. These and related studies (for reviews, see Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Shipp & Jansen, 2020) demonstrate that temporal organizing is always both deliberate and emergent.

Returning to the concept of rhetorical framing, we can now position kairos as the precondition as well as the effect of successful rhetorical frames. Kaplan and Orlikowski (2014, p. 27) characterize strategy-making as an emergent process in which temporal framing plays a pivotal role, as organizational actors shape and reshape multiple interpretations of the past, present and future in order to establish “coherent, plausible and acceptable” strategic narratives. Establishing such narratives, we propose, may be conceptualized as *the rhetorical framing of kairos*, which we provisionally define as persuasive appeals that both adapt to and seek to shape the organizational context of decision-making, constructing the future by appealing to the past in the moment of the present. What these rhetorical frames look like, more specifically, and which conceptualizations of time they draw upon and create is a matter of, first, empirical analysis and, second, conceptual discussion. Before turning to these two tasks, however, it is time to present our methods of data collection and analysis.

Research setting and methodology: Framing IT strategy in FiFi

Establishing the right time for a decision can be a long process, involving many different rhetorical attempts at creating kairos. Empirically, we studied different rhetorical framings of time in the making of an IT strategy in a financial firm (FiFi, a pseudonym). When the first author entered FiFi, the idea that a new IT strategy was needed had circulated in the organization for close to four years, but no decision to commence a formal strategy process had been made. In other words, despite key organizational actors’ push for change, inertia prevailed. Over a 13-month period, we followed individual actors’ rhetorical efforts to move the organization from this state of stagnation towards the initiation of a strategy process.

Research Setting

FiFi is a customer-owned company, offering a variety of financial services. In recent years, FiFi has pursued a business strategy of acquiring smaller firms and building a joint company that provides

investment management services. At the time of the study, the integration of a recent acquisition was well underway and took up considerable organizational resources, including those needed to integrate IT systems and customer data.

A key feature of FiFi's organizational structure, as we encountered it, is the lack of a single chief responsible for the IT area. During the fieldwork, two departments (A and B) shared the responsibilities for IT operations and development (see figure 1). Such a shared duty might leave FiFi with potential organizational struggles in terms of coordination across departments, but it could also allow for deep cross-departmental IT-integration.

[Insert figure 1 about here]

Five years ago, FiFi took steps to begin work on replacing an existing IT strategy, which was a technical document rather than a strategic vision. According to Victor (a pseudonym), the Executive of Department A and our point of entry to the organization, the establishment of a new IT strategy is long overdue. However, FiFi has a history, dating back +20 years, of investing in IT in due time, which all our informants agree is a main reason the organization has neither been forced to invest as heavily as some competitors nor taken the losses experienced by others. In sum, at the time of this study, IT had been a strategic issue for years, but top management had repeatedly postponed its diagnosis of the issue, meaning no new strategy had been implemented nor had a formal strategy process been commenced. Therefore, FiFi is a fitting case for studying how proponents of an organizational decision draw on the past and the future to frame the present as the right time for deciding on the issue of their concern.

Data Collection

Through a qualitative field study, conducted in the period from December 2018 to January 2020, we were able to follow developments in leading organizational actors' rhetorical advocacy of an IT strategy. The first author's interaction with participants in this process of pre-strategizing revolved

around the ambitions, uncertainties and dynamics of rhetorical efforts aimed at convincing the organization and its executive decision makers.

In addition to ongoing conversations with Victor, the first author conducted six formal interviews with members of Department A as well as with Carl (also a pseudonym), the Executive of Department B (see figure 1 for informants' positions in relation to each other). The reasons for this sample are both substantial and pragmatic: substantially, all informants either had direct responsibility for or worked with IT in the organization. Pragmatically, we were relying on Victor, being the main gatekeeper, to provide access. The aim of the interviews was to enable the informants to share their views on IT and its strategic significance in FiFi. Given that Victor was the main advocate for a new IT strategy, it was paramount that the informants could independently describe their opinions of and visions for IT in FiFi. By engaging in informal and continuous dialogue with several of the informants and performing one recorded follow-up interview with Victor, we were able to include the dynamic interpretation of events in our analysis.

As part of the observations and conversations with informants in FiFi (in total 13 months and +180 hours of field work, including 33 site visits, 45 one-to-one meetings and 21 interviews, recorded and informal), we received copies of draft memos, meeting notes, strategy documents and PowerPoint presentations, highlighting the work that had already been done towards commencing an IT strategy process (see figure 2 for an overview, including key data sources).

[Insert figure 2 about here]

Notable are the 2018 report "Evaluation of IT setup in FiFi", meeting notes from the internal IT Leadership forum, and Victor's own working memo (from March 22nd), outlining his vision for the process of making an IT strategy. Towards the end of the field study, two new strategy documents were formulated and conveyed to us. These two documents establish the formal starting point for the development of FiFi's new IT strategy and, hence, mark the success of Victor and his allies' rhetorical

efforts. As such, these latter documents are evidence of the rhetorical frame that helped persuade top management to initiate the strategy process, thereby setting the agenda for this process as it continues to unfold beyond our time in FiFi. Finally, in an informal follow-up meeting at the end of 2020, Victor assured the first author that “the entire leadership now explicitly asks for an IT strategy”. Yet, he said, much work was still needed, and he did not expect to present a formal strategy before the third quarter of 2021. As will be detailed in the findings, strategy takes time.

