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Pausing as an Enabling Practice: Insights From an African Bank During a Grand Challenge

Abstract

This research set out to explore pausing during the implementation phase of a change intervention in credit risk in an African bank, using the strategy-as-practice perspective, amidst a grand challenge. Understanding how the practice of pausing influences strategy during a grand challenge may offer valuable insights for practitioners and researchers. A sociological view of strategy, as opposed to mainstream economic views, provided the theoretical lens through which punctuated pausing practices could be analysed. A qualitative approach was adopted to engage practitioners about their practices during strategy implementation. From the data, pausing is first, confirmed as a practice that practitioners actually engage in. Second, pausing is confirmed as an enabling practice that positively influences strategy implementation. During times of strategic uncertainty, there is an impulse to act with reflexive urgency. Pausing generates opportunities to review the prevailing environment, reshape strategies, and enable organisational agility.

Keywords:

Strategy-as-practice; pausing; practitioners; grand challenge; credit risk; Covid-19; Africa

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1. Introduction

Change in business environments is ever-present, occurs at an increasing pace, and continually challenges organisations. Organisations need to survive in unpredictable environments through strategic and operational choices. The Covid-19 pandemic, deemed a grand challenge, created intense disruption and uncertainty for established business practices. Grand challenges are complex global problems that may be plausibly mitigated through coordinated and collaborative effort (George *et al.*, 2016). As organisations respond to volatility, they must balance stability with strategic intent. This requires not only established and innovative strategies, but also ‘little-thought-about’ fit-for-purpose strategies, which this article specifically addresses. Even where organisations possess robust systems and competitive strategies, in times of relative stability or “slack resources” (Vitale *et al.*, 2023), there may be the risk of complacency, leading to delayed responses and unfavourable outcomes. Gambuto (2020, n.p.) provocatively describes Covid-19 as “the greatest gift ever unwrapped. Not the deaths, not the virus, but The Great *Pause*. It is, in a word, profound.” He urges readers metaphorically not to “recoil from the bright light beaming through the window,” even though it may hurt the eyes. The curtain is wide open for revaluation and contemplation. “At no other time, ever in our lives, have we gotten the opportunity to see what would happen if the world simply stopped. Here it is. We’re in it.” The Covid-19 pandemic facilitated organisational alertness and action, and, in Gambuto’s view, signalled the importance of pausing, stepping back, contemplating, and considering the optimal course of action. Yet, pausing is under-theorised and often seen as inactivity rather than strategic capability. Pausing offers divergent, yet necessary resourcefulness. Despite the imperative of having to act or react, pausing has not been thoroughly probed in a grand challenge.

Strategy, as a survival and foresight mechanism, continues to evolve in response to organisational needs (Iriani *et al.*, 2024). Whittington (2007) argued for a sociological and learning lens for strategy, urging for the inclusion of human’s ‘doing strategy’ across daily and routinised levels of praxis and practice, to better respond to change. This suggests that people act consciously to fulfil strategy, rather than strategy as a plan or ‘thing’. This argument has become accentuated with the advent of artificial intelligence. Within the complexity faced by organisations, human responses such as conscious learning, discovering, intuiting, and pausing need to be identified, with people using these attributes for organisational survival and success (Jonathan & Bourgeois, 2011; Sinclair & Ashkanasy, 2005).

This places people and their activities at the core of organisational survival and success – at the metaphorical and sociological ‘eye’ of strategy (as opposed to the storm) (Whittington, 2007). The strategy-as-practice perspective recognises practices at a micro-level, through practitioners’ everyday activities, which may then constitute sustaining competitive advantage. It also acknowledges the intangible elements, which provoke contemplation and reflection (Johnson *et al.*, 2003; Cashman, 2012). Action and inaction, therefore, promote the explanatory theory of ‘real’ business practices (Raelin, 2007; Schön, 1983; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Seidl and Whittington (2014) also argue that explicitly connecting micro-level praxis (socially situated, daily ‘doing’ of strategy) to the macro level bigger picture (strategy, ‘writ large’) strengthens theoretical claims about strategy practices themselves.

