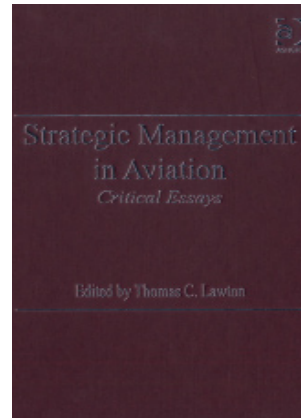


Strategic Management in Aviation: Critical Essays

By Thomas C. Lawton



Strategic management is contested terrain, fought over by academics from several disciplines and populated by 'gurus' peddling the latest 'quick fix'. Lawton has adopted the most popular, some would argue the most practical, of available perspectives on the field for use as a framework within which to bring together 28 previously published articles.

Book review by Stephen Holloway

Back in 1993, Richard Whittington produced a short but influential book with the pithy title *What is Strategy – and does it matter?*¹ His answer: 'strategy' means different things to different people, and whether or not it matters depends upon what it is taken to mean. The reason why strategy means different things to different people is that we do not all share the same world-view. We hold different assumptions about reality (e.g., *What is an objective fact, what is a socially constructed fact, and what is an opinion? – the old 'one man's freedom-fighter is another man's terrorist' dilemma*). We hold different assumptions about human beings – in particular, how economically rational and strategically calculating they really are. We hold different assumptions about organizations (e.g., *Single-minded, goal-seeking entities or messy political compromises?*). We hold different assumptions about markets (e.g., *Efficient and unforgiving jungles from which only the fittest emerge, or inefficient and slow to punish?*)

Lawton has chosen as a framework for his volume the 'classical' approach to strategic management – a broadly positivist perspective, which envisions a series of discrete steps pursued by objective and economically rational decision-makers. They formulate strategies by uncovering 'facts' in readily identifiable external and internal environments, then apply to these facts the specialist tools of economics, finance, and planning, before finally choosing the profit-maximizing option from a menu of alternatives; implementation – the allocation of resources, execution of action plans, and controlling of performance in order to ensure objectives are attained – follows on from formulation. We are told on the first page of the Introduction that this is what 'effective strategic leaders do'. That is not an assertion with which all academics, and many who assist practitioners, would agree.

Flawed though the classical model might be as an explanation of real-world strategy-making, it does nonetheless create some helpful compartments into which Lawton's chosen articles can be slotted. He has therefore broken the book into seven parts: conception; creation; context: non-market; context: market; content; choices; and control. Each of the articles fits comfortably into its allotted slot.

Three questions arise with regard to an edited volume. Are all the papers relevant? Is anything important missing? Has the editor effectively tied together the selection? With regard to the first question, whilst there are inevitably some variations in quality and rigor, none of the contributions look out of place; some contain enduring insights whilst others are relevant more for the historical context they provide, but all are worth reading. With regard to what if anything is missing, there is room for open-ended debate, but it is difficult to make a case for any glaring, indisputable omissions. Finally, Lawton's introduction to the volume does a good job of summarizing each article; what is arguably lacking is an overarching perspective on the broader topic of strategic management itself.

It could, in fact, be argued that the book is not actually about strategic management as much as it is about strategic issues. Naresh Goyal alludes to this in his Foreword. However, 'strategic issues' do not give rise to as marketable a title as 'strategic management', and it would have been a pity to perhaps narrow the readership of this fine book by drawing-in its scope too tightly. This is not a stand-alone treatment of strategic management, in aviation or indeed any other context. It is, however, an excellent companion to strategic management textbooks for students of the subject and a ready reference work for academics and practitioners. Lawton has made a valuable contribution by making the selected work more easily accessible, and, in doing this, better preserving it for the future.

References:

Whittington, R. (1993). *What is Strategy – and does it matter?* London: Routledge.

About the author: Thomas Lawton is Senior Lecturer in Strategic Management and Director of the Joint Honours Programmes at the Tanaka Business School, Imperial College, London.

About the reviewer: Steve Holloway is a former investment banker, consultant, and author. The third edition of his book *Straight and Level: Practical Airline Economics* is to be published in summer 2008.

About the book:

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