Data analysis

We began our analysis during the fieldwork in FiFi. Using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for coding of interviews, conversations, observations and documents, we distinguished between first order concepts, second order themes and aggregate dimensions, grounding our analytical framework firmly in the empirical data (Gioia et al., 2013). In line with recent suggestions to demonstrate qualitative rigor by explicating the analytical moves that researchers make in engaging with their data (Pratt et al., 2020; Grodal et al., 2020), we followed an iterative analytical process (Locke et al., 2015) of dynamic exchange between data collection and the emerging analysis. Specifically, our analytical process can be divided into three stages: generating initial categories, refining tentative categories and stabilizing categories (Grodal et al., 2020, p. 6). These moves of analytical categorization enabled us to identify how the primary theoretical concept of *kairos*, understood as the successful rhetorical framing of time, shaped the empirical phenomenon of organizational decision-making in FiFi. In short, we only came to recognize the importance of temporality as seen from a process-view (Hernes et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski et al., 2017) during our data analysis. In the following, we explain our analytical moves and provide empirical examples to increase transparency.

Generating initial categories: In the first round of coding, which began during the data collection, our primary focus was on the issue of how managers frame the need for an IT strategy. During this time, FiFi kept thriving (as evidenced by top financial results in 2019 and continuously confirmed

in observations and conversations), and the first author noted a gradual shift in the rhetorical efforts and substantial position of Department A. What had begun as an alarmist framing of a looming organizational crisis, claims of “executive illusions” (as articulated by the informants Bobby and Jeff, independently of each other), gradually moved towards a framing that acknowledged the merits of the past and the adequacy of the present as constitutive of future goals. Specifically, in a one-to-one conversation in March 2019, Bobby noted: “it is important to have respect for what the firm has built up. You cannot just tell your colleagues that they have done a crap job for the last 25 years. You do not get anywhere with that approach.” Further, when Victor, Carl, and the rest of the top managers went on their annual strategy excursion in May 2019, IT was not even on the agenda, despite Victor suggesting it to the CEO. This brought forth the key puzzle: how can organizational decisions be framed as worthwhile without an imminent threat?

Refining tentative categories: Seeking answers to this question, the second round of coding focused more specifically on the rhetorical framing of time involved in establishing and developing competing temporal interpretations of the organization’s past, present and future. This prepared the ground for our introduction and development of the classical rhetorical concept of *kairos*, as the final analysis emphasizes how rhetorical framings of (chronological) time are employed to establish the present (event) as the right moment for decision-making that shapes the future (Miller, 1994).

Stabilizing categories: Applying the concept of rhetorical framing enabled us to identify a number of recurrent themes and, hence, establish our final data structure (see figure 3; we provide a map of 2nd order themes and representative quotes in support of the 1st order concepts in appendix 1). Notice how some of the first-order concepts involve temporal pluralities, including past-presents and present-futures, supporting our emphasis on simultaneously existing temporalities, rather than depictions of event-chronologies (e.g. Langley & Truax, 1994). Also, the emerging 2nd order themes are inspired by theoretical concepts such as ‘constructing urgency’ (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016, p. 1017),

‘incoming threats’ (cf. time-moving frames; Crilly, 2017, p. 2372) and ‘historical consciousness’ (Suddaby & Foster, 2017), but also based on empirical observations of positions like ‘ongoing maintenance’ and ‘optimistic outlook’.

[Insert figure 3 about here]

We identified three distinct rhetorical frames of temporality, or patterns for the discursive organization of time, that function as potential sources of decision-making in our organizational setting (Vaara et al., 2016) by emphasizing urgency, vigilance and consistency, respectively. We have labeled these ‘burning platform’, ‘smoke on the horizon’ and ‘tend to the fire’ (see table 1), using the initial designation of the burning platform as inspiration for continuing to capture the intensity and direction of the frame with metaphors relating to combustion.

As table 1 illustrates, organizational actors establish each frame through specific rhetorical framings of time, and the analysis aims to unpack the use and dynamics of the involved frames, showing how they diagnose the past and present so as to make a prognosis of the future that supports a ‘necessary action’. In the subsequent discussion, we turn to the question of how rhetorical framing becomes kairotic—how it not only offers a temporal frame that warrants action but also persuades an audience that the present is the right time to act.

[Insert table 1 about here]

Findings: The rhetorical framing of time in FiFi

When we entered FiFi, IT did not play a significant role at the strategic level of the organization. While IT is ubiquitous in finance, saturates all its operations and has done so for decades, FiFi’s 2019 strategy did not mention IT one single time. Still, key organizational players were aware of the importance of IT, stressing that “approximately every fourth year one of the players in our business crashes with their IT” (Victor) and “in 2019 every company has to assume that it is an IT company; otherwise, it will lose” (George). Accordingly, members of Department A viewed the elevation of IT

to a strategically more significant level as paramount to fortifying FiFi's competitive position. However, not all members of the organization shared this view, and proponents of a new IT strategy faced the task of convincing the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) that such a strategy was, indeed, necessary. The decision to be made at this stage, then, did not deal with the content of the strategy; instead, the issue was more whether or not the time was ripe for initiating a strategy process.