This introduction has set the scene for isolating pausing as a strategic practice within a grand challenge. For the purposes of this article, strategic practice is defined as an activity considered strategic to the extent that it is consequential for an organisation’s outcomes, direction, survival, and competitive advantage (Seidl *et al.*, 2024), while pausing is encapsulated as a step-back contemplative action (Schön, 1983; Cashman, 2012). Pausing is done by strategic practitioners, defined as those who do the work of strategy and may come from multiple organisational levels (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008). Although often overlooked, pausing can counter-intuitively spur practitioners towards action. Within organisation and management studies, pausing is gaining ground and is often considered alongside concepts like reflective practice (Ganly, 2018),

sensemaking (Tam & Gray, 2021), silence (Chia, 2014; Dupret, 2018), and organisational learning (Hilden & Tikkamäki, 2013). Pausing is also associated with intuition, building on traditions of intuitive decision-making in which unconscious processing assists with cognitive overload (Akinci & Sadler Smith, 2012; Hu *et al.*, 2025).

Rouleau (2013) argues for systematic research into specific yet contrary empirical issues, which may extend the strategy-as-practice knowledge base. The units of analysis in this article are thus the pausing practice of practitioners. By placing practices and practitioners in the centre, strategy-as-practice research may deliver practical relevance (Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and offer knowledge that has broader relevance and dimensions that traditional economic strategic management may overlook. This theoretical perspective focuses on what people do in fulfilling organisational imperatives. Therefore, the strategy-as-practice perspective isolates practices that have a strategic role in the sense that they form the basis of organisational success. In an integrative review of research using the strategy-as-practice perspective, Kohtamäki *et al.* (2021) confirm that practices have been extensively researched. However, there has been less focus on practices that are not active 'doing' in the strategy-as-practice perspective. The strategy-as-practice perspective, alongside the value of pausing in organisations, inspired the study of an under-theorised "emergence" of an "alternative" strategic 'non-action' (Rouleau, 2013, p. 561; Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 29). The current research used a single case study with embedded units, allowing researchers to look at subunits (practitioners in various African countries) within a larger case (credit risk system) and to understand the phenomenon of pausing within its context (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005).

The focus was on pausing as a reflective action within the implementation phase of a strategy incorporating a new risk system. The research therefore addressed the following question:

How does pausing as a human practice influence strategy at a grand challenge level within the organisation?

This question explored whether practitioners actually paused, how they expressed the pause, their view on pausing, and how pausing influenced strategy.

The article first presents the study context, followed by a review of literature on pausing in practice and the methodology. The discussion then examines two themes relating to the influence of pausing on strategy during a grand challenge. The final section offers the limitations of the research, recommendations for further research, and the role of pausing as a practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Context: credit risk and the bank

Guided by Balogun *et al.*'s (2003) contention that researchers interested in micro-level practices should have experience rooted in practice within the research context, the lead researcher was closely aligned with the phenomenon of the study as an insider within the case organisation. This proximity enabled a focus on context and detail, grounded in the organisation's meaning and reality (Englander, 2019).

The phenomenon of pausing was explored within a commercial African bank, where risk is a significant pillar of the financial system. Banking risk management is shaped by regulatory frameworks, including Basel I (introduced in 1988), Basel II (introduced in 2004), and Basel III (introduced in 2010) (see Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, 2010). These frameworks collectively govern the minimisation and management of various risks, including credit risk (see Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, 2010). Risk management is an integral part of banks' strategy, addressing the vulnerability and complexity within

which the bank operates (Wakode, 2020; Iriani *et al.*, 2024). The field has evolved through regulatory developments following the 2008/2009 global financial crisis and advances in technology (Härle *et al.*, 2016).

The research explored pausing during the implementation of a credit risk technology system strategy in a large African bank to meet Basel III regulations. The strategy aimed to provide an integrated risk system centred on a single customer view to manage credit risk. The system was initiated in 2015, but only in South Africa, and was gradually developed over the years. The strategy was unexpectedly disrupted by the Covid-19 grand challenge, first reported in December 2019, in Wuhan City, China (World Health Organisation, 2020). The pandemic increased the overall risk faced by banks (Pham & Nguyen, 2023). Despite the disruption, the system was implemented virtually across Africa, given public health risks, and country and travel restrictions and embedded in countries such as Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia, Mauritius, Uganda, Kenya, and Ghana.