As mentioned, we followed Victor and his allies' attempts to put IT on the strategic agenda of FiFi and have identified three rhetorical framings of time upon which these attempts were based. We label the first frame 'burning platform', as it aims to create a sense of urgency; a need for action now. We call the second frame 'smoke on the horizon', as the desired outcome of this rhetorical framing of time is a state of vigilance; a situation in which constant care is crucial. The last frame we designate 'tend to the fire', as it shifts emphasis from establishing a new situation to a temporal framing of consistency. As the framing changes, the advocacy for decision-making appears to evolve from external threats that demand a reaction to the inner motivation that drives organizational actors. We set the scene for each round of analysis with a short representative story, or vignette (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014), that, we hope, will illustrate the over-all temporal frame, the rhetorical mechanisms of which we then go on to unpack.

Urgency: Burning platform

At the end of January 2019, I had asked for a meeting with the managing team in Department A to find out more about which strategic projects they were working on and struggled with. Three of our five key informants, Victor, Bobby, and Jeff were late to the meeting. When they finally arrived, they were clearly agitated, displaying signs of both excitement and anxiety. The reason, they explained, was that they had just been in a meeting with George who had presented an analysis of the status of the IT system, and, the three managers agreed, "this mess is much more complicated than we expected." (Field notes, first author, January 30th, 2019)

The meeting that we reference here imbued the efforts to initiate an IT strategy process with new urgency, but several of our informants trace their conviction that a new strategy is necessary back to a consultancy report from April 2018. Victor explicitly referred to the report as a ‘burning platform’, but when talking about it in hindsight (as mentioned, our field work commenced in December 2018) he conceded that it did not have the desired effect. Reflecting on the process, he said: “the report tried to start a burning platform by igniting a lot of small fires. They were too easily put out. Maybe we should have just focused on one fire.” In this section, we will unpack the attempted temporal organization of this first frame and discuss why it did not create *kairos*; that is, did not succeed in convincing the relevant organizational decision-makers (i.e., the ELT) that the time had come for creating a new IT strategy.

Here, it is worth noting that management consultancy has popularized the metaphor of the burning platform (e.g., Conner, 1993), which may explain our informants’ explicit use of it in reflecting upon the process. In much popular change management literature, the metaphor is used to underline that a sense of urgency is necessary to stimulate the courage needed for organizational change (e.g. Kotter, 2008). From a rhetorical perspective, such an approach relies on a consequential logic in which a problem (a gap) prompts action towards its solution (closing the gap).

Basing one’s persuasive attempt on arguments from consequence is typical of practical reasoning (Walton, 1996; O’Keefe, 2013). The argumentative model is: ‘if you carry out action A, then good/bad consequences C will occur. Therefore, you should/should not carry out action A’. Translated to language that is closer to our case: ‘if an organization wants to grow (goal), and the current IT setup prevents this (premise), then the organization should change its IT setup (conclusion)’. As with any logical argument in this causal mode, if the premises are true, the conclusion necessarily follows. Therefore, let us examine how the FiFi employees who advocated the need for an IT strategy established the premises of their argument. In so doing, we focus on the

aforementioned consultancy report, detailing the elements of diagnosis, prognosis and necessary action (see table 2):

[Insert table 2 about here]

Insufficient action

The scope of the report was to “judge whether the IT set-up in FiFi in an appropriate fashion supports customer and business needs and delivers cost-efficient operations, development and maintenance.” And its aim was to assist FiFi in “revitalizing the IT strategy” and “establishing a target goal for the IT set-up in FiFi in order for the right competencies to be put into play, creating the most value at a sector level benchmark.”

The report began from 10 so-called “observations” that are all, in fact, problems or short-comings of the organization, e.g. “a lack of alignment for the strategic direction of FiFi has a negative consequence on collaboration and communication in IT” and “the technical foundation appears non-satisfactory, and there is not sufficient focus on raising its level.” Thus, the report clearly based its conclusion that a new IT strategy was necessary on a certain framing of reality, selecting and highlighting some aspects at the expense of others. It created a sense of urgency based on an interpretation of the present situation as deeply problematic because past actions had not adequately prepared the organization for its future.

Vulnerability

The forecast in this frame is one in which continued inaction will lead to imminent catastrophe. Our informants spoke of an “executive illusion,” manifested by the ELT’s belief that IT works well, which overshadowed part of the reality and resulted in the executive decision makers’ failure to see the situation for what it “actually” was. As Jeff concluded, “FiFi will go from being a development company to a discontinuation company.”

Although the ELT did show some responsiveness, several of our informants felt that they were doing too little, too late. According to this view, as for example expressed by Bobby, the severity of the

situation had not dawned on the main decision-makers: “there has been a mantra that everything looked really good, but now it is 2019. We have developed a lot of features but not consolidated anything, and that means that the platform is sanded up.” This framing, in principle, establishes the now as a moment for decision-making; if we do not change course, the organization suffers. But does it call organizational decision-makers into action?

Redundancy

With the observations as a starting point, the April 2018 report made seven recommendations for a new IT strategy that would amount to a comprehensive make-over of the organizational set-up as well as the employed technology at FiFi, e.g. “define clear target model and direction for IT” and “establish solid technical foundation and architecture.”

It is important to note that such recommendations presuppose a certain state of affairs, assuming a base from which arguments can evolve (Macagno, 2016). If an organization should “define clear target model,” from a logical perspective this implies that there is no such model at present or that the existing model is inadequate. Several of the informants stressed that FiFi had severe problems, requiring action here and now. For example, Carl, Victor’s counterpart in the current organizational set-up, acknowledged some of the challenges and accepted their urgency:

Well, we have problems that make themselves felt. We have, for example, some code that is so outdated that we cannot get anyone to code it anymore. Those kinds of things. This we are able to understand and therefore we have to act on it.

Similarly, Bobby, one of Victor’s two immediate subordinates and main allies in Department A, underlined the urgent need for action:

There is a latent danger that we cannot just keep on talking. I would say the most important thing right now is to create this feeling of “now we are going to do something about it.” Let us put a person in charge, create this team that can handle it.

Nevertheless, the temporal framing of the burning platform did not lead to a new IT strategy. One possible explanation for this failure is that the problems articulated in the report—and by some employees—were not recognizable to the majority of the organization. The sense of urgency, built on past failure to deal with imminent catastrophe, simply did not match their experience of the organizational reality and, hence, did not amount to a persuasive interpretation of this reality. That is, organizational decision-makers were not persuaded to apply this frame as the basis of their own understanding and judgment; the framing of time involved in the burning platform did not create *kairos*. Realizing that organizational decision-makers had not rallied to this call for action, our informants, who were interviewed a year after the consulting firm delivered the report, mostly spoke of the burning platform as a failed frame.

Vigilance: Smoke on the horizon

In April, I had a one-on-one meeting with Bobby. During the meeting, he expressed the belief that a shift had occurred in how key actors talked about IT and the need for change. In particular, he said, Victor had changed his strategy. Instead of talking about an “executive illusion,” the focus had shifted to the need to act in due time before it turned out to be too late.

(Field notes, first author, April 10th, 2019)

During the Spring of 2019, a stronger emphasis on the existing strengths and competencies of FiFi emerged in the framing of the need for an IT strategy. The frame of the burning platform was gradually replaced by an alternative vision of how to move from the present into the future—from urgent and decisive action towards gradual change. While Bobby, along with other members of the organization, was sympathetic towards this move, it also worried him; as he explained: “you know, you cannot un-ring the bell.” For more than a year, proponents of the IT strategy had supported their position in the deficiencies of the existing systems and the urgency of changing them. The rhetorical maxim that consistency is credibility (Baumlin & Scisco, 2018) should dictate continuing the framing

of IT as in dire need of comprehensive replacement. However, this rhetorical frame had also proven largely ineffective, and un-ringing a bell that very few had heeded might not, after all, be so difficult. Thus, IT was still not a key topic on the agenda of the ELT, and yet FiFi continued to thrive; explaining this situation seemed to invite a new frame rather than demand consistency with the temporal framing of the burning platform. We label this second rhetorical attempt to create the necessary conditions for decision making ‘smoke on the horizon’ in order to reflect the informants’ (new) understanding of the present as quite reasonable, but with dangers looming ahead.

As already indicated, the frame of the burning platform was not consistent with competing organizational positions, and, more importantly, factual circumstances did not clearly warrant the conclusion that decisive action was necessary now. That is, although the logical structure of the argument from consequence was applied, the argument failed because organizational members did not believe there was data to support the claim of imminent crisis. In response, Victor began framing the present IT system as functional but limited. Thus, he maintained a rhetorical framing of the future as risky but changed his evaluation of the risk:

We see limits to what we can do with the foundational IT architecture. How many customers we can onboard, how many calculations we can make, how many processes we can run. We are not able to use data appropriately. All our systems communicate one to one, which means that if one system goes down, then all systems go down. [...] So, there are plenty of alarm buttons that light up right now without me being able to say that something will happen within one year or three years or five years.

The frame of smoke on the horizon seeks to establish a temporal horizon of looming threats that FiFi has to divert in due time. The rhetorical form of this frame is also that of argument from consequence, albeit with the delicate twist that a crucial premise is conditional on uncertain future outcomes (see table 3). However, this is often the case, as Walton (1996) points out: “quite often, D [for danger] is a long-term consequence that may well occur at some future, unspecified time” (p. 307). Therefore,

the argument involves an implicit choice between maintaining short-term status quo and ensuring long-term safety. The rhetorical framing of time, here, focuses on projecting the present into the future, arguing that what was adequate in the past can no longer safeguard the organization. Hence, a decision to act is needed now to avoid the dangers ahead. The overall argument contains the following elements in which diagnosis and prognosis function as premises (or grounds) from which it is possible to conclude that acting now is immanent to achieving(/avoiding) future growth(/recession):

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Prudence

Explaining that the system is not impressive, but that it does work and allows FiFi to service its customers, George exemplified the “pragmatic” diagnosis of the present:

I do not think there is anything critically wrong in FiFi. There is a culture that has been allowed to live and develop over time and because it is an old company, it is clear that something is very well-anchored, and it is difficult to change, even just with IT [...] And then fools like us come in from the street, and we have tried other things within IT. And then we say, oh no, you are in the wrong lane.

Carl shared the view that the organization was doing quite well but could do better. He also applied the notion of constantly moving forward as an explanation of the failure of the burning platform:

I understand what they [proponents of an IT strategy] mean, but I also get a little provoked when someone tells me that IT is all “sanded up.” It bothers me because there is nothing strange in the need to always keep up to speed. That is how it works, but generally we are in good standing, and therefore we need to be aware of how we talk about our own world.