As noted earlier, the Covid-19 pandemic represents a grand challenge: a large-scale, complex issue with socio-economic dimensions affecting large populations (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2019). Jarvenpaa and Välikangas (2020) argue that addressing grand challenges requires diverse practitioner perspectives, as subjective experiences and reflection enable human agency. While the Covid-19 pandemic has subsided, understanding how practitioners invoked pausing during a grand challenge remains relevant given the persistence of global grand challenges. Seidl and Whittington (2014) argue that examining micro-practices may reveal the significance of overlooked strategy practices providing value to those who seek to develop or renew strategy practices on a macro level (Whittington *et al.*, 2003). Human agency and social structures connect in practice (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Pausing represents a hidden, under-explored practice that may influence human agency during complex strategic situations. Thus, pausing gains an evolving and durable position within broader open strategy (Whittington, 2019), connecting global ‘big’ strategy, the ‘small’ strategy of the case, and individual practitioners.

2.2 An overview of pausing

While research on reflective practices is not new, pausing as a practice remains underexplored. Pausing is related to reflection, specifically reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Critical reflection develops practitioners' cognitive ability to make sense of their practice (Tam & Gray, 2021). Samson *et al.* (2022) refer to *reflection on* practice as a conscious action. Dewey (1933) explains that reflection-on-action involves reviewing, describing, analysing, and evaluating past practice to gain insight for future practice, whereas reflection-in-action involves scrutinising experiences and reactions as they occur. In both forms, practitioners connect with experience to construct new insights and guide action. Cashman (2012: 5) states that practitioners should “step back often, reflect, and become more aware” to act and innovate in complex environments. Although pausing is not explicitly recognised as a strategy-as-practice activity, Schön (1983) and Cashman (2012) view it as a step-back reflective action that enables sense-making and strategising by creating space to interpret events. This aligns with McIntyre's (2018) view of purposeful pausing as an intentional practice of settling the mind, focusing attention, and becoming more receptive to the present moment and its experience. Thus, pausing represents conscious consideration and sensemaking within strategy-making, whether planned or emergent.

As noted in the introduction, pausing relates closely to reflective practice, sensemaking, organisational learning, and adaptive practices. Ganly (2018) suggests that reflective practice begins with a pause that enables assessment and review. Pausing is thus understood as an interruption that enables reflection through a process of sensemaking that can lead to changes in behaviour, actions, or strategies. Pausing is not inactivity – it is a critical practice through which meaning is made, assumptions are challenged, and

future actions are reoriented. Intuitive pausing may also address cognitive overload in strategic decision-making (Hu *et al.*, 2025).

Dewey (1933) identified pausing as a specialised form of thinking stemming from doubt, reluctance, or perplexity. He argued that pausing shifts people away from mundane thinking towards reflective action, involving careful consideration of undervalued knowledge. Specifically, Dewey (1933) points out that practitioners devise hypotheses through trial and error, and then use these hypotheses to strategise, test ideas, and learn from counter-intuitive “doing”. In principle, pausing can be seen as a cause-and-effect relationship that can paradoxically influence strategy development the more deeply practitioners allow themselves the free flow of consciousness (Cashman, 2012).

Through pausing, strategies may be formulated and reassessed so that new ideas can emerge as a response to deliberate strategy, implying the emergence of unplanned consequences from intentional strategies by way of sense-making (Mantere, 2008; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). Mintzberg’s (1978) framework shows that realised strategy stems from emergent influences at middle and lower levels of the organisation, while deliberate influences emanate at the top. Strategy-making is thus a process of social learning, where strategy-as-practice is created through everyday activity rather than through formal plans or declarations.

Pausing may result in paradigm shifts by helping practitioners to reinterpret experiences, challenge assumptions, and increase awareness of thoughts, values, or actions (Cassaniti *et al.*, 2020). According to Cashman (2012) pausing, is undervalued, creating an important gap for exploring its value-creating influence within strategy.

Gaining new insights into underexplored practices embedded within social and discursive frameworks may provide deeper insight into strategy emergence (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). The current research was informed by deliberating on the influence of pausing during a grand challenge. No collective literature findings for ‘pausing’, ‘pausing in grand challenges’, or ‘pausing in credit risk’ came to light in academic or applied research.

3. Data and Methodology

Before presenting the methodology employed to explore the practice of pausing, it is necessary to present the research team. The lead researcher is a practitioner employed in the selected case organisation. Her familiarity with the organisation provided contextual depth for the research. The second and third researchers are scholars with a combined 50 years’ experience in higher education and several years’ research using the strategy-as-practice perspective across different contexts. The research team met regularly and engaged in consensus sessions throughout the research process.