The rhetorical framing of the past and present, involved here, turns the diagnosis of the past into one of organizational success, establishing the present as a decisive moment because such success cannot be assumed to continue.

Ongoing maintenance

The second aspect of smoke on the horizon consists in emphasizing how risks will increase if action is not taken in due time. Several informants used the same example to substantiate their claim that although IT was functional at the moment, growth was in jeopardy. They called it the story of the marine, and the gist of the story was that once a month one employee (the marine) attended work when the rest of the organization slept in order to run a query that was necessary for the IT system to be fully functional. George presented the story as follows:

Our marine, he's one of the people who every month when we make payments to the customers...but it is a heavy process, unnecessarily heavy process, to conduct, and he gets up a bit past three in the night, drives to work to be here at around 3:30 AM, then he does the payment query [...], but before eight, which is the opening hour of FiFi, because otherwise FiFi would be unable to run. And this is just the amount of people we are paying now. What if it were ten times the customers? [...] and that is why FiFi does not have scalability. That's the example I use to say we can't get any further in FiFi. Don't believe we can take in 100,000 more customers. We simply cannot. We wouldn't be able to solve the tasks.

This example provides a clear link to FiFi's strategic interest in terms of growth, whereby it supports the argument in favor of a new IT strategy. Thus, the example forms part of an argument hierarchy in which the claim of one argument, 'the company cannot grow', functions as proof of another argument that supports the conclusion: 'change the IT infrastructure'. Connecting these claims pushes the argument from definition (or diagnosis) to advocacy (Brockriede & Ehninger, 1960), establishing the need for a decision to be made in the present.

Incoming threats

Unpacking the process of rhetorical framing shows that the recommendation (conclusion) to establish an IT strategy in the present rests on the presupposition that scalability precedes growth. Here, proponents of a new strategy used the marine to illustrate what would happen to a system that was

close to its maximum capabilities. Hence, the framing follows the form of a slippery slope argument in which FiFi is approaching a limit as to how far down the slope it can go without taking damage. If one accepts this claim, now is the time to decide on the new strategy, lest FiFi cannot avoid larger hazards and unforeseen expenses in the future.

While this argument is logically solid and has empirical backing (in the form of the marine), the rhetorical framing of time involved in smoke on the horizon proved as ineffective in creating kairos as the burning platform. To understand this failure, let us examine what happened in FiFi prior to and during the field study: as it turns out, the firm had successfully acquired two other companies and was in the middle of a third acquisition, including IT integration processes. According to our informants as well as publicly available information, these acquisitions went as planned, despite indications that they could have been even more (cost) efficient. Therefore, there might have been smoke on the horizon, but skeptics countered the example of the marine, which was presented as evidence that FiFi could not grow without causing a systems meltdown, with their general experience that the organization was actually growing and that IT remained functional. Whereas the temporal frame of the burning platform was not persuasive because it was based on the selection of too many indicators of failure that simply did not match the overall dominant interpretative frame of the organization, one prime example seemed to present too few indicators.

Still, evidence was accumulating, as Victor indicated in his account of developments in May 2019:

I have at no point in time felt that we were not progressing [towards a decision on IT strategy].

I wish that we could move faster, but I do think that we are in constant movement. We are raising some good flags. For example, Margaret, our Risk Manager, recently presented the operational risk analysis to our CEO and almost half of the risks relate to outdated IT, and he accepts the premise that we have to address this. So, we are pushing the original understanding of how we think about our IT. Something can actually destabilize us if we do not act in time.

To summarize, the temporal framing that we label smoke on the horizon provides an interpretation of the organizational present as ‘reasonable’ while the future is ‘uncertain’, thereby seeking to persuade decision makers to take preventive action now. The main obstacle to the persuasiveness of this frame was that its key premise—that a new IT strategy is a prerequisite of continued expansion—was challenged by organizational members’ experiences of the near past and ongoing present. Thus, proponents of the IT strategy had yet to frame their call to action in a way that the rest of the organizational decision-makers could adopt as their own.

Consistency: Tend to the fire

Today I had my last meeting with Victor. He looked tired but also seemed pleased. The meeting took place more than a year after our first meeting. Earlier this month, Victor said, the ELT had finally accepted four new IT projects. This seemingly simple decision was the culmination of months of work, during which Victor and his team translated a rather technical roadmap into the proposal that had now been accepted. Victor seemed particularly proud when recounting that in the decisive ELT meeting, the CEO had defended the proposal against other members’ challenges to it. (Field notes, first author, January 17th, 2020)

To understand how FiFi reached a point at which Victor could count on the CEO as his ally in the process of developing a new IT strategy, we must go back to the late Spring of 2019. Back then, Victor had to recognize that his persuasive attempts had once again been thwarted by the prevailing organizational experience of continuous success, which led him and the other proponents of a new IT strategy to re-frame their position once more; this time invoking a perspective of consistency. While this frame only gradually emerged as the dominant one, let us stress that Victor already brought it up in our first formal interview—only back in December 2018 he did not seem to favor this view.