The research team adopted a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of pausing. Following Englander (2019), the researchers set out to elicit context-anchored meaning through qualitative, interpretative claims to finally present a set of assertions in Section 5.4.

A single case study was conducted, with the implementation of the credit risk system strategy representing the case. This allowed the research team to explore the case while also analysing the data within the case, enabling within-case analysis (Mills *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the single case study (credit risk system) within a single context (the bank) encompassed embedded units (different countries and practitioners thereof). These embedded units were participant-oriented, serving as multi-sites representing the countries in which the participants were located because the credit risk system as a case spanned multiple countries. The embedded units aggregated into the intrinsic (Stake, 2005) single case (Yin, 2012), consistent with the

strategy-as-practice perspective, which positions practitioners, rather than geographical locations, as the core of strategising.

Given the practitioners' workload demands, the research team opted for e-interviews to gather data (Salmons, 2022). A schedule was created in Microsoft Forms and sent via email with guidance on the process. Participants therefore chose their own 'pause time' to respond, as opposed to an imposed structured interview, aligning with the intent of the study. The interview schedule comprised 7 open-ended questions addressing participants' roles within the bank and their involvement in credit risk strategy. It then asked specific questions that required the participants to describe how they paused and offered guidelines such as: *You can relate specific incidents using a clear example or a story: what event/activity made you pause, when you paused.*

Following Englander's (2019) view that the sample size is not central to claim validity, the research team approached 29 practitioners, and 13 (within the bank) consented to participate. All had worked in the case organisation for at least four years and were involved in the credit risk system strategy, fulfilling relatively homogeneous strategic roles. The lead researcher did not hold a line-management or supervisory role over any of the participants, which reduced the potential for undue influence or coercion during recruitment and data gathering. After an introductory discussion, an email was sent containing confirmation of the discussion and the informed consent form, as part of the research ethics requirements. Written consent was provided via email and electronically stored. Data were collected between September 2023 and November 2023. Participants included: a) lower-level managers from the credit user team, responsible for system testing feedback; b) the leadership team, who developed the strategy for the development and credit teams to follow; and c) members of the development team who built the system and relied on feedback from the credit and leadership teams. As the system was implemented virtually across countries, participants were geographically dispersed across their respective locations. Once the interviews were completed and notification of completion was received through Microsoft Forms, the researchers downloaded the responses as a PDF document and imported them into ATLAS.ti™, Version 24. The responses were also transferred to a spreadsheet for preliminary analysis. This provided a broad overview of the data and initiated the sensemaking process for the researchers.

From the outset, the research team recognised that the participants were knowledgeable about what they were doing, how they did it, and why they did it, and could articulate these things through the e-interviews. The data were informative accounts of their experiences in terms meaningful to them (Gioia, 2021). As such, participants were asked how they paused, enabling them to describe, in their own words, what pausing looked or felt like in practice. The research team further explored the influence of pausing on strategy implementation. The findings presented here are grounded in the participants' experience and their understanding of those experiences. These accounts were then interpreted to develop theoretical insight.

Recognising the benefit of the contextual richness offered by the lead researcher, as an insider, deliberate efforts were taken to ensure she maintains a reflexive stance by regularly reflecting on her personal experience, assumptions and organisational knowledge. These deliberate efforts for reflexivity were documented in the reflexive journal, and shared during the research teams' consensus sessions. The research team worked collectively through several cycles of coding. Drawing on the systematic inductive methodology advanced by Gioia *et al.* (2013), the researchers followed a rigorous process to prioritise informant-centric analysis, followed by theory-centric analysis to develop assertions (see Figure 1). Following Naeem *et al.* (2023), the research team selected keywords and quotations from the e-interview data and assigned codes. This initial coding was closely aligned with the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. Initially, 195 codes were developed in the first cycle of coding, which were refined through multiple readings of the interview responses. The researchers engaged in second-order analysis by revisiting the theoretical perspectives and jointly interpreting the data that confirms pausing as a reflective activity.

The research team held regular consensus sessions to share ideas and potential themes. This process of data reduction and conclusion was complemented by the comparison of data within and across themes and accompanied by continuous, simultaneous reading of the literature. Ultimately, the research question guided the inductive development of the two themes presented in this paper. Meaning-making is similar to the conceptualisation and interpretation step described by Naeem *et al.* (2023: 5). Finally, the research team developed four assertions on the influence of pausing on strategy during a grand challenge within an African bank during implementation.