Hence, the process we followed did not amount to a sudden change of heart on the part of our informants. Rather, they changed their view of how they might persuade the organization, especially

the ELT, informed by organizational developments. For the proponents of an IT strategy, finding common organizational ground involved a concession to settling for small projects that, if successful, might eventually lead to a fully-fledged strategy. Action, then, was framed as *gradual change* that could ensure consistency between the perceived past, the ongoing present, and the desired future. Victor described his new ambition of prioritizing strategic IT initiatives—instead of insisting on the development and implementation of a full IT strategy once and for all—in the following manner:

So, we have to say, and I think that is an important premise in order to make the right IT target goal, that we need to be aware that we are going to prioritize this to create a bigger advantage, a lasting advantage, not just to clear the road of a future problem.

This statement clearly re-frames the future in positive terms; now action is not just aimed at compensating for past/present deficiencies in order to avoid future harm, but could lead to actual advances. Expressing his support for this long-term approach of gaining a lasting advantage instead of avoiding a future loss (as in the two former frames), Carl explained why it was counter-productive to focus too heavily on what currently did not work.

My biggest anxiety is that the more you start talking about that everything is “sanded up,” then you come to a halt and ask yourself: “do you mean that we need to change everything?” That is just the worst you can do. That is the sure way to utter chaos.

Thus, the new frame focuses on how a continuation of present initiatives may gradually lead to future opportunities, as advocates of a new IT strategy shift their emphasis from avoiding an external threat towards exploiting an internal potential. The advantages, they now argue, will emerge if IT is used properly to tend to the fire; that is, to maintain existing organizational strengths and develop new advantages (see table 4):

[Insert table 4 about here]

Historical consciousness

The main evidence in support of this frame is the acquisition and integration of three companies that took place before and during the field study; the third of these processes, according to Carl, who was centrally involved in all three, happened in half the time of the former two. This adds credence to the organizational interpretation of the current state of affairs as the successful result of prudent past actions. As Carl put it:

For me, it inevitably is because I compare with other firms. When I make this judgment of where we are, when I say that it looks good, then it is because I have a feeling of how it looks around us, and based on that, I can say that FiFi is doing well.

When comparing FiFi's immediate situation to that of competitors, the evident success makes for a strong pull towards organizational inertia. Similarly, Victor had become aware of how damaging a framing that is at odds with the dominant organizational interpretation can be when trying to convince fellow executive decision-makers:

We cannot show up and say, now listen up, we have always said that our IT has been well-functioning, we have said that our systems are good, and that our products for financial advisors are fantastic. Now it is crap, now we are going to change it all. No, it is actually quite reasonable and solid, but now we are going to embrace the new era and take control because we have the good preparatory work. I think that is an important part of getting a permission to proceed.

Although Victor continued to believe that there was a need for increasing the speed with which FiFi "takes back further control of strategic IT initiatives," with the new framing he emphasized existing organizational success as the basis for doing so. Instead of seeking to change the dominant organizational view, in the third frame Victor attempted to base his proposal upon existing beliefs, meaning his expressed view of the future had also changed.

Sagacity

Whereas the two first frames position development of an IT strategy as a means of staving off future threats (whether imminent or in the longer term), the third frame positions the new strategy as a means of realizing future opportunities. As Victor said, “FiFi can transform the market and make it much more transparent—enabling customers to compare prices and allowing FiFi to grow due to its prices and products.”

The question is how such potential might be actualized. Here, May 1st 2019 marks a turning point. On that day Victor announced that instead of seeking to raise the necessary support and funding for a full-blown process of developing a new IT strategy, he would propose smaller initiatives and ask for 10% of the initially prospected sum in order to make the firm fit for the future. By then, it had become clear that a dramatic appeal to future threats did not fit the perception of the CEO nor did it match the broader organization’s generally positive experiences of developments at FiFi.

A few weeks later, in preparing for an ELT strategy excursion in which IT was *not* on the agenda, Victor shared that he was fully engaged in the process of making the decision ‘small enough’ for the ELT to accept it. Thus, his stated aim had become the continuation of existing IT projects, which might, at a later stage, provide adequate grounds for supporting a new strategy within an overall argument of continuity.

Optimistic outlook

Recent research has found that visions of continuity are effective tools of change management because they reduce uncertainty (Venus et al., 2019). Our case supports this conclusion by showing how executive decision-makers are only persuaded by frames that match their existing interpretation of organizational reality.

Hence, the third (and successful) rhetorical frame is one of temporal coherence and consistency in which the warrant is that in order to remain competitive the organization has to be able to sense, seize and reconfigure itself without losing its core identity. One important development, which indicates

the success of this new frame, occurred during the autumn of 2019. After integrating Acquisition 3 within FiFi, Victor and Carl had assigned a senior project manager (who until then had been in charge of this integration) to lead the work on IT strategy. As a result, alignment between key organizational members from both Department A and B had increased, and a so-called roadmap of existing and future IT projects and initiatives was finally under way (such a roadmap had been part of the discussion since the April 2018 report but had not been produced). This is the process Victor refers to in the vignette that introduces our analysis of this third frame. As the vignette indicates, the finished roadmap became a key enabler of the decision to begin making changes to FiFi's IT system. Rather than taking on a full strategy process, FiFi eventually opted for direct but gradual implementation of new initiatives.

In seeking to explain the success of the roadmap, the differences between the rhetorical framing of this document and earlier persuasive attempts are compelling. In stark opposition to the 10 observations of the 2018 "Evaluation of IT setup in FiFi," the roadmap includes a more nuanced heat map analysis of the interdependence between business processes and IT systems (the entire IT architecture in FiFi consists of 90 individual systems!). Distinguishing between "OK" (green), "Unharvested benefits or unsolved challenges that better IT could solve" (orange), and "Large unharvested benefits or critical challenges that better IT could solve" (red), it evaluates only 12 out of a total of 117 specific business processes or IT systems as critical (red). This is enough to act on, but also a much more positive evaluation than the one supporting the burning platform. Given the criticism of Carl and other key organizational actors who did not trust the negative evaluation of the 2018 report, basing the proposal for a new strategy on a diagnosis that also highlights the prudence of past actions and the strengths of the current situation proved to be a much more persuasive temporal frame.

In the end, the persistence and adaptability of the strategy-advocates paid off. In January 2020, at the conclusion of our field study, the ELT decided to accept a proposal, based on the roadmap. Thereby,

FiFi formally initiated a process that could eventually become a full-fledged IT strategy and by the end of that year, in December 2020, the ELT actively asked for an IT strategy. However, one question remains: is the rhetorical framing of small steps strong enough to provide momentum throughout the strategy process or will it, once again, be overtaken by inertia? Only time will tell.

Concluding discussion: Getting the timing right

We set out in search of a solution to a fascinating empirical puzzle: if the near-future does not present itself as a fast-approaching threat, there appears to be no urgent need to act (Augustine et al., 2019, p. 1935), so how do organizational actors make decisions that are not strictly necessary? Seeking to answer this question, we have established the rhetorical framing of *kairos* as a persuasive process in and through which actors work to adapt their strategic frames to an existing organizational context while also shaping that (evolving) context to make it fit their purposes. *Kairos* is, as Miller (1994) aptly puts it, “the dynamic relationship between discourse and situation” (p. 83). In support of this position, our empirical study shows that decision-making is neither solely retrospective nor purely prospective; instead, what is at stake is the rhetorical shaping of the very present as the moment in which a certain decision is the fitting response to an “imperfection marked by urgency” (Bitzer, 1968). This rhetorical practice of creating *kairos* involves uses of the past to interpret the present and guide the future; *kairos* may be an event in itself, but creating *kairos* involves *chronos*, as actors must align past, present and future (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013) in such a way as to constitute the now as the right time for decision-making.

Building on these insights, the present paper offers two main contributions to the study of organizational temporality: one emphasizes the collaborative character of the persuasive process of arriving at a decision, the other its emergent contextuality. After discussing these two points, we will conclude by highlighting the eventfulness of persuasive processes and present a conceptual model that illustrates the confluence of the deliberate *and* emergent dimensions of creating *kairos*. Hereby,

we answer calls to better explain “how actors engage with temporality to produce and reenact stability” (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016, p. 1031) that prompts a “productive interplay between different temporalities” (Hernes & Schultz, 2020, p. 17).

The collectivity of rhetorical framing

In seeking to create kairos, managers and other organizational actors can frame the past strategically (Suddaby et al., 2010), but history also operates as a constraint, limiting what an organization will perceive as an adequate representation of past events as well as how the past may be used to advocate a certain future course of action. Similarly, actors may envision the future as an extrapolation of the current situation onwards or it may be presented as a new opportunity waiting to be seized (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016).

In our case, the framing of decisions as being consistent with past actions and present circumstances proved to be the stronger persuasive strategy; the frame that created kairos by matching general perceptions of the current situation with suggestions for future actions. The specifics of how our informants reached this framing underline that we should not understand (the framing of) kairos as the practice of a single actor. Rather, the rhetorical framing of kairos is an ongoing and collective process in which organizational actors can influence the organization while also becoming influenced by the organizational context (see below). This finding emphasizes that framing is contingent on how actors move, improvise and adapt to situations, ultimately accounting for the emergence of frames (Reinecke & Ansari, 2020, p. 9). Rhetorical history, then, may be a tool for organizational actors, but they are themselves also products of their organizations’ rhetorical histories, which in turn both constrain and enable how persuasive their projections of future states can be in the present.

Hereby, we also complement recent conceptualizations of the action-orientation of distant futures by empirically demonstrating how “it may thus be beneficial to stimulate debate and different perspectives, rather than suppress them in the interest of urgency or ideological closure” (Augustine et al., 2019, p. 1955). Our study shows the underlying social mechanisms of this process and reminds

us of the human need to take control of uncertainty (Miller, 1994); the rhetorical framing of kairos offers decision-makers a sense of such control. Hence, successful invocations of kairos draw the past into the present, thereby enabling a certain vision of the (distant) future—and pointing out the course of action needed to fulfill this vision. If and when an actor achieves such framing, it will, in Bisbee's words (2018, p. 495), "heighten an audience's sense that *this* moment is the right moment for the course of action or judgment being proposed." And this will happen collectively, as audiences not only participate actively in interpreting persuasive messages, but (at least in organizational settings) usually take on an even more decisive role as co-creators who are able to mutually influence each other (Ihlen & Heath, 2018; Cheney et al., 2004).

The contextuality of rhetorical framing

Persuasive attempts do not necessarily lead to persuasion, as became abundantly clear through our identification of two unsuccessful attempts to create the opportune moment for deciding in FiFi. Thus, our study reinforces Kaplan's (2008) point that framing is a contested process. As Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) show, successful frames fit organizational members' experiences of the past and expectations of the future, thereby making actors' interpretations and recommendations acceptable to decision-makers. Our study also reconfirms Kornberger's (2016,) point that "time is not linear but knotted, a circular, reflexive movement where the present always creates imagined (present) futures that struggle to alter the future presents" (p. 43).