The first theme confirms that participants paused and describes how pausing occurred in practice. The second theme explains how pausing influenced strategy, based on participants' accounts. These two themes lead to four assertions demonstrating that pausing is an enabling strategic practice that supports sensemaking during complexity. These assertions encapsulate the findings and insights derived from the analysis.

Ethical clearance was granted by the university's Research Ethics Committee (Reference number 0995). All ethical principles and the bank's requirements for granting permission were adhered to throughout the study.

4. Results

Certain codes, interpretively linked to the participants' accounts, were developed into themes and assertions that addressed the research question. The findings are presented in two informant-centred themes which informed the theory-centred assertions developed by the research team. Given the qualitative, and retrospective nature of the data, the findings presented in this article reflect the perceptions and experiences of the participants as they recall it. As such, the findings should be interpreted as insights into how the participants understood and experienced the role of pausing, rather than as evidence of a causal positive effect on strategy implementation outcomes.

Figure 1 depicts the analysis process that resulted in four assertions. While the diagram appears linear, the analysis, interpretation, and conceptualisation were iterative, requiring repeated engagement with both the data and theory.

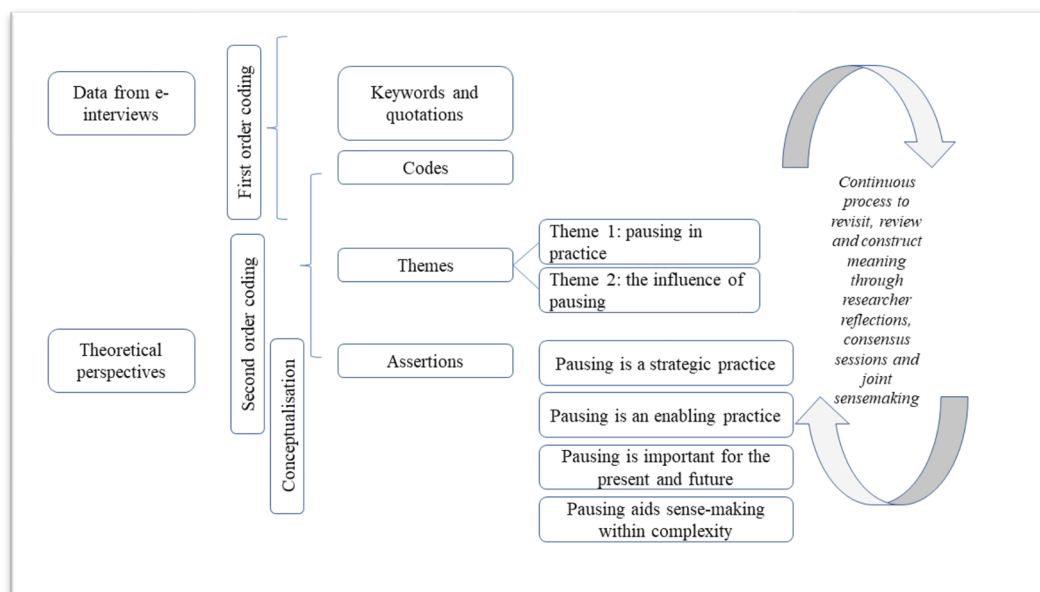


Figure 1: The research analysis process (source: Authors)

Theme 1: Pausing in practice

All participants confirmed that they paused, either individually or in teams. The research team then examined participants' descriptions of how pausing occurred during strategy implementation. Participants also described how pausing affected their work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 1 offers excerpts underpinning theme 1 – how pausing occurred in practice.

Table 1: Verbatim quotations on pausing in practice

Verbatim quote	Participant
<i>A good pause can be used to honestly review goals, approaches and measures. I find that pausing provides a measure of peace and calmness, and makes me more effective.</i>	Leader 1, South Africa
<i>Pausing help me clear my mind and get a deeper understanding of the tasks we perform on a daily basis and whether/how important they are to the overall operation and objective of the institution.</i>	Credit user 2, Uganda
<i>Personally, pausing allowed for a breather (taking a break, away from the 'noise') to distill the situation, process all the information and then re-assessing the situation with a clearer mind. This helped in getting clarity in cause of action to take and focus on more important things (both personally [family, health, friends] and professionally [leading with empathy])- and to be mindful.</i>	Leader 3, South Africa
<i>The pandemic slowed everything down and disrupted life in general including way of working. It was time to re-invent and find new ways of doing things. Adapting to new way of working and interacting with colleagues through virtual platforms posed a new challenge. A point of reflection was how to achieve set goals/ objective in the midst of a global pandemic.</i>	Credit user 8, Ghana
<i>In terms of the leadership team, I witnessed some 'unofficial pausing' when leaders would have sidebar discussions in a 'safe space'. Here they could speak more freely and reflect on what problems they saw and what they thought should be done.</i>	Leader 1, South Africa

From the data, participants consistently demonstrated that practitioners actively engaged in pausing. Pausing was described as a *mindful act that provides a measure of peace and calmness during turbulent times* (Leader 2, South Africa) and enables practitioners to think outside the box. The findings affirm pausing as an intangible, silent practice amid complexity and uncertainty. It enables reflective practice through re-evaluating the present, reconnecting with future goals, and identifying how to achieve them. One participant described pausing as a *moment of introspection and meditation* (Credit user 1, Uganda). Pausing emerged as an implicit part of practitioners' everyday work. While some participants referred to 'reflection' or 'a breather', the practices undoubtedly align with pausing, as defined earlier in this article.

Practitioners faced various obstacles during the pandemic, and strategising initially proved challenging. However, they paused through retrospective sessions, where both hard (technical) and soft (people) issues were discussed. Although remote work created moments of isolation, practitioners described focused engagement through pausing, supported by virtual training and learning. These engagements enabled shared learning and improved consistency across processes, training, and technology.

Theme 2: The influence of pausing on strategy

The second theme draws on the data that describe how pausing influenced strategy. Table 2 presents participants' descriptions of how pausing influenced the implementation phase of the project.

Table 2: Verbatim quotations on how pausing impacted implementation

Verbatim text	Participant
<i>Pausing with team members has been very valuable to my direct reports, allowing them to reflect on where they are in the week. By asking more strategic questions, we are able to get out of the rush of execution. I think pausing with team members helped their mental health during the pandemic.</i>	Leader 1, South Africa
<i>Pausing for me was like decoding the experience at the time and learning more about how to deal with these scenarios.</i>	Developer 1, South Africa
<i>Pausing has led to several influences which were as follows:</i> <i>1. It helped during crisis situation and prepared us how to deal with a challenging situation.</i> <i>2. Resources were allocated efficiently based on the needs and priorities and created concepts which were more sustainable.</i> <i>3. It helped to adapt to dynamic and flexible environment. It made us become more resilient.</i> <i>4. It helped to create new ideas/features, improvement on the new system which will enable to overcome challenges</i>	Credit user 3, Mauritius
<i>The few times we paused were very valuable as we were able to think about strategic issues instead of tactical execution. Those allowed us to relook at what was really important and what needed to be done to get back on track. I think after some reflections we went back with a proposed alternative (better) approach which improved execution.</i>	Leader 1, South Africa
<i>Covid 19 made me took a moment to reflect on the real aspects that matters in human life and the importance we give to each of them. Pausing for me was to reevaluate.</i>	Credit user 6, Mozambique
<i>I believe that the implementation phase was an achievement and pausing was considered at some levels of the process, but it could have been more successful if more pauses would have been considered especially from an end user perspectives. There were some back and forth in the beginning while we were using the new system. Probably if we had more time to pause, these issues could have been tackled before the implementation phase.</i>	Credit user 3, Mauritius
<i>Overall, pausing enabled the bank leadership and I to critically analyze the situation as well as various tasks at hand to enable us to identify workable solutions for business continuity in view of the prevailing circumstances.</i>	Credit user 1, Uganda
<i>...the team(s) had a find a way to achieve the outcomes - we had to think- out-the-box and taking time to reflect help in adjusting focus and priorities to achieve the project's goals.</i>	Leader 3, South Africa

As mentioned earlier, the Covid-19 pandemic required the system to be implemented virtually across other African countries. Participating practitioners described how they paused to reconsider strategic plans, adjust ways of working, reallocate resources, and address mental health. Pausing helped them achieve goals, refocus, and adapt plans during the grand challenge. Pausing enabled practitioners to step back to evaluate past experiences and identify the best approach for delivering the strategic solution (Credit User 5, Zambia), keeping all stakeholders in mind (Leader 1). Pausing helped identify patterns of minor setbacks that could delay the overall project timeline. It encouraged realistic timelines (Leader 3), appropriate levels of engagement, and an appreciation of the work required to implement the strategy (Leader 2). It also created space to reflect on other aspects, such as family and health (Leader 3). Participants further described pausing as a restorative interval during periods of intense strategic change and chaos.