Building on these central points, we show how actors themselves are influenced by their frames; by framing the proposal of an IT strategy in terms that resonated with the organization (Giorgi, 2017), the proposal itself was significantly altered. Rhetorical framing, then, is not only about finding the right argument; the persuasive ambition is shaped in the process, depending on the context in which the rhetorical efforts take place. In our case, the ambition shifted from the decisive action of establishing and implementing a new strategy towards a gradual implementation of new technologies that does not have to involve an actual written strategy but could be carried out incrementally. Thus,

the provisional outcome of the process reflects what was rhetorically possible at this time in this organizational setting. Strategic coherence between the organizational reality and the proposed change (Luisiani & Langley, 2019) was, in this case, only possibly through a frame of gradual change that matched the existing context.

Hence, our study advances the growing understanding of the importance of *context* in the framing of choice. As Giorgi and Weber (2015) explain, in “rich discursive contexts, audiences evaluate frames not in isolation but in reference to other frames that are available in that context” (p. 336). We have unpacked these contextual dynamics by showing how evaluations are not only actor-based (intra- and inter-individual) but also highly dependent on the ongoing negotiation of the temporal context and uncertainty (Geiger et al., 2020, p. 6) on which framing must rely to establish *kairos*. Further, we advance current framing research that underlines how frames and actions are situated in a dynamic, mutually constitutive cycle (Kim, 2021, p. 43) by showing how actors secure support for strategic initiatives when they develop an existing frame that enjoys a high degree of contextual legitimacy.

The eventfulness of persuasive processes

While there was no big bang strategic decision to undertake an IT strategy process in FiFi, our findings indicate how the process of decision-making gradually developed through a multitude of smaller decisions whose consequences only begin to reveal themselves in the ongoing rhetorical framing of time. In this light, we may view the organizational *indecision* on IT strategy as a decision in itself. As we have demonstrated, the dichotomy between the initial framing of IT strategy as “survival demands urgent action” and the largely justified interpretation of FiFi as a successful company was simply too big for the organization to take action. However, this gap enabled organizational actors to continue the process of exploring their rhetorical options—and as Victor emphasized, the strategy process is likely to continue as a series of small steps, as the situated activity of tying the past and future together in the event of ‘now’ (Hernes & Schultz, 2020).

However, taking small steps is still moving, and our contribution dovetails with recent studies of the ongoing present and the continuous organization of becoming (Hernes, 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2017; Reinecke & Ansari, 2020). Whereas a ‘short present’ lacks both temporal and rhetorical depth, a ‘long present’ permits actors to become part of overlapping cycles and interconnected temporal rhythms (Kim et al., 2019, p. 626). Instead of viewing the present as specific instances or moments in time, leading to chronological comparisons and sharp intertemporal trade-offs (‘if we do not act now, then...’), our study shows that actors can benefit from enacting and stretching the ongoing present in order to achieve sufficient organizational resonance.

Specifying the interrelation between the empirical findings and conceptual contributions, we have developed the conception of temporality in relation to organizational decision-making by following the process of rhetorical framing of time in one particular setting. With this work, we supplement existing conceptualizations of organizational temporality and rhetorical history by highlighting that the rhetorical framing of *kairos* is deliberate *and* emergent; one does not create *kairos* freely, but persuasive attempts are successful when they both give shape to (frame differentiation) and take shape from (frame resonance) the organizational context and the collaborative communicative process that unfolds within it (Giorgi & Weber, 2015, p. 355).

In offering an account of how organizational actors harness temporality in their attempts to develop a persuasive rhetorical frame, we have shown how the positions of these actors are themselves constituted by the rhetorical framing in which they are involved. Thus, we offer a conceptual framework for the close analysis of rhetorical framing of time in organizations that posits the concept of *kairos* as the felicitous constellation of multiple temporalities that enable the opportune moment to emerge (see figure 4).

[Insert figure 4 about here]

The duality of *kairos*, we believe, is an important contribution to conceptualizing temporality in organizations as it combines clock- and event time in ongoing processes. Encountering and enabling

a compelling opportune moment, the rhetorical framing of kairos requires both a fit with existing organizational interpretations and the shaping of organizational aspirations. Hence, kairos enables decision-making, which in itself is an attempt to shape a projected future that only exists (Kornberger, 2013) and is experienced (Vesa & Franck, 2013) in the present. As such, persuasion is first and foremost situational and collaborative; different contexts require different (rhetorical) strategies that enable different interpretations of the past, present and future. Further, creating kairos is an ongoing endeavor; the time is never just right, but has to be constituted in a continuous process of folding the past and the future into the present (Hernes & Schultz, 2020).

To conclude, the very positions available to organizational actors emerge from the rhetorical framing of time. We have shown how organizational perceptions of the past, present and future are both constituted by persuasive efforts and constitutive of such efforts' persuasive appeal. Thus, kairos is neither purely determined by the organizational context nor can it be freely constructed by communicators. Instead, the rhetorical framing of kairos is successful when striking the balance between an actor's strategic ambitions for the future and decision-makers' perceptions of the past, thereby getting the timing right in the present.

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