The findings indicate that pausing clears the mind, enabling deeper understanding and more informed decision-making. It entails switching off and taking breaks to maintain energy during a crisis. Pausing also helps practitioners identify solutions for business continuity, adopt broader perspectives, allocate resources more effectively, and monitor progress.

The data led to four assertions about pausing as a strategic practice while implementing strategy during a grand challenge.

Integrating data and theory

Overall, the findings confirmed existing theory on pausing. Consistent with Cashman (2012, p. 11), pausing involves slowing down to speed up, where reflection supports learning and growth. Ganly (2018) confirms that reflective practice, which starts with pausing, is essential for navigating changing work environments. The findings further suggest that pausing creates resilience and flexibility, enabling adaptation through gradual and cumulative rather than dramatic organisational change.

Pausing permitted a staggered approach to rolling out the system, allowing focused thought and concentration. This aligns with Henry's (2011) view that pauses between shifts of focus improve outcomes and contribute to the successful implementation of the system.

New ideas, features, and improvements can also be fostered by pausing through engagement, consistent with more open forms of strategy-making (Splitter *et al.*, 2024; Friesl *et al.*, 2023; Vaara *et al.*, 2019). Self-discipline and intentionality are critical to embed pausing and reflective practice into daily work (Ganly, 2018). A staged implementation also enabled issues to be resolved before finalisation, contributing to a smoother implementation. Overall, pausing emerged as a valuable yet unconventional practice during grand challenges. As the practice perspective situates action within fields of social practice (Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Kohtamäki *et al.*, 2021), pausing as an action, when located within a grand challenge context, may be enabling, as seen in the implementation of the risk system in the case organisation.

Findings also showed that pausing enabled change and innovation. Cassaniti *et al.* (2020) describe pausing as an important tool for continuous learning and adaptation. From this stance, adaptation may be viewed as a means by which practitioners can pause through their adaptive capacity, ask questions, delve into details, or take time to increase (or at least maintain) the quality of life in a turbulent environment (Gallopín, 2006). Similarly, adaptive capacity may be considered an action of pausing (to pause is to adapt), which is referenced as a crucial factor in dealing with grand challenges. Basit *et al.* (2024) found that organisational capability improves resilience and adaptability during unprecedented disruption.

Although pausing has traditionally been viewed as passive and unreceptive, this research confirms it as a lived and strategic practice that contributes to the practical accomplishment of strategy alongside established tools and routines. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) identified material and discursive tools, such as PowerPoint, through which strategy is crafted and enacted. Similarly, this research shows that pausing is a practice through which strategists actively shape strategic work and influence strategic direction. Under conditions of strategic overload, intuitive problem-solving often emerges, and pausing provides a cognitive 'reset' (Hu *et al.*, 2025). Findings from this research contribute to the strategy-as-practice perspective by confirming pausing as a strategic practice that warrants greater consideration in strategy. When practitioners pause to strategise, the act itself becomes a form of strategy-making by creating space for reflection and adaptation. Accordingly, the findings extend both the practical and theoretical understanding of pausing during grand challenges. Consistent with Schön (1983), Raelin (2007), and Cashman (2012), pausing is fundamentally a human and social practice that enables strategic learning and action.

Assertions: Pausing is an enabling strategic practice

Reflecting on the two themes anchored in participants' practices and the integration of data and theory, the research team conceptualised the following assertions.

Assertion 1: Pausing is a strategic practice

As mentioned in the introduction, an activity is considered strategic when it is consequential for an organisation's outcomes, direction, survival, and competitive advantage. Based on participants' descriptions and theoretical grounding in research on pausing as a 'step-back contemplative action', the research team asserts that pausing is a strategic practice.

Assertion 2: Pausing is an enabling practice

Pausing has a positive and enabling influence on strategy implementation during grand challenges. It allows practitioners to identify workable solutions in cognitively demanding circumstances and creates interpretive spaces for sensemaking by enabling them to interpret cues, construct understanding, and redirect actions. Within strategy-as-practice, which centres humans rather than plans, conscious or unconscious pausing is a fundamental expression of human agency, particularly in the age of AI. Pausing can also foster change and innovation by enabling new ideas, improvements, and strategy-making, as humans increasingly pause to consider human and technological implications.

Assertion 3: Pausing is important for the present and future

Pausing supports present responsiveness and future readiness by enabling organisations to adapt while maintaining relevant and effective strategies. Whittington (2019) examined evolving strategy practices in response to societal and technological change (opening up strategy), and pausing can be seen as one such practice during dynamic contexts like grand challenges, where strategy must develop and progress in response to social and technological change.

Assertion 4: Pausing aids sense-making within complexity

During grand challenges, pausing helps organisations navigate complexity by first acknowledging that no individual has all the answers. Through pausing, organisations can leverage collective intelligence and more inclusive forms of strategising (Splitter *et al.*, 2024), fostering collaboration, learning, and shared ownership. As stated earlier, strategising is shaped by human attributes such as conscious learning, discovery, intuition, and pausing. Practitioners using these attributes are critical to organisational survival and thriving. Although conducted within a specific context, these assertions offer insights to be considered within grand challenges.

5. Limitations

Given the qualitative case study design, the findings may not be generalisable across different organisational contexts. However, they contribute analytically to the strategy-as-practice perspective and may assist organisations in understanding pausing as reflective practice. A further limitation is hindsight bias, as participants reflected on past experiences. The research team addressed this through the insider perspective of the lead researcher and regular consensus sessions that incorporated reflective pauses throughout the research process.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that pausing, as a strategic practice, influences how practitioners strategised during the Covid-19 pandemic within an organisational context. Rather than representing inactivity or delay, pausing is confirmed as a strategic hiatus that enables reflection, learning, and adaptive strategising. During uncertainty, pausing created space for practitioners to interpret events, challenge assumptions, adapt actions, and develop resilience.

Although this study examined pausing as an enabler during one grand challenge, the findings offer analytical possibilities for other complex contexts. This study provides micro-level insights into pausing from an engagement and social learning view, highlighting its enabling capability within the social realm. This provides practitioners with insight into how strategy is pursued and how they might approach strategy differently. The findings indicate that pausing added value to implementation by providing insight into how practitioners navigated the risk system through their lived experiences of disruption (Whittington, 2003).

In answering the research question, the study also identified potential areas for future research, such as the pace of decision-making in management studies. Eisenhardt (1989) examined fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments, arguing that rapid decisions can lead to superior performance in fast-paced settings. Mintzberg (1987), however, argues that slowing down and allowing for emergence is beneficial. Pausing as a reflective practice enabled practitioners to think through the crisis and uncertainty of the grand challenge, contributing to successful system implementation. Future research could therefore explore how pausing influences decision-making pace and quality in a more thoughtful and focused manner (Ronnie, 2016) as opposed to rapid action.

When navigating towards a “new abnormal” during an extreme situation, an enormous task, such as the risk system strategy, may lead to anxiety-driven pausing (or workload paralysis). While the e-interview questions did not explore this psychodynamic area, and the data did not explicitly address anxiety, participants' references to “stress” and “pressure” suggested feelings of being overwhelmed. Roberts *et al.* (2021) similarly found that Covid-19 increased practitioners' stress levels and potentially their anxiety. According to Geldenhuys *et al.* (2012), organisations often attempt to avoid or contain anxiety; however, anxiety also influences organisational behaviour (James & Clark, 2002). This anxiety warrants further investigation from a grand challenge perspective, viewing pausing as an anxiety-driven, mindful act that may provide calm and peace during challenging times.

The research team presented four assertions affirming pausing as an enabling strategic practice that supports present and future needs and enables sensemaking during complexity. Despite these assertions, pausing remains a complex concept, as do grand challenges like Covid-19 and other global problems. The emergence of a ‘new abnormal’ during the pandemic highlights the need to consider unconventional approaches to strategising. There is always an urgency to act, especially during extreme situations; however, unprecedented times present opportunities to pause and take stock of what is occurring around people and their organisations. From this stance, pausing may very well form part of the intangible toolkit practitioners require.

7. References

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